

The Course of Life of Those Deported on 14 June 1941 Until Their Release from Forced Settlement. Examples of Disinformation, Misleading Information

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Abstract. Totalitarian state regimes use disinformation and misleading information in the form of propaganda to influence, control and reduce the possibility of critical thinking in their citizens. It still continues in several countries around the world. In order to facilitate recognising disinformation, to understand its manipulation methods, to promote critical thinking in a democratic environment, it has been valuable to analyse the country's own lived experience through the prism of its inhabitants. The article reflects examples of the experience of the population displaced from Latvia during the mass deportation carried out by the Soviet totalitarian regime on 14 June 1941, from the moment when the echelons full of deported people crossed the border of Latvia and arrived at the deportation camps, until liberation, the opportunities for return and life in Latvia after the experience of deportation. Oral history, represented by interviews in video format from the video testimony collection of the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia are the basic historical sources of the current study, predominantly focusing on the memories of people who were adults at the time of deportation. Several accounts of the memories are compared with the documents in the criminal case files of the deportees stored in the State Archives of Latvia. In the article, the insights into the main findings are grouped into eight key points of the historical context: 1) the beginning of the German-USSR war; 2) information obtained at the site of displacement (deportee status, information about the men); 3) the end of the German-USSR war; 4) communication with relatives, friends in Latvia; 5) efforts to return to Latvia in 1946–1948 (illegally/legally); 6) deportation of 25 March 1949 (informed/uninformed); 7) Stalin's death on 5 March 1953; 8) discharge in 1956–1957 and return to Latvia. Through examples, the article, reveals the disinformation of the Soviet regime in the form of silence, not responding to people's questions, absence of any explanation either regarding the status of the displaced person, or any aspects of rights. Replies to written submissions to the state authorities of the USSR were rejected without explanation. At times, the repressive regime also used partial disclosure of information, for instance, regarding relatives who were shot and killed in imprisonment. Not only the very harsh physical conditions

in the detention made the deportation inhumane, but the victims were also morally destroyed by this reigning ignorance, fear about their status, loved ones and fate.

Keywords: deportation, disinformation, information, deception, oral history, concealment, video testimony

Introduction

To control the society and the information flows therein is the basis of totalitarian regimes (Brzezinski, Friedrich 1965, 22). Thus, one of the pillars of state administration is disinformation in the form of propaganda to keep society under constant control and prevent the involvement of critical thinking. With repressions as an aid, the ruling power instilled fear in people and endeavoured to stifle the preservation of true information, driving people toward adapting it to the needs of the regime, or aiming to conceal it altogether and confine it to oblivion.

With the occupation of Latvia by the Soviet Union on 17 June 1940, the system of total control was introduced in the country, within one year transforming the state administration according to the Soviet requirements (Bleiere 2022). One of the first steps was to eliminate public participation in the life of the state, closing practically all types of public organizations, banning freedom of association and speech. The culmination of those repressions which took place during the first year of Soviet occupation was the mass deportation of Latvian residents on 14 June 1941. What made this action particularly tragic for the victims was that two types of repression were carried out simultaneously – the arrests of the heads of families and the deportation of their families to forced settlement sites (Pelkaus 2001, 17).

In 2020/2021, the author started research exploring the existence and impact of information, disinformation and misleading information during the mass deportation of 14 June 1941 in Latvia. On the basis of its first part, mainly consisting of eyewitness accounts' analysis, seven key points were marked regarding the information circulation and context of the deportation process until the departure of the echelons of the deported from the territory of Latvia (Neimane 2021). The purpose of this article is to highlight the influence of information, disinformation, misleading information through the examples of deportees' destinies and their memories. This is done in the following eight key points of the historical context.

Methodology

The base of the research in terms of sources consists of the video testimony collection of the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia.¹ These are oral history sources, where the interview method is characterized by the fact that it is guided by historical events in which the researcher is interested (Bela, Zirņīte 2014, 19).

