Illustration: Moa Thelander

Songs from Siberia

The folklore of deported Lithuanians

essay by **Vsevolod Bashkuev**

The deportation of populations in the Soviet Union during Stalin's rule was a devious form of political reprisal, combining retribution (punishment for being disloyal to the regime), elements of social engineering (estrangement from the native cultural environment and indoctrination in Soviet ideology), and geopolitical imperatives (relocation of disloyal populations away from vulnerable borders). The deportation operations were accompanied by the "special settlement" of sparsely populated regions in the hinterland. At least six million people of different nationalities were relocated by force in the USSR from the 1930s to the 1950s.[1]

This article focuses on the texts of songs, poems, prayers, and jokes created by Lithuanians deported to Eastern Siberia in large-scale relocations from the Lithuanian Soviet Republic in 1948 and 1949. They suffered repression at the hands of Stalin's regime for alleged active aid to the nationalist Lithuanian resistance known to historians as the "forest brothers". *Vesna* [Spring] is the name given to the most massive deportation operation in Lithuanian history, conducted on May 22–23, 1948, resulting in the exile of 11,233 families, 39,482 men, women, and children, to Krasnoyarsk Krai, Irkutsk oblast, and the Buryat-Mongolian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. A year later, in March, April, and May 1949, in the wake of Operation Priboi, another 9,633 families, 32,735 people, were deported from their homeland to remote parts of the Soviet Union.[2]

The deported Lithuanians were settled in remote regions of the USSR that were suffering from serious labor shortages. Typically, applications to hire "new human resources" for their production facilities were received by different ministries a few months before a major deportation.[3] In the area of exile, the bulk of those deported were settled in separate communities supervised by the MVD (Ministry of the Interior) district command post. The displaced were provided with employment without any consideration for their occupation before exile. For example, in Buryat-Mongolia, most of the Lithuanian peasants were employed in the forestry sector, felling trees and handling lumber, while in the Irkutsk region, some of the exiles worked at collective farms and "sovkhoz".[4]

Special settlements were quite close to local population centers and did not differ from them externally. The displaced were commonly accommodated in the dwellings of local residents, or even lodged with them as part of the forced accommodation-sharing program. Whatever the housing arrangements, the exiles were in permanent contact with the local population, working side by side with them at the factories and collective farms and engaging in barter; the children of both exiled and local residents went to the same schools and attended the same clubs and cultural events. Sometimes mixed marriages were contracted between the exiles and the local population.

A special status that existed only in Stalin's USSR was assigned to the displaced Lithuanians as well as to other ethnic groups. The term "special settler" used in the Soviet legal reprisal lexicon meant "administratively exiled for an indefinite term without deprivation of rights". Translated into normal language, it meant that people were exiled without a proper court ruling, without announcing the exile term, with only limited freedom of movement, but with some of the elementary civil rights and duties enjoyed by the Soviet people. Hence, special settlers were not allowed to leave special settlements without the express permission of the command post leader and were obliged to work at the jobs assigned

Special settlement of Barun, Khorinskii region, Buryat-Mongolian Autonomous Socialist Republic, 1956. Photo from the private archive of N. D. Grebenshchikov.

Dedication of a monument to deceased Lithuanian

them, but they enjoyed the right to vote and the right to education, medical assistance, and social security. Naturally, in real life, the special settlers were second-class citizens, stigmatized as ideologically unreliable.

Most of the Lithuanian special settlers had been self-supporting farmers, including many peasants of average means and sometimes even members of the working poor.[5] Therein lies the tragic peculiarity of the internecine "war after the war" that broke out in Lithuania in the course of sovietization and collectivization (1945–1953). What was described by the Soviet government as a class struggle was, in fact, a civil war provoked by Stalin's regime, in which those who suffered most were common people, who simply longed above all else for a peaceful life.

The bulk of exiled Lithuanians were included in the lists of people to be relocated because of denunciations. Exile orders were approved on the basis of only four signatures – often those of close friends, neighbors, or fellow villagers. A few liters of homebrewed vodka, a sack of flour, or a piece of smoked fat given to another person could provide sufficient reason to suspect a farmer of links with the nationalists.[6] Without taking the trouble to look for proof, the Soviet authorities launched the punitive mechanism, and in the course of the next special operation, the whole family would be exiled, together with thousands of other unfortunate companions.

