

How History Is Falsified – Deportations in the Politics of Russia and the Soviet Union

Sofi Oksanen's speech at the Toronto Conference on Repressions and Human Rights: Commemorating the 1949 Baltic Deportations

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From an early age I wanted to become a writer. At the age of six I started keeping a diary and then followed story writing. I did not think, however, before I began writing my debut novel *Stalin's Cows* (*Stalinin lehmät*) in 2001, that I would write anything about recent Estonian history. This is true although I had grown up between two countries, Finland and Estonia, and between two realities, between the West and the Soviet Union.

Everything pertaining to Estonia had felt like non-literary subject matter. Simply for the reason that Estonia was literally missing from the map until it gained independence anew. It was a part of the Soviet Union, about which I never wrote a single word it before its dissolution, except for school essays I wrote about it, and for which I meticulously used information found in Finnish textbooks. Anything else would have been completely impossible in Finland. Nothing could be written down. Everything had to be remembered. Everything to do with what had really happened in Estonia belonged to the sphere of private memory. Not public memory. It was oral history, talked about only in trustworthy company. Not written history.

The Soviet system depended on the fact that people had learned not to give voice publically to things that were unfavourable to the system. They internalized this mode of behaviour without questioning, because there was no point of comparison to another, different reality. Not the kind of reality in which one could have written about such things. Not even in Finland, which after all was an independent state. Finland at that time lived under years of Finlandization, and that meant living in Moscow's reality. And there was no context or environment in which these matters could have been made public. And there were no listeners outside of the system who would even have understood what it was all about.

Those who expressed improper opinions risked being denied entry to the Soviet Union where our relatives were still living. Work to improve the chance to receive travel permits was never ending. We were under constant threat that we would never again be allowed to step inside the borders of the Soviet Union, never again see our relatives, our letters no longer reach their destination, our phone calls not get through. Because my father went to work in the Soviet Union and my mother translated documents pertaining to trade with the Soviet Union, the threat also meant the jobs were in danger.

And the employment opportunities in Finland for immigrants were very limited – except for those who had come from the Soviet Union and who cooperated with the KGB.

In my childhood I had used the same expressions as other Estonians about camps, deportations and other repressive actions. At the time I learned to speak I also learned in Estonian the essential expressions, such as he went into the forest, he came back, he did not come back, he was taken to Siberia or simply – he was taken. I also learned that there was no point using these euphemisms outside of Estonia, because for the great majority of outsiders their meaning was unclear. Only individuals with personal experiences recognized them.

However, networking with people who had command of the secret language was impossible outside of the Soviet Union. The West was full of informers, snitches, and people of Estonian origin or Exile Estonians who had left the Great Fatherland were under surveillance, also outside the borders of the Soviet Union. In 1956, the KGB issued an order which was designed to destroy the Exile Estonian communities – communities where people spoke of an independent Estonia and about deportations. The methods included the traditional methods of the information war, blacklisting individuals, fabricated accusations, and planting distrust into the communities.

The afore-mentioned euphemisms were just as ordinary as other words belonging to the everyday world of my childhood. It was simply a matter of fact that our family and their circle of friends included people who had disappeared into unknown places, gone to the forest and died there, been taken to Siberia, and people who went along with the Soviet system in order not to end up in the cold country. It was just as natural to write letters in which the true meanings were sprinkled between the lines. And that was done in phone conversations as well, and always indoors. This code of conduct was so common and so unquestioned that in Soviet-Estonia the existence of any other modes of expression had been completely forgotten. Estonia's independence and freedom were only a distant mirage. Of that only few dared even dream; not even the boldest were imagining what the reality of a free state would be like. That is why no one missed for example newspapers whose mission would be to convey information or in which one could write about one's own experiences using the correct words: Deportations. Camps. Torture. Execution. Censorship. Censorship that did not exist officially Soviet Union, but was masked as editorial recommendations.

In the Soviet Union the function of censorship and the press was to prevent the emergence of alternatives and the questioning of the existing system. The result was an alternative reality. Its vocabulary did not include expressions for those things that affect ordinary people's lives, their everyday conditions, but it did establish rules for what one could speak of and how. The disconnect between the personal and the official was quite wearing, and it forced people to develop layered personalities, double-identities.