The collection includes 241 life stories of Latvian residents deported on 14 June 1941. The examples of the study are the materials reflecting events from the point of view of the victims of the second type of repression – the deportation of family members to forced settlement locations. In order to better understand particularly the informative aspects during the course of deportation, 30 out of 38 video testimonies of people who were adults at the time of deportation were studied.² The basic method – quantitative content analysis, which allows to highlight the main trends of circulating information, disinformation and misleading information.

Results

1. The beginning of the German-USSR war

Deported people were placed in barred railway wagons, whose destination was unknown. The information that the German-USSR war had started on 22 June was not officially given to those in the wagons. Those victims who knew the Russian language learned this message indirectly, for example, by listening in to occasional conversations of railway employees, seeing army echelons on other tracks, which were carrying soldiers and weapons, – they could convey the message to the rest of the people sharing the fate in the carriage. This news about the beginning of the war had a significant meaning for a large part of the deportees. A characteristic feature revealed in the video testimonies was that upon learning of the beginning of the war emerged a hope that the front would stop the echelons and release the people detained therein. “War is war, maybe we’ll get home sooner – that was the thought!” (OMF2300/212).

2. Information obtained at the location of forced settlement (deportee status, information about the men)

Typically, when the deportees arrived at the location of forced settlement, they did not receive any clearer explanation regarding the length of prospective deportation period, the reasons for the repressions, nor were they informed about any rights they had or did not have. Studying the spoken testimonies of the deportees, as well as the criminal case files of these persons in the Latvian State Archives of the Latvian National Archives (fund No. 1987 “Case files of persons deported from Latvia on 14 June 1941”), a conclusion emerges that a lot, especially in the first years of the forced settlement, depended on the employees of the local department of security institutions, – what information, to what extent, and at what moment to give or withhold from the victims. Likewise, the registration data in these institutions could be carelessly recorded, therefore some of the documents have not been preserved to this day. The deportees testified about several single deportees or the ones lacking any relatives who had died in the first

years of the displacement (1941–1944) and no information about them can be found in any records (OMF 2300/379),³ thus the list of deportees published today (Pelkaus 2001) is definitely missing the records of some persons. Representatives of the authorities quite often deliberately lied to the deportees and even ridiculed them when they sought some information or justice (OMF2300/172). Russian language skills were very important for the deportees in communication with the responsible local persons in forced settlement. Those deportees who knew the Russian language, to some extent became mediators or leaders in the forced settlement camp. They had access to slightly more information that they may or may not have been able to unravel from lies and concealment. Meanwhile, these people were also subjected to a greater scrutiny by the security authorities, were arrested and tried for anti-Soviet agitation (OMF2300/172; OMF2300/1676). Only from 1948 did the security authorities begin to inform the displaced about deportation for 20 years or for life (Bleiere 2021).

From the very first day in forced settlement, the wives sought their husbands, attempted to find out where they were and why the family was not together. In relatively rare cases, but there were very persistent women with Russian language knowledge who learned about the system of gulag camps and started writing letters to different camps, in this way learning not only about the imprisonment of their respective husbands, but also about other Latvian men imprisoned there, passing on the news to the women in forced settlement who then had the opportunity to correspond with their loved ones (OMF2300/83). However, the wives in forced settlement were predominantly left in the dark. L. Vanhanena testifies: “We ask where the men are – if they were alive, they would be here with you! We asked and asked, and they already knew that they were dead, just didn’t tell...” (OMF2300/185). It was a deliberate form of disinformation by the totalitarian regime – deliberate concealment of men’s deaths in prison and/or disclosure of incomplete information.⁴

3. The end of the German-USSR war

Since uncertainty prevailed among the displaced people regarding their fate, the most important role of the information about the end of the war was the hope of being discharged and returning to Latvia. Mirdza Lāce testifies: “People on the shore holler, sing, shout: “Vojna konchilas!” [The war is over!] We hugged with Mirdza and thought that we would get home! We had high hopes that we would get home, but life went on, and nothing improved.” (OMF2300/684)