The only supporting document given to the local supervising authorities in the place of settlement was a deportation certificate. Flimsy though it may have been compared to today's multi-volume files, this single sheet of paper was a sentence and determined the subsequent destiny of the exiled families. This sterility characterized all of Stalin's deportations: their mass scale, extrajudicial nature, machine-like detail, and soulless indifference to human fates.

Inside the mechanism of repression, the situation changed dramatically. Total control and all-permeating surveillance were at the heart of the forced labor system. Once there, the person was immediately surrounded by numerous invisible informants who scrupulously took notes to report anything that could be perceived as a threat to the Soviet regime. Selection of informants from among the special settlers began in the early stages of their transportation to the place of exile. In addition to the lists of deportees, the train officers would hand over to the receiving MVD officers supplementary lists of enrolled informers, who, from the first days of exile, began to provide information regarding those among the contingent of special settlers who showed signs of wanting to escape.[7]

The ordeal of exile brought out both the best and the most ignoble in people. The vast majority of secret agents who reported on the moods of special settlers were Lithuanian. In return for their services, they were given money, work exemptions, and other minor forms of preferential treatment that acquired significant value in the exile environment. But denunciation was risky, and, if unmasked, such informants were at best subjected to unspoken ostracism from the entire Lithuanian community, such that the MVD agencies often had to transfer them to other places of special settlement.[8]

Great importance was attached to the formation of the informer network and scrutiny of the attitudes of the special settlers until the Lithuanians were released from exile in 1958. Multiple factors were taken into account when selecting informants: age, willingness to cooperate, agility, awareness, and a command of Russian. The latter ability is particularly important given the context of this article. The poems and lyrics quoted below were translated into Russian by Lithuanian informants, apparently in advance, as they are attached to the documents in verse. But the Lithuanian originals are missing.

The reports on special settlers' attitudes received from informants were gathered at the lowest level of the MVD system, at village and district special command posts where they were first evaluated, interpreted, and systematized. "Surveillance files" formed at the district command posts, using memos and reports received from village command post leaders, were then sent to the MVD's regional department or head office. Once received, the information was analyzed and, based on the analysis, decisions were taken to investigate particularly unreliable special settlers. An abridged summary of the surveillance file materials was used to prepare reports for the Soviet Ministry of the Interior.[9]

One result of all this activity is the vast collection of documents that form the basis of this study, containing the most diverse data from surveillance of people who had been forcibly relocated. This study used only a small portion of the collection kept in the "special files" of the Information Center of the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Buryatia. Various segments of the most extensive archival records made it possible to reproduce every detail of life in a special settlement in Buryat-Mongolia. This provided a strong empirical foundation for correlation with the real features of special settlement life in other parts of Eastern Siberia and for further generalizations. Most importantly, thanks to accurate records of carelessly dropped phrases and utterances, songs, prayers, poems, and jokes overheard, it was possible to recreate the thoughts, attitudes, and even emotions of the people who found themselves in the extreme environment of distant exile.

Naturally, the secret informers only recorded manifestations of negative emotions against the Soviet system and the gray reality around the special settlers. MVD officers also focused on manifestations of hostility, disobedience, slander, and freethinking, since that was what their key supervisory and repressive responsibilities implied. However, behind the flow of choleric, accusatory, and disparaging words, one can discover, like particles of gold in river sand, the overtones and images, hopes and aspirations, ideas and views of the people who had fallen under the wheels of repression.

