

Censorship and Self-Censorship in the Letters of Salaspils Camp Prisoners

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Abstract. The study of World War II correspondence is relevant to communication science; furthermore, it is an interdisciplinary topic that provides insight into the representation of places of incarceration and related aspects. By studying the letters of people imprisoned in the Salaspils camp, it is possible to establish the depiction of censorship and self-censorship of that time, as well as other categories (for example, relationships, communication, conditions, etc.) from the perspective of the authors of the correspondence. At present, it is possible to observe similarities with the censorship implemented in Russia and the methods of limiting information with the methods how censorship was achieved during World War II and the era of Nazi Germany. The state power strictly controls the information space and restricts freedom of speech. The aim of the work is to analyse the presence of censorship and self-censorship in the correspondence by prisoners of the Salaspils camp. The theoretical part of the paper consists of the study of interpersonal communication with an emphasis on the communication by letters, censorship and self-censorship in the totalitarian regime. The research results have been obtained using qualitative and quantitative content analysis. The censorship stamp appears in 24 of the 123 prisoners' letters, revealing the presence of censorship and self-censorship. The letters employ the technique of self-censorship suppression and interpretation. In the letters with a stamp, self-censorship appears explicitly, substantiated by providing minimal negative information about the conditions and events in the camp. The letters, which do not have a censorship stamp, expressly contain negative information about the events in the Salaspils camp, such as mortality of children, blood sampling, deportations and interrogations. Comparing the correspondence that has been inspected with the correspondence that does not have a censorship stamp, it was concluded that such letters (without a stamp) were delivered to the addressee by unofficial means, for example, by taking these letters out of the camp territory and handing them over during working hours, making arrangements with the guards or other prisoners.

Keywords: suppression technique, censorship, interpretation technique, content analysis, self-censorship, letters

Introduction

The construction of the Salaspils camp commenced in 1941, and from the summer of 1942 it officially functioned as an expanded police prison and labour training camp. The camp was liquidated on 29 September 1944, when the USSR troops approached the territory of Latvia (Kangeris *et al.* 2016, 97, 102, 298). In the camp, prisoners could correspond with their relatives by sending one letter a month, but certain groups of prisoners were forbidden to correspond (for example, imprisoned soldiers). Before being sent out, the letters of the prisoners of the Salaspils camp were subjected to inspection and censorship, and the indication of such review was the censorship stamp on the letter. However, despite the fact that letters were subject to censorship, the writing opportunities and quantity were limited, prisoners found other ways to convey their messages to their friends and relatives, such as making arrangements with other prisoners or guards (Kangeris *et al.* 2016, 180), who worked outside the territory of the camp. The messages that had been carried outside the camp contained information that would have been censored in official correspondence. In this way, it is possible to learn more about the physically and psychologically oppressive life in the camp. Considering the era of Nazi Germany in Latvia, it can be concluded that this power practiced political censorship, which was regulated by government organizations (for example, the Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories, military and paramilitary propaganda institutions (Zellis 2012, 50–70)). As emphasized by Ahmad (2019), political censorship is carried out in countries that endeavour to hide some information from the public, thus maintaining social control. The historian of Russian censorship Blyum (2000, 14) should also be noted here. He classifies censorship in a growing hierarchy; the first being self-censorship, or, as the historian calls it, author-censorship, which is our internal censor. Self-censorship in a totalitarian regime goes hand-in-hand with the censorship exercised by the existing power, which forces the author of information to censor his own work both consciously and unconsciously.

When studying self-censorship in letters written by prisoners, attention should be paid to two techniques of self-censorship distinguished by Cox (1979, 319) – interpretation and suppression. These particular techniques more frequently appear in the letters of prisoners. By using the suppression technique, letter writers avoid providing important information by simply not including it in their text. Interpretation technique is employed when letter writers choose, for example, figurative means of expression, subtext, allusions, poetry to convey an important message. Taking the text literally, it does not convey anything, but once the reader delves deeper into it and interprets its essence, it is possible to find a hidden meaning that reveals more. Professor Goldberg (2006, 158–159) specifically characterised the letter writing during the reign of Nazi

Germany, – the correspondence was full of self-censorship, where the authors misled the readers or provided false information, but a deeper look revealed hidden information about the lives of the letter writers and the events that they witnessed.

