

THE TEXT OF DEPORTATION AND TRAUMA IN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING: THE DIARY OF ARPENIK ALEKSANIAN. *Summary*

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This article is an analysis of the diary of Arpenik Aleksanian, which documents the deportation of Armenians from Tbilisi and their everyday life as forced migrants (*spetspereselentsy*) in the Tomsk *oblast* of Siberia in 1949–53. I co-edited the diary for publication in 2007.

The purpose of the paper is to show how the trauma of ethnic deportation is constructed in autobiographical writing, using Aleksanian's diary as an example. In analyzing the diary, I pay particular attention to the way in which Armenian identity is stigmatized and gender roles change in response to changes in socio-economic status. I also examine the language of trauma in the context of a tragedy that is usually overshadowed by the memory of genocide of 1915 in Armenian public discourse.

Born in 1926 in Yerevan to parents who had left Ottoman Turkey for economic reasons and to escape the genocide, Aleksanian was a final-year medical student at the time of deportation. More than simply a young woman's personal diary, the Armenian exile's text is a dispassionate chronicle of deportation trauma and everyday practices of exclusion under Stalinism, giving it public resonance beyond a private, family framework. Along with documenting the traumatic events, the diary describes the deportees' behavior and reactions to acts of discrimination, as well as their strategies of survival and resistance, providing a micro-level account of the everyday experience of repression.

Aleksanian felt the presumption of guilt and was prepared for the diary to be inspected. She therefore kept the diary in Russian, making it easily accessible in order to prove her family's innocence. The diary is a text of self-justifying subjectivity; in Roland Barthes' terms, its words are an alibi. This is why she chooses to write in Russian, the language in which the sacred texts of the Soviet state were composed.

Throughout, the text exhibits an essentialist understanding of ethnicity. The Armenians are represented as a large family that unites people by birth and obliges them to help each other, subordinating individual interest to the needs of the group. The ethnic identity of the deported Armenians is reinforced through the experience of its negation, e.g. when they are identified as Turks or Russians.

Despite her largely primordialist view of ethnicity, Arpenik unwittingly demonstrates the constructed and instrumental nature of Armenian identity by describing her Armenian community from within and without embellishment. Instead of ideal displays of solidarity, we witness common human behavior, including envy, intrigue, theft, gossip, and informing the authorities.

We see how femininity and masculinity are constructed in the mind of a young urban Soviet Tbilisian woman in the 1940s and how traditional Armenian gender roles are modified. The deported men are no longer able to fulfill traditional expectations of masculinity. Women find themselves in the unusual position of having to perform traditionally male roles. Arpenik acts as the toastmaster during feasts and officially works as a lumberjack. The very act of writing the diary demonstrates her resolve to take her life into her own hands.

Diary-writing was a spontaneous act for Aleksanian, the words appeared as she was writing. Although she censored herself and never openly questioned the state in her text, even the slightest hints of disloyalty were phrased in Armenian. Nevertheless, her sense of repression made her choose words that reflected her trauma and created a language to express it.

The alienation of the deported Armenians and their exclusion from Soviet society registers in multiple expressions that directly reflect the subhuman status of the deportees: "We were thrashing about the car *like caged animals*." "Water was nowhere to be found, and we had to wash *like cats*." "The apartment was dirty *like an animal farm*." Aleksanian also compares the collective farmers from the *Lenin's Idea* kolkhoz with serf peasants, an assessment that appears accurate in hindsight. The deportees' exclusion from human society also manifests itself in her choice of words: "We were a *live commodity*; it was as if they were selling *slaves* and we had to be chosen."

Arpenik's diary is full of a traumatic vocabulary of pain and fear. Excluded from Soviet society, the young woman does not enjoy life and often employs expressions that indicate non-existence: "We are all like *corpses*, we cannot speak." "Every minute, you wait for death." The locals are Others for Arpenik, they are "them" or "everyone." This impersonality is one of the defining features of totalitarian society. Arpenik contrasts her private world with the world of official history: she cannot accept the unjust accusation and punishment and therefore describes the life of the exiles—different from that of the other Soviet collective farmers—primarily through her own apprehensions and fears.

Arpenik only ever uses the language of public declarations when discussing Stalin's death and the execution of Lavrentii Beria. She cautiously reports on important political events by using the phraseology of Soviet newspapers, yet her emotions break through, as when she writes, after Stalin's death: "They played a wonderful funeral march." Even though major political events are recorded in the diary, it focuses on the life of the Aleksanian family, a characteristic feature of female autobiographical writing. All these examples illustrate the main narrative strategy of such writing: by intensifying the affect of trauma, the author rules out the position of an outside observer. Her diary cannot so much be read as it has to be lived through, creating a "topology of the feminine."

Aleksanian observes strict internal taboos, and even though she allows herself to write about toilets and lice, she never discusses specifically female health concerns that must have troubled her and many other female deportees. She only mentions female legs, making them symbolize the entire lower body. The legs she describes are always dirty, and dirt is a metaphor of danger. Female sexuality is considered dangerous, as, in this case, is the very membership of the weaker sex. In the diary of a medical professional, such omissions are evidence of self-censorship. Whereas politically disloyal thoughts are expressed in Armenian words and letters, evidence of female subjectivity finds no direct expression: they are symbols that remain to be deciphered.

The diary of Arpenik Aleksanian, which recounts the everyday life of a single family among one hundred thousand deported, and only one of twenty ethnic deportations in the 1940s and 50s, is a document of repressed subjectivity, stigmatized ethnicity, and resisting dignity. It shows, once more, that the personal is political.