Art reflected the negative features of their existence, personified in caricature and sometimes even demonic imagery. The songs of exiled Lithuanians often combined images of their Mother Lithuania and disparaging epithets aimed at Russia and Russians as aggressors. On formal occasions such as elections, Lithuanian youth would sing songs with "nationalist content" to spite the Soviet system. Thus, on December 16, 1951, on their way back from voting, young Lithuanians were singing the song below (the original document is a Russian translation):

> **A linden tree is bowed down by the roadside;**
> **My old mother bursts into tears:**
> **Ah, my son, your Motherland is calling you;**
> **Once again my Lithuania will be free.**
> **And if I am to die**
> **At the Russian butchers' hands,**
> **Ah, lassie, adorn my tomb**
> **With white locust blossoms.**[10]

The old mother and the Motherland are identical in the song's context, while the array of images is made vivid by the symbol of the bending linden. The linden tree, typical of Lithuania, is long-lived, and in this instance forms the heart of an extended metaphor: a mother calling to her exiled son and the Motherland bent under the aggressor's heel. The victim's

deportees. Village of Chelan, Buryat-Mongolia, 1957. Photo from the private archive of K. Mikulskene.

Work brigade of Lithuanian women deportees clearing a path in the forest. Buryat-Mongolia, 1950s.

Easter, 1950s. Buryat-Mongolian Autonomous Socialist Republic. Both photos above from the private archive of A.V. Arefyeva.

fate, possibly awaiting the song's protagonist, is reinforced by the image of a girl adorning the tomb with white blossoms, a symbol of youth, innocence, and eternity.

Jhukas Kazis, who was under surveillance as the son of a kulak and ex-member of a gang, was seen singing a similar song:

Your old mother is crying;
Your Motherland awaits you,
A merry spring will blossom,
The happy day of freedom will come to Lithuania.[11]

The array of images used in the above songs is identical. Quite likely, it was the same song translated differently into Russian by informers among the exiled Lithuanians. Or the exiles who sang it may have added appropriate words here and there, modifying the form but leaving the meaning unchanged.

While the images of the Motherland, the mother, and the blossoms and trees symbolizing them formed a sacralized context, their antagonists, Russia, Russians, Soviet reality, and Soviet power, were portrayed with caricatures or demonic images.

One of the informants reported that on July 16, 1949, Kirsha Alexas gathered a group of Lithuanians at his place, and joined them in singing songs with "counterrevolutionary, nationalist, anti-Soviet, and slanderous" content, one of which is quoted below:

The sun has set, the evening has come,
Our land has been robbed by the pauper Russia;
It seized our land
And does not let our sisters sow rue grass.
[...] Asians came up to the mother's window
And asked: Where is your son?
But she kept silence and did not betray her son;
So she was exiled to Siberia forever.
Spring will come; the cuckoo will start cuckooing;
We'll cover all the roads with the bodies of Soviet partisans;
A time of blood will come, and our sufferings will end;
We'll oust the pauper Russians from the Lithuanian land.[12]

In the above context Russia is presented as an enslaver. The rue grass normally sown in the spring by Lithuanian children is associated with the national traditions being oppressed, and possibly even with children yet unborn whose potential mothers were exiled to Siberia. Two distinctive features that parody Russia are the epithet "pauper" and the direct reference to "Asians", personifying wildness and poverty in the eyes of that generation of Lithuanians.

Once again, in the image of a mother who did not betray her son, one can recognize thousands of Lithuanian women exiled in punishment for their sons, husbands, and brothers, members of the nationalist resistance, and Lithuania itself raided by "Asians".

Interestingly, the image of Siberia is more neutral in the exiles' songs and poems. It is undoubtedly a harsh place, ill-suited for human life, but descriptions of it contain less hatred and rejection. For instance, another song, recorded by a Lithuanian woman named Pranya, goes as follows:

Don't ask me why my face is sad;
Between the high mountains of Siberia
I cannot see the sun setting;
I cannot hear the lark's song,
It may be that I will not see my brothers
mowing hay in a green meadow;
It may be that I will not hear my sister
Singing a song of freedom.
You living over there in our homeland
Have neither nests nor sentinels,
Only the rustling of young birch trees
And the echo of a boring song.
Cold blizzards are raging in Siberia;
Our brothers have long been suffering there.[13]

Like the lines quoted earlier, the above song was based on contrasting images: Siberia is severe, a place of fierce suffering; Lithuania is a quiet homeland, with birds warbling and trees rustling in the wind. But no derogatory attitude towards the land of exile is present here. This song rather conveys sadness and alienation, representing Siberia as a cruel but monumental natural purgatory where the firmness of the exiled Lithuanians is tested.