Self-censorship can also be observed in the correspondence by the prisoners of the Salaspils camp, because the prisoners understood that what they wrote would be checked and, in order not to incur punishment upon themselves or put their loved ones at risk, they chose to withhold specific information about the camp or use other ways (figurative means of expression, subtext) to convey a message.

Methodology

For the analysis of letters, it is necessary to obtain qualitative data – to study and assemble correspondence, which involves deciphering manuscripts, rewriting, and also translation. Since the letters have been written about 80 years ago, some of them have faded and there are illegible parts; many letters have been written with a pencil that has smudged, making the correspondence difficult to read. Before the analysis of the text of the letters, the deciphering of the texts to be studied and the preparation of the set of the texts to be analysed in a computer script have been carried out.

The research has drawn upon unpublished materials, – a total of 123 letters written by prisoners of the Salaspils camp have been analysed. The letters were obtained from the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia, the Latvian War Museum, the Museum of the History of Riga and Navigation and the Latgale Culture and History Museum. The letters included in the research were written by 17 different prisoners – Aleksandrs Strautmanis (the greatest number of letters – 72), Arvīds Ermanis Vaicišs, Arvīds Viksna, Ernests Balodis, Fricis Cīrulis, Jānis Logins, Jānis Zvirbulis, Jūlijs Vaļņins, Kārlis Saulītis, Krišjānis Rubenis, O. Melbiksis, Marija Melbiksis, Pēteris Annens, Pēteris Balalajevs, Vasilijš Boikovs, Jānis Jekals, Lūcija Valters. Using quantitative and qualitative content analysis, the content and character of the letters were studied – how many letters have a censorship stamp and what is the context of the letters for correspondence that does not have such a stamp. An inductive approach was used in the content analysis, distinguishing a total of 14 categories. Some of them are discussed in this article – the categories “Censorship”, “Self-censorship”, “Punishment”, “Means of figurative expression”, “Subtext” and the subcategory “Events taking place in the camp” of the category “Other activities”. I plan to discuss the other categories in greater detail in future publications.

Camp prisoners could write and send one letter a month (other groups of prisoners were forbidden to send letters), but prisoners frequently also used other ways to transmit the information to their next of kin and receive replies.

The letters of the prisoners of the Salaspils camp are currently available in various museums and collections of Latvia, for example, there are more than 70 such letters in the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia, more than 30 in the Latvian War Museum, and correspondence of this type is also available in the Latvian State Archives of the Latvian National Archives (Kangeris *et al.* 2016, 43).

The analysed self-censorship in correspondence has been studied under assumption that it is present in all the letters bearing a censorship stamp. The presence of self-censorship in the examined letters is also evidenced by the fact that no negative information about camp conditions (e. g., health, hygiene), punishments, events is disclosed.

Results

In order to better understand the presence of self-censorship and censorship, the thematic category “Punishment” and the subcategory “Events taking place in the camp” of the category “Other activities” were selected for the analysis thereof. Within the framework of content analysis, these particular categories clearly show the presence of self-censorship. Out of the analysed 123 letters, 24 have a censorship stamp, which is physically stamped on the paper of the letter (most often on top of the text); 22 letters bear the inscription “*Gepprüft*” and 2 – “*Caurskatīts*” (“Inspected”).