4. Communication with relatives, friends in Latvia

With the second Soviet occupation of Latvia (Bleiere 2022), the deportees had the opportunity to correspond with their relatives and friends who remained in Latvia. This was a significant turning point in the lives of the deportees in terms

of information, because it opened up an opportunity to find out, of course, conditionally or as much as censorship (Daukšts 2011) and self-censorship permitted, about the situation in Latvia, as well as to convey information about their fate in the forced settlement. It also gave an impetus to some of the deportees to write requests for release to the responsible authorities of the USSR and LSSR,⁵ but without success. Mirdza Tomsone testifies: “He [A. Kirhenšteins⁶] answered me even to Siberia, which was a great risk on his part, and it was written by hand – Dear Mrs. Tomson! And sent 400 roubles. He said I had to apologize, knowing you, that’s all I can do for you! And you can believe it! [...] Mom had gone to Vilis Lācis⁷, but the secretary said that he did not receive such [people]” (OMF2300/678).

Although partly, often in a symbolic text, with concealment, these received fragments of information significantly raised the morale of the deportees. Of course, in parallel with information, a very important part of communication was also the material part, lucky were those whose relatives could help by sending food, clothing, things that could not be obtained in forced settlement.

5. Efforts to return to Latvia in 1946–1948 by illegal or legal means

With the end of the German-USSR war and communication with Latvian relatives/friends, some of the displaced people had real thoughts about returning to Latvia. In 1946 and 1947, thanks to enterprising people from Latvia, it was possible to legally send children to Latvia to relatives/friends (Riekstiņš 1996). However, it was very difficult for mothers to part with their children, and soon after they were sent to Latvia, several women also dared to return, although without the permission of the authorities’ documents (OMF2300/270). There were quite a few cases when women travelled from the locations of forced settlement to Latvia individually, – with their children, as well as those without children (OMF2300/1676; OMF2300/296). Rarely, there were cases when women were intercepted on the way, and accordingly the woman herself was sentenced to a certain period of imprisonment in the camps and the child was sent back to the location of forced settlement (OMF2300/724). Just as seldom, there were cases when women were issued documents and permission to return to Latvia (OMF2300/852), however, as it turned out later, pursuant to the decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the USSR of 26 November 1948 (Riekstiņš 2004), this type of return also was considered illegal. The presented situation regarding the return from 1946 to 1948 indicates that, until the aforementioned decree,⁸ the status of the displaced was not entirely strictly formulated by the authorities, therefore, quite a lot of the displaced used this conditional “absence without leave”. Of course, the deportees who arrived in Latvia had no information about the intensification of repressions and the decisions of the USSR adopted in 1948, they often had legalized and lived an apparently peaceful life.

In 1949, the state security authorities commenced a stricter arrest, trials and forced resettlement of the people who had escaped the first forced settlement (OMF2300/270, OMF2300/1676; OMF2300/296). Some were arrested, but some still managed to avoid repeated repressions, for example: changed surname, changed region of residence in Latvia, concealed biographical information, and other types of concealment (OMF2300/380).

6. Deportation of 25 March 1949

In terms of information, this date was important for the part of the deportees who had returned to Latvia. In them, these news incited and intensified the fear of being deported once more, fear for their loved ones, several of them, driven by dread, had already packed their bags in case of possible deportation. It was rare for this second mass deportation to open a new deportation case, and those who had already been victims were deported again (OMF2300/938). For the most part, those who were deported in 1941 still were individually tried a second time and deported, while this fact mostly remained unknown to those who were still in forced settlement, unless it concerned close friends, relatives, for example, L. Vanhanena testifies: “In the summer of 1949, I received one line in a letter: “Father, mother, sister Valija and grandmother are coming to visit you!” And that was all. I didn’t understand at that moment. I was so stunned. I can’t say anything. Nothing more. No signature, nor anything. I knew from the handwriting that it was the middle sister. Nothing more at all.” (OMF2300/185). This quote illustrates the use of symbolic language mentioned above in the fourth point regarding the communication of information in correspondence.