Other verses of the song contain an interesting image of Lithuanian partisans that becomes clear in the context of the "war after the war":

Don't ask me, dear sister
Why I was exiled to Siberia;
[For] loving my native fields
And serving food to my brothers.[14]

The girl was exiled to Siberia for aiding members of the nationalist movement, as described in the last verse of the song. The "brothers" to whom she was "serving food" are definitely her relatives or friends who fought in the "forest brothers" detachments. For exiled Lithuanians, their memories were precious because some of their "forest relatives" remained at large; moreover, resistance meant the survival of deeply rooted traditions and the will for freedom, and instilled hope during conditions of exile.

It was vigorous and aggressive march-like songs that helped to mobilize the exiles' will and physical strength to survive and resist the system. Thus in July 1949 an informer reported that three young Lithuanians returning from work formed a column and sang:

Get up, lad, get up,
Get up, good man,
It's time to go to the war;
Defend enslaved Lithuania![15]

That same summer, during a drinking party, Lithuanian youths sang an even more rebellious song:

Down with damned communism,
Down with heartless liars
Burglars of others' property,
Those who ousted us, the young,
From our sweet homeland [...]
As soon as the sun sets
You can see through the small windows
Our yellow faces and tearful eyes.
You won't come back, old people;
You won't come back, little children;
You won't come back, brothers and sisters;
You won't walk Lithuanian paths;
You won't join the soldiers' ranks.[16]

In the above song, the call to overthrow communism and the denunciation of the Soviet leadership are linked with sorrow about the fate of exiled Lithuanians, with fatalistic motifs making the song sound like a lament, made more poignant by multiple repetitions of the negation. This song, both a cry and a lament, conveys the feelings Lithuanians had during the first years of their Siberian exile.

Religion played an important role in the life of the exiles. Given the extreme conditions of exile, prayer helped to mobilize their strength to survive. Thus, even in the rush to pack all that was most essential during the single hour granted for gathering up their belongings, Lithuanian women would take prayer books, crucifixes, rosaries, holy pictures, and other devotional articles. These and the appeals to God composed in exile not only served to restore their spiritual equilibrium, but also helped them to preserve their Catholic faith in the Soviet environment of bellicose atheism. The religious poem below was written by a Lithuanian girl, Aldona Artishauskaite, in 1951:

> **The earth was in blossom, the olives were praying;**
> **You were accompanied by Christ's sad glance**
> **And the free wind of your native fields.**
> **Do not cry, even if your heart is torn by storms;**
> **Love your Motherland; grace will descend to your feet.**
> **Hard as it is to remember your Lithuanian name,**
> **Do not ever exchange your cup of happiness.**[17]

The poem contains a clear call to submission and spiritual strength, expressing confidence that all the hardships inflicted on the exiles will finally end. The lines urge the listener to maintain love for the Motherland and never to lose the traditional values and ideals.

Clearly, singing songs and composing poems seen as "anti-Soviet" and "harmful" were risky undertakings. The exiles were deeply concerned about their destiny. Thus, in July 1951, a Lithuanian girl who lived in Buryat-Mongolia told her countrywoman – who proved to be an informant – "How soon will the ones in the blue caps take me?" When asked "What for?" she replied: "I believe they must seize me for going to the cemetery with Kazya Rimkutya last summer. When we were there, we sang songs against the Soviet rule."[18]

Indeed, just a few lines of poetry, song, or letters were enough to earn the exiles several years in a camp, charged with anti-Soviet protest. However, there were people who dared to mock even the top Soviet leaders. Such jokes were often recorded in the MVD's surveillance files at the time of the state bond issues, hated by the special settlers. For instance, during a bond offering, a Lithuanian woman named Zinaida Blagozhevichute said on June 26, 1953: "I hate this deputy director for political affairs because he makes me subscribe for amounts I don't want. Last year I did not subscribe for the full amount of my salary and Stalin died because of that; and if I don't subscribe this year Malenkov will die."[19]

Such on-the-edge statements most tellingly reveal the level of antagonism towards Soviet practices and rituals. Despite the risk of being sent to a camp, the exiles expressed resentment towards the aggressive ideological campaigns, which aggravated their already strained financial situation.