At the same time as I in Finland learned the words to the Song of the Flag and to Our Land (the Finnish national anthem) which we always sang on Finland's Independence Day, in Estonia Estonia's flag, the national anthem and the combination of blue and

black of the flag were forbidden. At the same time as I in school in Finland read about Finland's greatest national story, the Winter War, in Estonia, the greatest tragedy of Estonia's recent history, the deportations and the occupation, could not be talked about aloud, or publically. Officially the tragedy did not exist. And it did not exist either in Finlandized Finland whose school textbooks had to have Moscow's approval. In practice it meant that the young people of my age heard about Estonia for the first time as teenagers during Finnish class only when Finnish-related languages were discussed. This is indeed an odd fact given that we are talking about Finland's closest neighbour today – and before the Soviet occupation. That is how effectively the Soviet Union affected a complete loss of memory even in neighbouring Finland.

Decolonialization

Along with becoming independent again, a process of decolonialization began in Estonia and is still ongoing: the undoing of the occupation. This entailed concrete actions, which included the removal of the occupying army from the country, returning the property to the first independence-era owners, a land reform, and restoring society, also the law, to the state that prevailed before the double occupation. The nation's memory also had to be rebuilt, biographies had to be collected and archived, a foundation for new research and history writing had to be created. The stories which had been preserved orally had to be given written form. The deported were rehabilitated. Books gathered and recovered the national memory that the occupations had destroyed, and gave written form to stories in which people finally could see themselves reflected. They reconstructed the country's past in such a way that it matched the citizens' own experiences. Events were given terms which corresponded to the experiences of Estonians. The euphemisms and circumlocutions of the Soviet era were left behind, replaced by words such as occupation, occupying forces, repression, and deportations.

After the regained independence I had to do what others had to as well: I had to learn to talk about occupation and deportations with their right words, aloud and publically. But I also had to get acquainted with the visual memory. The Soviet Union destroyed that as well. Changing or replacing the pictorial material of the entire society was an important part of Sovietization. And Stalin, an ardent admirer of American films, understood the powerful effect of pictures very well. I remember my feeling of surprise when for the first time I saw images of ordinary street life in Estonia in the 1920s. I had not understood to miss anything like that – what you do not have, that you rarely miss. Only then did I realize that I had in my head visual imprints from the early century from numerous other countries, not to mention Finland and the Winter War. And I realized that not even one of the flashes churning in my head came from my home album; they had come from other sources: school books, movies, art history books, museums, newspapers and magazines; from the public repository of stories from which everyone forms her understanding of the world, her own place in it, and the country in which she lives.

Regarding Estonia I had to shape my understandings from entirely different vantage points. My images of Estonia's past had developed during my visits to various locations afterwards or through stories I had heard told. Or through those precious few

photographs which selectively had remained in the cleaned-out family albums, through a few wedding photos, confirmation pictures, politically safe portraits. Not news photos, not movies, for they were all known to be propaganda. Some of the pictures I gathered from a few books dealing with politically safe topics, for example about Medieval Estonia. Publishing books about that era was allowed even in the Soviet Union.

At the same time as the imagery of Nazi concentration camps was etched in the eyes of my generation and at the same time as my generation was dealing with memories of Finland's Winter War, no visual material of deportations was available. Countries which have not experienced occupation have great difficulties comprehending how a nation's most essential sufferings in recent history can be completely deleted from the visual repository and from official memory. Citizens of such nations consider it self-evident that they can speak of their nations' tragedies and learn about them in school and trust that what is being taught is true. They hold in their minds iconic images of their history and their tragedies. They find it difficult to grasp or imagine what kind of people they would be if they had grown up in another kind of reality. In one where children taken to concentration camps are officially criminals, as a relative of mine who was deported as a child. And they would never have seen what had happened reflected in images they could believe to be authentic. They also have difficulty grasping that a person who grows up in such a reality, will consider it a state of normalcy, and another reality as abnormal.

It is difficult for the citizens of such a country to comprehend why Russia did not become the democracy the Western leaders so ardently believed in before the Ukrainian war/conflict. They find it difficult to comprehend because it is so hard to understand the impact of total brainwashing and to understand how much is required to remove its traces. It also requires trust in society, in its judicial system, in the police and other civil servants, and in people. Trust that revealing private experiences or opinions does not get you in trouble. Trust that it does not lead to a psychiatric ward, where people holding opinions inconvenient to the state would be sent in a country in which anti-Soviet thoughts were literally a sign of mental disorder.

Only with the regained independence did private memory become public memory in the Baltic. This did not, however, happen in Russia where, along with Putin's rise to power, they now with greater determination than before concentrate on rehabilitation and glorification of Soviet history.