Amongst the letters of Aleksandrs Strautmanis, which make up the majority of the studied correspondence, only one bears a censorship stamp. Analysing Strautmanis’ communication with his family, it is concluded that it took place both officially – by sending one letter per month, which had been inspected – and also illegally, by delivering messages to the addressee outside the camp territory, for example, during work hours. Two letters written by A. Strautmanis, which do not have a censorship stamp, mention the control of letters: “The letters were brought from the commandant’s office together with the others and went through the censorship, because the stamp “inspected” was affixed on the corner” (Strautmanis 1942e). This information caused anxiety in the author of the letters, who wrote to his wife that it was necessary to wait a few days: “[...] I am a little worried and I want to wait a couple of days, [to see] if they have spotted something bad” (Strautmanis 1942e).

The presence of self-censorship in letters can be analysed by employing the interpretation method, especially if the correspondence includes poetry, figurative means of expression, subtext. For example, Strautmanis’ letters expressly show the use of this technique, as he wrote to his wife about the meeting place and date using subtext: “I would like you to go to Baloži on 25 July” (Strautmanis 1944o), “Aucīt, when you write, mention that you will go to Baloži on such-and-such date, or “getting ready to go any day”” (Strautmanis 1944l). In

correspondence, the authors also use metaphors, comparisons, epithets, personifications, compelling the recipient of the letter to interpret the written text. For example, in the text “[...] the scales are already weighing toward the bad side [...]” (Strautmanis 1943j). Strautmanis writes to his wife that it is impossible to meet. Also, in the lines of poetry, the inner experiences of their authors clearly appear, giving the recipient of the letter the opportunity to draw his or her own conclusions about the situation in the camp. For example, Jekals writes about hopelessness and pain in the following lines: “[...] Whoever has already descended the stairs of hopelessness knows that one must take the pain by the throat [...]” (Jekals 1943a).

In the category of self-censorship, two more letters must be singled out, which lack the censorship stamp, however, their authors created the content of the letter in a way that indicates self-censorship: “[...] I would like to write to you so much, but how can I do it” (Valtere 1943a), “[...] Of course, I cannot say everything” (Rubenis [S. n.]). This confirms what Bar-Tal (2017, 37) has said about the emergence of self-censorship in interpersonal communication, when the true information can be hidden even from one’s family and next of kin. Strautmanis’ letter, which has passed the censorship inspection, does not mention any negative information about the conditions in the camp or the events there, mostly there is information about relationships and lack of communication. This letter contains the following text – “Send me Valdis’ address, I want to write to him next month, if we are still here” (Strautmanis 1944k), which suggests that only the official way is used for transmitting the letters. Such correspondence presents evidence that the authors have tried to use the technique of suppression, avoiding the mention of negative information.

Most of the messages written by the authors of the letters were about the need for food and clothing (with a request to send specific things), requests to write longer and more frequently, about work in the camp and gratitude, however, in general, the content of these letters does not reveal negatively intoned information about the camp itself. A few negative messages cautiously appear (nothing negative is said openly about the camp), for example, in the words written by L. Valtere: “My eyes are much more weakened now because the sewing happens during the day and at night by electric light” (Valtere 1943b). In this letter, it is mentioned that she has become accustomed to the conditions of the camp: “Otherwise everything is not [too bad], I am completely used to the order of the camp.” (Valtere 1943b).

The presence of self-censorship in letters can be observed by examining those that do not bear a censorship stamp and comparing them with each other. These letters tend to contain more open information about conditions in the camp and the events there, as well as mentioning negative information. Expressly, such information appears in the letters of A. Strautmanis lacking the censorship stamp,

for example, regarding punishments: “[...] for stealing they hang by the pillory, but death does not scare either. If someone runs for it, 5 are shot along with him” (Strautmanis 1942b). A. Strautmanis also wrote about his punishment (it was not mentioned what the punishment had been): “[...] the punishment for writing has ended” (Strautmanis 1942d); it could be concluded that punishments were also imposed in the camp for consuming alcohol: “Then for that sin of drinking, I have escaped with my skin intact and I have not received any punishment” (Strautmanis 1944n). In this letter, A. Strautmanis mentions the punishment of another prisoner and assistance: “[...] help will be needed again. See, Steins, he got a punishment 3 months product ban [...]” (Strautmanis 1944n). In the letters, information emerges about the duration of the punishments: “[...] smoking in the barracks are not allowed, one got a punishment 2 days in the bunker and 2 weeks in the punishment group, this is a very severe punishment” (Strautmanis 1943h), “those punished for bringing in products with 4 weeks” (Strautmanis 1942c). In total, information about punishments appears in 10 letters.