7. Stalin’s death on 5 March 1953

The historical fact itself and its reflection in the memories of the victims regarding Stalin’s death is essential because at that time a hope for change arose once again, an anticipation that their status would change, that something more would be learned about the separated and missing loved ones. It is truly worth listening to the testimonies of the deportees about the announcement of the fact and the reaction to this news. It also reflects how much these people were influenced by Soviet propaganda, the instilled fear, the inner feeling often contradicted the outer behaviour demanded by the society. Mostly the deportees reacted to this news outwardly neutrally, but inwardly, hiding it from others, they rejoiced (OMF2300/1006). Sometimes, in the company of trusted people, even openly exulted (OMF2300/1676). There were also a few cases when the outward expression of emotions was crying, not about the demise of Stalin, but about what was lost during this totalitarian regime (OMF2300/218).

8. Discharge in 1956–1957 and opportunity to return to Latvia

After Stalin's death, the deportees again began to write requests to the state security authorities of the USSR to be released from displacement and allowed to return to Latvia. Unfortunately, until 1956, when the deportation cases began to be examined more widely (Bleiere 2021), they were mostly rejected. In this respect, the question arises as to whether the particular individual could have done something to speed up his or her release. Among the deported women there were reports that if a woman married a free man, the status of the displaced was removed. In the examples identified in the study, there are testimonies where deported women believe that this hastened their return in 1955 and 1956 (OMF2300/1006; OMF2300/270), but in another case this did not serve as an argument, despite applications to the supervisory authorities, the woman had to wait until general delisting in 1956 (OMF2300/185). Equally controversial is the question of whether the applications written to the state administration and security authorities of the USSR did help or not, because both those who wrote and those who did not write requests for release ultimately were discharged. Those who wrote requests for release in their memories contended that this hastened their discharge, but the documentation shows⁹ that only through a general review of cases after certain decisions were the deportees removed from the list of special settlement.

The return to Latvia practically took place individually, the deportees themselves saving up enough money for the journey, finding opportunities to settle down in Latvia. At that time, Latvian society as a whole received these people in fear of their own status and place in society, thus showing caution, mistrust, avoidance, even arrogance. In several deportees, this created a desire to return to the location of former displacement (OMF2300/1922). Psychologically and socially, they had to find an opportunity to somehow adapt to the environment of occupied Latvia at that time. Marta Zeime testifies: "I wasn't initially really happy. Mother [husband's mother] was, though – she wanted that Latvia, but I wasn't all that excited about Latvia. I had more respect in Siberia than in Latvia. *Latishka* [from Russian – the Latvian woman] – was something more – already the status – a higher nation in Siberia! In Latvia, I was Russian and Siberyachka [Siberian]..." (OMF2300/1636). Of course, there were people who preserved their humanity and tried to help the deportees to find a place to live, a job, and assist with some material household matters, but this was not the norm of society. The moment of return to Latvia clearly marks emergence of the trend of memory adaptation and reveals the examples of misleading information in the lives of the repressed, which includes the emergence of a double biography in society, workplaces, and families. The repressed people mostly hid their biography, the fact of deportation. If this fact was known, the individual, true experience of a person was not explained or told. In the families of former deportees, children were mostly not

told about the fate of their parents, thus creating a steep generational information barrier (OMF2300/1006). Children in schools learned the information or disinformation interpreted by the totalitarian regime in the form of propaganda, and without finding a chance of an alternative point of view, it was accepted as the norm and truth. Of course, there were also exceptions, where the experience of deportations was to a greater or lesser extent told in families, but it was also conveyed through the prism of self-censorship, in the form internally adjusted or permitted by the victim. This was the case until the period of awakening and the regaining of Latvia's independence, when the withheld information could be expressed more freely and stories of experiences could be heard.