Propaganda Aimed at the Baltic Countries

During this spring the international media have favoured headlines like "Are the Baltic Countries Next" as if we were dealing with some kind of new turn in Russia's crusade against the West. This crusade against the Baltic nations has gone on for a long time, there is nothing new about that. Russia has already for years strived to influence the reconstruction of the historical memory of these nations, by, for example, interfering with the court proceedings concerning deportations in Estonia. The court proceedings in 2008 against Arnold Meri, accused of deportations, became a spectacle in which, in addition to the victims, the Russian state television was present as were Russian youth

who presented flowers to the accused, as a hero of the Great Patriotic War. The Russian Duma registered a complaint with the EU parliament demanding that it discontinue the “shameful” court proceedings. The Russians declared it to be an attempt to disgrace the honour of individuals who had attempted to free humankind of the “Fascist plague”. This statement includes the assertion that the people Meri deported were part of the “Fascist plague”. The majority of the people Meri deported were women and children. Meri confessed to charge of deportations but did not admit any guilt. In 2009, the European parliament declared the deportations to be crimes against humanity.

In Estonia people have spoken of Russian imperialistic politics during the entire regained independence, while, for example, in Finland it has been defined as “post-Soviet trauma”. This despite the fact that Russia has repeatedly behaved aggressively toward the Baltic nations. Russia admitted in 1993 that it had occupied Estonia but since then Russia has made different claims. With Putin’s rise to power, Russian politics of history has regained momentum and has consistently attempted to restore not only the Soviet rhetoric, but also the Soviet Union’s official view of history. It has attempted to exert its influence in other countries as well.

In 2007 professional deniers of occupation began to appear in Finland and so did pro-Putin factions who took it upon themselves to deny the deportations. Similar cells appeared elsewhere as well; some of them masqueraded their activities as cultural or media clubs in a fashion very familiar from the Soviet era.

Initially the Finnish media were confused by these actions. At the very time the Finns had restored their relations with their closest neighbour Estonia, at the very time Finlandization and its effect on history began to be talked about, at the very time the crimes against humanity committed by the Soviet Union and Nazi-Germany had been combined together in the school teachings, right then these cells began their very visible activities.

Because people in Finland – as people in other Western countries – had forgotten their propaganda literacy – no one made the connection between these actions of the pro-Putin groups to Russia, ostensibly because they were Finns, not Russians. There is nothing new in this – Moscow has always found its mouthpiece among the local people, because people everywhere trust their own citizens.

These activists equated the deportations to sun vacations. They published books, some of which were given lots of serious review space. The books systematically reiterated the basic messages of Russia’s information war and old soviet narratives about the despicable Estonian fascists, who as a matter of fact are building concentration camps for Russians at this very moment. In addition to denying the occupations and the deportations they exorcised the end of Estonia’s independence. Some of these individuals continued teaching in Finnish universities – despite the fact that it would be hard to imagine that even one university would accept holocaust deniers on their premises. Despite the fact that National Socialist Germany and the Soviet Union are

both described in our school books as totalitarian states, this knowledge is not internalized to the extent that they would be discussed as similar systems in the general universe of opinion. One example of this is precisely the fact that such persons were allowed to continue teaching in the university.

The situation became tense in connection with the bronze statue controversy in 2007. A statue of a Soviet soldier in the center of Tallinn became the symbol of the controversy. To the Estonians he represented the occupying force, to the Russians a liberator.

The statue was moved in a matter-of-fact fashion to the cemetery and was not, as Russia claims, destroyed. The situation escalated into Kremlin-backed riots in Tallinn; in the Russian Duma Estonia was accused of fascism already before the relocation of the statue. The Nashi-youth who enjoyed Moscow's protection surrounded the Estonian Embassy in Moscow and carried banderols with slogans familiar from the Russian media and the Ukrainian war/conflict. They made raunchy effigies of the Estonian ambassador, and the Soviet occupation was declared a myth.

In 2010 when editor Imbi Paju and I published a book in Finland of recent history of Estonia, *Fear Behind Us All* (Kaiken takana oli pelko), an essay collection about occupations and deportations, Russia's reaction was the same. The book was a collection of essays in which Estonia's recent past was discussed from many perspectives. The authors were a versatile bunch, Estonians, Russians, and Finns and included for example Anne Applebaum, President Ilves and one of the world's best known Soviet dissidents Vladimir Bukovski.

The book launch attracted demonstrators from Russia, Nashi-youth and representatives of the Estonian Russian organization Night Watch (Yövärtio) as well as the aforementioned Putinist activists. Putin's party, United Russia, issued a statement stating that the book was anti-Russia and representatives of the party arrived in Finland to hold a press conference. Also the Estonian Russian Night Watch organization, which was active during the statue controversy, held its own press conference. Of course none of them had read the book at that time, but that mean little or nothing. The placards at the demonstrations were well known from the Ukraine and reiterated Soviet slogans. The book appeared in 2010, the Bronze statue incident happened in 2007. Both these events were like small dress rehearsals for Russia's larger projects, practice for the full-fledged implementation which has materialized in the Ukrainian situation.