CONCLUSION

The examples of the oral folk art of exiled Lithuanians cited in this paper allow us to address the fundamental problems of how the trauma of deportation relates to the archival findings and how it transformed the creators of the folk art. The bulk of research material is still preserved in the memory of those who suffered exile, or in restricted-access archives. Nevertheless, this analysis has made it possible to arrive at a number of generalizations.

It is folklore that most vividly reflects the situation of exile: homesickness, expressed through immediately recognizable images, grudges against Soviet power, and rejection of an alien reality reflected in the contrast of expressive means and a conflict of images. At the same time, folklore may have served to neutralize the trauma, thus removing psychological stress and assuaging spiritual anguish.

Songs, poems, and prayers were reliable tools of passive resistance to Soviet propaganda. Unlike other types of expression of dissent, they were created for existential purposes, to last a long time and to be open to modification. Quite possibly, the same songs and poems, like court ballads, were passed from one contingent of Lithuanian special settlers to another, with new verses added.

The system of total surveillance established by the government to punish and reeducate the exiles has been preserved in its records and has brought to the present age examples of folk art that were created under extreme stress and documented for the purpose of surveillance. Given the ability of the human memory to quickly erase that which is most painful, the above examples might, under different circumstances, have been forgotten and have disappeared forever. The fact that most of them are presented in Russian translation and are accompanied by the interpretations of supervising officers gives us a vivid impression of the peculiarities of the perception and reasoning of the exiled Lithuanians': the MVD officers. This adds particular value to the examples of folklore as primary historical sources.

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references

1 Viktor Zemskov, *Spetsposelentsy v SSSR*, 1930–1960 [Special Settlers in the USSR, 1930–1960], Moscow 2003, p. 281. See also: Pavel Polyan. *Ne po svoei vole… Istoriia i geografiia prinuditel'nykh migratsii v SSSR* [Not by Their Own Will… History and Geography of Forced Migrations in the USSR], Moscow 2001, p.239.

2 Vanda Kašauskiene, "Deportations from Lithuania under Stalin: 1940–1953", in *Lithuanian Historical Studies* 3:80, 1998.

3 Vsevolod Bashkuev, *Litovskie spetsposelentsy v Buriat-Mongolii* (1948–1960) [Lithuanian Special Settlers in Buryat-Mongolia (1948–1960)], Ulan-Ude 2009, p. 100.

4 "Sovkhoz" is an abbreviation of the Russian *sovetskoe khoziaistvo* [soviet farm] and refers to the large mechanized farms owned by the state.

5 Viktor Berdinskikh, *Spetsposelentsy: Politicheskaia ssylka narodov Sovetskoi Rossii* [The deported: the political exile of Russian ethnic minorities], Moscow 2005, p. 525.

6 From an interview with B. S. Razgus dated April 28, 2010 (the audio tape of the interview is kept in the author's records). According to B. S. Razgus, chairman of the regional organization National-Cultural Society of Lithuanians in Buryatia, the resolution concerning the expulsion of his family contained only four signatures of alleged "witnesses" to the fact that his father, S. V. Razgus, had given a sack of flour and a certain quantity of home-brewed vodka to his neighbor. The Razgus family owned 20 hectares of land and a small farmstead.

7 Vsevolod Bashkuev, *Litovskie spetsposelentsy v Buriat-Mongolii (1948–1960)* [Lithuanian special settlers in Buryat-Mongolia (1948–1960)], Ulan-Ude 2009, p. 149.

8 Ibid., pp. 160-161.

9 Ibid., pp. 52-53.

10 Archival abbreviations are henceforth used as follows: F for "archival fund"; O for "inventory"; D for "archival file"; T for "volume"; L for "info on Lithuanians" or "sheet". Gruppa spetsfondov Informatsionnogo tsentra MVD Respubliki Buriatiia [Special Deposit of the Information Center of the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Buriatia], F. 58L. O. 1. D. 91. T. 1. L. 66: "Sognulas' lipa pri doroge, / Zaplakala mat' moia starushka, / Akh syn moi, otchizna tebia zovet, / I opiat' budet svobodna moia Litva. / A esli suzhdeno mne pogibnut' / Ot russkikh palachei ruki, / Akh devushka, ukras' moiu mogilu / Beloi akatsii tsvetami".