Negative information about the camp appears not only when mentioning punishments. Correspondence also reveals other types of content showing various events. For example, the letters of A. Strautmanis and J. Jekals mention taking of blood from prisoners: “We will have to give blood this spring as well, the day before yesterday they took about 20 for a sample [...]” (Jekals 1944b), “last month we gave blood for wounded soldiers” (Jekals S. n.), “also had to enlist as blood donors [...]” (Strautmanis 1943f). The correspondence of the authors of these letters reveals information about the disinfection of the barracks and the mortality of children: “all our barracks have been gassed with prussic acid [...]. 2 children died from poisoning and 20 are still in the hospital” (Strautmanis 1943i). In a letter of A. Strautmanis, information about the lists of people and their deportation appears: “Today they are going to take the children away, probably to Germany” (Strautmanis 1944m), “[...] on the agenda 2 lists one 105 the other 80 persons. [...] I haven’t appeared in the lists yet” (Strautmanis 1943g). In his letters, A. Strautmanis also wrote about the interrogation: “From our midst are picked out to Reimersa iela [...]” (Strautmanis 1943i), as well as about new prisoners: “Jews are taken away, but in their stead prisoners of war are said to be coming” (Strautmanis 1942a).

Analysing the correspondence of Salaspils camp prisoners, it is concluded that the letters bearing the censorship stamp show a high level of self-censorship. These letters contain minimal negative information about the camp, rather communicating about the topics such as work, requests for clothing and products, urging to write more often, and questions about the well-being of the relatives. Here appears the use of suppression technique, whilst the letter, which is written in the form of poetry displays the interpretation technique. The authors of the letters restrain themselves while writing the text, so it can be argued that

self-censorship has been practiced deliberately. In the letters without a censorship stamp, information of a negative nature appears expressly – about punishments in the camp, the deportation of prisoners, the mortality of children, blood sampling, etc. It should be noted that most frequently such information appears in the letters of A. Strautmanis in particular, and in order to ascertain more precise information, it would be necessary to analyse a larger number of letters.

Conclusions

After conducting the content analysis, it is concluded that the smallest part of the correspondence bears a censorship stamp, which suggests other methods of sending messages from the Salaspils camp to external recipients (for example, during the work outside the camp territory). Out of 123 letters, only 20% (24 letters) have been stamped. Although the number of such letters among those reviewed is small, it yields a notion of the level of self-censorship. Looking at the content of the censored letters, it is concluded that minimal or no negative information appears about the conditions of the camp or events taking place there. The level of self-censorship can be compared by looking at letters that do not bear a censorship stamp. Such letters expressly reveal information that would not be passed through official censorship, such as punishments (shooting, hanging), child mortality (disinfection of barracks with prussic acid), drawing blood from prisoners, interrogations and deportations of prisoners. It should be noted that such information mostly appears in the letters of Aleksandrs Strautmanis, therefore, in order to ascertain more precise information and check the facts, a larger number of letters is needed, using also the correspondence of other authors.

Analysing the content of the correspondence, it is concluded that the suppression technique was mostly used, where the authors of the letters deliberately self-censored themselves, not disclosing specific information to the exterior world; the inability to express themselves also appears in the written letters, where the authors write that they do not know how to do it. The interpretation technique employed by the authors appears in the correspondence in the form of poetry, figurative means of expression and subtext, thus compelling the recipient of the letter to make his or her own judgment about the context of the letter. This technique enables the writer of the letter to express his inner feelings and trials, conveying this information to his loved ones in a safe way without violating the censorship rules.

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