The rehabilitation of Soviet history continues also on Russian soil. Just recently the Memorial-organization in St. Petersburg, which gathers information about Gulag victims, was issued the court's decision: it has been listed as a foreign agent, which renders it suspicious in the eyes of the citizens of their own country.

Russia's only Gulag museum is located in Perm, in the place of Camp Perm 36. We only very recently received word that it will close its doors, this just as it had been nominated for inclusion in the UNESCO list of world heritage sites. The local authorities have made it impossible for the museum to function, both in terms of financing and of

interruptions to electricity and water supply. Aggression against the museum increased seriously with the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis: one citizen, it is alleged, found it problematic that the museum paid respects to Ukrainian and Lithuanian victims at the Perm camp who had fought against the Soviet Union. At the same time it was announced that a museum, Novorossiia Museum, will open its doors in St Petersburg. The museum presents as real Russia's own history fantasies: it will concentrate on telling about the sacrifices of the Pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Memory is essential for identity – it connects history with identity and identity with history, and it is the mission of museums to preserve that memory. In Russia at this time, their mission is to consolidate Moscow-fabricated reality.

Imagine what kind of protests such activity would instigate, if Germany all of a sudden were to discontinue the financing of its concentration camp museums or were to cut off their electricity. Instead of worldwide demonstrations against totalitarianism, the world concentrates on wondering where Putin is.

According to the latest opinion poll of the independent Levada Center, 52 percent of Russians consider Stalin a positive person. This is not really a surprise, not in that environment.

But it is indeed a surprise how difficult it is for the West to understand how Moscow's propaganda can be successful among Russia's citizens, in a country where people follow the news mostly through TV-channels controlled by the state.

It is possible, because the moment the archives in Russia were open was very brief. It is possible because the moment the press was free in Russia was very short. It is possible because the school books never really got started talking about things as they were. The iron curtain was ripped open for a moment and closed again in Russia about everything to do with human rights crimes. And the state does not encourage people who try to investigate them. Quite the contrary. When we in the West already in school learn something about what colonialism meant to the African nations, in Russia there is no attempt to make future generations understand what Russia's and the Soviet Union's colonialism meant to the countries it occupied. Instead, the memory of the Soviet Union is being rehabilitated and its history cleansed and massive propaganda campaigns are perpetrated on the former "colonies" and the consequence is that the Baltic countries, one after the other, are Russia's number one enemies. Threats.

They are indeed threats to the Kremlin administration insofar as they are prime examples of countries that have become modern democracies in an extremely short time. Countries who after getting out from under their occupiers have managed to create a free press, and where the standard of living is higher than in Russia, as is also life expectancy. That is why they are a threat to the Kremlin administration. Because they do not want the Russians to understand that their country could have the same success, under a different administration. That is why those small countries must remain enemies, not friends, not examples, but enemies. Then aggression toward them

is justified. Then their experiences, their sufferings are also justified and there is no need to feel empathy for the victims, because after all – they deserved it.

In Tzevatn Todorov's words:

“The enemy is the great justifier of terror and a totalitarian state cannot live without enemies. If there aren't any enemies, they must be invented. When they have been identified they do deserve no mercy, not any. – Being an enemy is an inescapable and hereditary stain.”

According to Moscow's moral code, the admission of errors, apologies, and redemption of crimes represent weakness; respect can be earned only with violence. Therefore the Western model of dealing with the past does not apply in Russia. The absence of that moral code should have awakened the Western nations to realize that Russia will never be on the road to Western democracy. But the Western nations also failed to look for it, because the Western nations have not learned to associate imperialism with Russia. It is as if no one understood that Russia should have had to do as much comprehensive work to deal with its recent past as any state that has lived under totalitarianism.

In the West, the word imperialism always conjures up images of the era of Western colonialism; colonies far beyond the seas, slave ships from Africa. Not of deportation trains to Siberia, although they too meant slave camps, because without Gulags the natural resources of Siberia would never have been harvested. The groups who organized these slave transportations were never condemned as criminal organizations, and that is why former KGB men are now in power and hold on to power with the same methods as before.

History is a magnificent tool in this: Stalin's Great Patriotic War, as the Second World War is called, is still Russia's greatest success story. The name of the war even reveals its essence: it silences the losses of others and emphasizes Russia's role as victim. The fact that others had victims and losses too is not part of Russia's story of losses, nor that the Soviet Union itself made victims of others, not to mention that it tormented innocent people or committed war crimes such as deportations. That does not fit the story line.

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