11 Ibid., L. 119: "Mat' starushka tvoia plachet, / Otchizna mat' tvoia zhdet tebia, / Zatsvetet vesna veselaia, / Budet schastlivyi den' svobody dlia Litvy."

12 Ibid., D. 10. T. 1. L. 124: "Solntse zashlo, nastal vecher, / Zagrablena nasha zemlia nishchei Rossiei, / Ona zavladela nashei zemlei / I ne daet nashim sestram seiat' travu-rutu. / […] Prishli aziaty k oknu materi / I sprosili mat', gde ee syn, / A mat' molchala i ne vydala syna, / Za eto ona vyslana navek v Sibir'. / Pridet vesna, kukushka zakukuet, /Trupami sovetskikh partizan zastelem vse dorogi, /Pridet vremia krovavoe i nashi stradaniia konchatsia, / Nishchikh russkikh vygonim so svoei zemli litovskoi."

13 Ibid., L. 125: "Ne sprashivai, pochemu skuchnoe litso, / Mezhdu vysokimi gorami Sibiri / Ia ne vizhu, kogda saditsia solntse / i ne slyshu pesni zhavoronka. / Mozhet ne uvizhu, kak na zelenom lugu / Brat'ia stanut seno kosit', /Mozhet byt' ne uslyshu, / Kak sestrenka pesniu svobody zapoet. / U vas tam na nashei rodine / Net ni postov, ni chasovykh, / Tol'ko shurshanie molodykh berez / I ekho skuchnoi pesni. / V Sibiri svirepstvuiut kholodnye v'iugi, / Tam stradaiut brat'ia izdavna."

14 Ibid., L. 125: "Ne sprashivai menia, dorogaia sestra, / Za chto popala ia v Sibir', / [za to], chto liubila rodnye kraia / i brat'iam kushat' podavala."

15 Ibid., L. 124: "Vstavai, vstavai parenek, / Vstavai molodets, / Pora ekhat' na voinu, / Zashchishchat' poraboshchennuiu Litvu!"

16 "Doloi kommunizm prokliatyi, / Doloi besserdechnykh obmanshchikov, / grabitelei chuzhogo imushchestva, / kotorye nas, molodezh', / vyselili iz nashei miloi strany […] / […] Kak tol'ko solntse zakatitsia, / Vy vidite skvoz' malen'kie okna / Nashi zheltye litsa i slezlivye glaza, / Ne vernetes' vy, stariki, / Ne vernetes' vy, malye deti, / Ne vernetes', brat'ia i sestry, / Ne budete khodit' po litovskim tropam, / Ne vstanete v soldatskie riady."

17 Ibid., D. 91. T. 1. L. 257: "Tsvela zemlia, molilis' olivy, / Tebia soprovozhdal pechal'nyi vzgliad Christa / i svobodnyi veter rodnykh polei. / Ne plach', khot' tvoe serdtse i budut razryvat' buri, / Liubi otechestvo, blagodat' spustitsia k tvoim nogam. / Khot' i tiazhelo vspominat' imia litovki, / chashu schast'ia nikogda ne promeniai."

18 Ibid., T. 2. L. 140: "Mne kazhetsia, menia dolzhny zabrat' za to, chto ia proshlym letom s Rimkutei Kazei khodila na kladbishche, gde pela pesni, napravlennye protiv sovetskogo gosudarstva."

19 Ibid., D. 130. T. 1. L. 251: "[…] ia nenavizhu etogo zamdirektora po politicheskoi chasti, tak kak on zastavliaet menia podpisyvat' na zaem stol'ko, skol'ko ia ne khochu. V proshlom godu ia ne podpisala na polnyi oklad, i iz-za etogo umer Stalin, a v etom godu, esli ne podpishu, umret Malenkov."