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Russia

For the Sins of Their Fathers and Mothers: Children of the Soviet Terror

Topic of Research and Countries Visited

I visited the Russian Federation to research the topic “For the Sins of their Fathers: Children of the Soviet Terror and Post-Stalinist Society.” This research is for the narrative and analysis to accompany the translation of documents on the experience of children who lost their parents and families permanently or temporarily due to their parents’ designation by the Soviet state as “enemies of the people” in the years 1918-1956. The documents include state decrees and interagency correspondence from archives opened in the 1990s and memoirs by child survivors. My research includes oral history interviews with survivors and eyewitnesses, as well as a survey of students and instructors in institutions of higher education to determine what they know about Soviet terror/repression and how they view it.

Relevance and Contribution to the Field

Those children of the terror who survived became citizens of post-Stalinist Russia and continue to be citizens of post-Soviet Russia or former Soviet republics, as do their children, to whom some survivors believe they have bequeathed what one interviewee termed “genetic fear”. There is a story only recently making its way into print through such memoirs as those in Vilensky, *Till My Tale is Told*; Yakovlev’s *A Century of Violence in Soviet Russia*; a chapter in Anne Applebaum’s *GULAG. A History*. For the most part, these publications focus on the culpability of the Soviet regime and trauma of the childhood experiences. They contribute to the existing historiography on the Soviet orphans and education/re-education, collectivization, dekulakization, and terror. My research, narrative and analysis depart from previous works in my focus on child survivors across all episodes of Soviet terror/repression, geographic scope, and inclusion of peasant and worker survivors outside urban areas.

The policy significance of my research is that it enables us to consider what the contemporary understanding of Soviet repression is among citizens of the Russian Federation. Citizens orient themselves toward the current government and administration partially through their historical consciousness/memory. In the shifting limits of their tolerance for authoritarian or democratic structures, knowledge and memory of the terror, including of the terror’s youngest victims, is one factor worthy of our consideration.

Summary of Research Methodology and Sites

My research comprises oral history interviews with child survivors and a survey on historical consciousness and evaluation of Soviet repression/terror among students and teachers in institutions of higher education in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Vologda, Kotlas, and Severodvinsk.

I have already interviewed survivors in Moscow, Vologda, Kotlas, and the Staritsa region, while previous published surveys and interviews have been limited largely to Moscow respondents and members of the educated classes. In 2005-2006, I will interview survivors in St. Petersburg, Syvtyvkar, Arkangel'sk, and Severodvinsk. I tape these interviews, have them transcribed, and one print copy is for analysis and preservation in a major international library/research center in the United States or Europe.

With support from the travel grant, I have also been able to finalize the questions on the survey instrument and arrange to have it administered in 2005-2006. As of this research report, I have received my first 50 completed surveys from Vologda.

Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions

After completing 20 oral history interviews and working with local representatives of societies memorializing victims of Soviet repression and serving as advocacy groups for those victims, I have come to the following preliminary conclusions about the experience of the child victims as children and as adult survivors, historiography of Soviet repression, and the memorialization of the children's experiences:

- My research is limited to those who survived. Only eyewitness accounts suggest the fate and suffering of those children of the enemies of the people who died because of the state's treatment of their parents and them.
- Those who survived suffered deprivation, abuse, and humiliation, engendering various lifelong habits in personal relationships and attitudes toward the state. Among the range of emotions I encounter most frequently are fear, anger, and skepticism.
- Almost every survivor refers to at least one special person who served either as a Samaritan or as a companion-in-suffering; these personal relationships and interventions were crucial for survival.
- The Muscovite respondents who are the most frequent subjects of interviews for previous studies are a unique group. As children of the Bolshevik intelligentsia, they suffered genuine loss, but their own education, urban experiences, and membership in a community of children of the enemies of the people enabled them and continues to enable them to process their childhood experiences with sophistication, some distance, and emotional reparation through their circle of fellow survivors that children outside the capitals from the peasant and worker classes did not and do not have.
- Focusing on children as a category of victims of Soviet repression across the years 1918-1956 highlights the fact that there were constant waves of repression against ever-expanding categories of the enemies of the people.
- The January 2005 conversion of social welfare benefits for pensioners to cash stipends established by local governments, and the accompanying elimination of the victims of Soviet political repression and of their children as such victims as beneficiaries of the new cash stipends in that legislation has enraged survivors. In every community, I met persons engaged in court suits/legal petitions to various courts and state organs to overturn the January 2005 regulations. The first such case had made its way to the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation by mid-October 2005.
- There are mass graves of children of the enemies of the people all across post-Soviet space. Only one memorial exists to children of the enemies of the people: on the edge of the mass graves of Makarikha, on the outskirts of Kotlas, Arkhangel'sk province.

- Local governments differ in their level of support for the work of advocacy and memorial groups for victims of Soviet repression. Kotlas is particularly supportive; Vologda is particularly unsupportive.
- There is significant diversity in Russian citizens' definitions of repression, terror, and victim. Thus, it is possible for a Moscow survivor to agree with Western (European and U.S.) assertions that there were tens of millions of victims of Soviet repression and for law instructors in Vologda to assert that there were fewer than one million victims of Soviet repression.

Suggestions for Future Research Agendas

We need to work closely with St. Petersburg and Moscow Memorial to reach local chapters and facilitate the gathering of oral history interviews in distant regions. For example, St. Petersburg Memorial cannot afford to travel to Magadan to do the oral history interviewing they hope to do; similarly, they cannot get to Kazakhstan for extensive interviewing. It would be useful for us to undertake a massive, collaborative oral history project with our Russian colleagues. We have accomplished a great deal in publishing archival materials; we should invest equally in oral history, bringing our research interests to the work of our colleagues at the universities in the capitals and outside the capitals.

Recommendations for the US Policy Community

I offer three recommendations for the US Policy Community. They are:

1. Keep in mind that Moscow is not Russia. Support research and other programs that reach beyond Moscow and St. Petersburg. It has taken about a decade for higher education institutions in the regions to embark on genuine transformations of their curricula and pedagogy; U.S. Department of State programs have contributed to that process.
2. Maintain a US presence in support of reform and further transparency in all areas of Russian culture. Senators and Congressmen should visit the cities/towns where U.S.-funded programs have been in place to meet with local citizens (not just officials!) in "town meetings." Insist on open, televised public forums. This would contribute enormously to Russian-U.S. mutual understanding and provide a model of politicians' accessibility to the public. It would be fairly simple to come up with topics of common concern: terrorism and democracy; public health challenges; public education goals and challenges; taxation policies; religion and the state; oil and politics (domestic and international).
3. Be willing to invest in Russia's political and cultural development outside Moscow and St. Petersburg for another decade. Consider the pace of the development of democratic institutions (especially the judicial system and educational systems) in the Early Republic in the United States. What had we accomplished by 1790? What remained to be done? The Russian Federation has been inventing much in the economy, political system, judicial system, and educational system since 1991, a mere fourteen years ago.