Discussion and conclusions

In general, reviewing the experience of those deported on 14 June 1941 discussed in the article, it can be observed that the Soviet totalitarian regime kept the repressed in the dark about the reasons for the deportation, the course of the deportation, the status and rights of the deportee, and the fate of the separated relatives – which is a form of disinformation in the form of concealment. This concealment at times alternated with open disinformation, for example, in the case of family separation at the beginning of deportation (Neimane 2021), partial and/or misleading information, both in the explanation of the status of the displaced, and in the news about the causes of death of separated relatives in prison. Clearer information about the reasons for the deportation and the fate of the relatives could be obtained only during the awakening and after the regaining of Latvia's independence. Therefore, people attached great, even vital importance to every opportunity to learn and understand something – it was done purely psychologically, in the conditions of uncertainty. These conditions of being kept in the dark were a fertile ground for interpretations of various thoughts, fear, audacity, rumours, hopes, perception of the mystical world, interpretation of dreams, fortune-telling. Depending on the person's character and the coincidence of external circumstances, this type of information either strengthened the person, for example, the faith in God, or engendered depression, pessimism, for instance, disbelief in one's own strength, incredulity that circumstances can change, thus reducing the deportee's chances of survival. Considering that the research has been based on the stories of survivors and also psychologically resilient deportees, we can only partially understand the perception of information, ignorance, disinformation and misleading information by those who died in forced settlement or those who passed away after discharge.

Today, all the witnesses, whose memories form the basis of the research reflected in this article, have already passed away, but the recorded and recorded video materials enable the researchers and all those interested to listen to them

and acquaint themselves with these testimonies. The researched video testimonies revealed the influence of disinformation, false information and information vacuum of the Soviet totalitarian regime on the chances of survival for adults in displacement, who had grown up and formed their fundamental beliefs in independent Latvia (1918–1940) with the ability to make independent decisions, employ critical thinking, consider the existence of different opinions and information both in public life, in workplaces, and in the family. Since the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia continues to record video testimonies, the topic would be complemented by the testimonies of deported children, children born in the displacement, as well as children born into the families that were once again subjected to forced resettlement, which would enable the studies of the traumatic experience of deportation in the family and the influence of the propaganda of the Soviet totalitarian regime on the lives of the aforementioned groups of people, their perception and beliefs, discovering the consequences that these events have brought upon today.

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NOTES

- 1 The Museum of the Occupation of Latvia Audiovisual Archive repository contains 2444 video testimonies recorded from October 1996 to 1 December 2022, in which the memories or life stories of victims of the Soviet and/or Nazi occupation regimes and eyewitnesses of significant events in Latvian history are documented in video format.
- 2 These are persons who at the time of deportation had reached the age of 18–40 years.
- 3 For example, there is no information about Viesturs Kalniņš (deceased in 1944) and Katrina Rusberga (deceased in 1943).
- 4 From 1955 to 1963, the instruction of the KGB of the USSR No. 108-ps was in force, stipulating that the family members of the shot person must be notified that the relative has been sentenced to 10 years in a prison camp without the right to correspond. The document stated that, if necessary, the fact of death should be registered in civil status act registration institutions and certificates should be issued, in which the date of death should be indicated within 10 years from the date of arrest, and some illness should be indicated as the cause of death (Pelkaus 2001, 15).
- 5 The Latvian National Archives (hereinafter – LNA), Latvian State Archives (hereinafter – LVA), fund No. 1987 “Case files of persons deported from Latvia on 14 June 1941”, Description – Madona, case file No. 16269.
- 6 Augusts Kirhenšteins (1872–1963) – chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Latvia (26.08.1940–10.06.1952).
- 7 Vilis Lācis (1904–1966) – chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Latvian SSR (25.08.1940–27.11.1959).

- 8 With this decree, it was stipulated that the deportees should remain in the camps of Siberia and other remote regions of the USSR “forever”, but for escaping from the locations of forced settlement they should be sentenced to 20 years of hard labour. (Riekstiņš 2004).
- 9 See LNA, LVA, fund No.1987.

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