

Who Recounts the Stalinist Past? Mnemonic Roles, Acts of Remembering, and Life-Scripts in Russian Families

Abstract

This paper asks why some memories of the Stalinist Gulag are shared while others are not. Considering remembering as a social act (Feindt et al 2014), we argue that who engages in acts of remembering, to whom, when and how helps explain what is remembered. The paper draws on family memories shared by participants of 16 focus groups in four research sites in Russia. We find that mnemonic actors – most often grandmothers - remember victimhood in veiled ways, structured by life-scripts that focus on the positive: they couch the bad in the good of the Soviet past, they focus on evasive action and near misses which highlight the stoicism and cunning of family members who narrowly avoided repression. We suppose these narratives emerge in families and are shared within the focus groups due to perceived social appropriateness. The study adds to the literature on entangled memory and argues for the use of focus groups as a method for exploring the social patterning of remembering.

Keywords

memory; family; life-scripts; Gulag; Russia; repression

Introduction

Why are some memories shared while others are not? In the case of traumatic events such as the Stalinist repressions in the Soviet Union we might assume that people do not want to remember such times. Survivors of horrific events psychologically repress their memories, and their descendants do the same (Kogan 2002). Meanwhile, at the political and cultural level Russian citizens might be discouraged, for politically expedient reasons, from speaking ill of the past in the present (Durdieva 2021; Krawatzek 2021). Yet, clearly some memories of the repressions are remembered and shared. Families conduct investigations, memoirs and diaries are written and kept, many are published (Paperno 2002). This paper engages the question of which family members engage in acts of remembering and how these acts are culturally and socially structured in ways that shape what is remembered and how it is recounted.

The data for the paper come from family stories of the repressions that were told among relative strangers within focus groups in different sites in Russia. Focus group participants recounted who had passed on stories of repression in their family. They mainly identified grandmothers as the most common source of autobiographical memory about the repressions. Yet how these stories were recounted varied a great deal. Participants remembered that their relatives' stories were shared only when asked about, or through emotional outbursts, veiled talk and meaningful silences. Other stories were shared more frequently when they were framed in fonder memories of the Soviet past. Often such fonder memories are not of repression but of repression avoidance: how family used their own - sometimes tragic, sometimes heroic - fortitude to avoid a terrible fate. We argue that such narratives are selected because they are structured by broader cultural life-scripts for remembering the past within and outside families. This interpretation is supported by the fact that focus group participants repeated these stories as frequently as stories of actual repression, suggesting the existence of social expectations about how to talk about the Stalinist past.

The paper is structured as follows: we first review the literature on memory in Russia and the social structuring of family memory. We then look at how focus group participants reported how memories of repression was transmitted to them. The analysis leads to a discussion of the incentives of mnemonic actors to present appropriate stories, both inside and outside families, within appropriate life-scripts about recounting the past. In conclusion, we support the turn towards analysing the 'travel' of memory as a social action undertaken by actors who maintain shifting subject positions as regards the past depending on the context of the act of remembering (Erl 2011; Feindt et al. 2014).

Family Memory in Russia: Beyond Collective and Collected Memory

Between 1929 and 1953 around 24 million people were subjected to the system of punitive labour camps and special settlements known as the Gulag in the Soviet Union (Applebaum 2003). A recent study on memory of the Gulag in Russia utilizes survey data to show that those who have repressed relatives are statistically more likely to be aware of Stalinist repression, to be knowledgeable about the scale of it, and to morally condemn it (Gerber & van Landingham 2021). To explain this relationship, the authors assume that a mechanism exists whereby memories of repression are passed on within families. This seems reasonable given that the recalling of autobiographic memory of Stalinist repressions began while those repressions were in progress and sped up after Stalin's death in 1953 (Jones 2008, p. 353). Notwithstanding ebbs and flows in the degree of testimony since that point there has been a 'constantly growing repository' of published memoirs and diaries (Tumarkin 2011, p. 1051; Etkind 2009; Paperno 2002).

Despite this written testimonial culture many studies find a tendency towards silence among survivors of repression (Merridale 2000; Figes 2007; Kaznelson 2007; Round 2006; Gheith 2007; Narsky 2013). One study, consisting of 80 oral history interviews with Gulag survivors and family members, found that 'only in a very few families is the general rule of silence broken' (Duprat-Kushtanina 2013, p. 13). Children of Gulag survivors characterize this silence as an attempt to save younger generations from ongoing stigma and shame (Figes 2007). Beyond an aversion to the transmission of stigma, other Gulag returnees remained silent out of a psychological need to find a place again within the system while others remained true believers in the communist cause (Jones 2008; Adler

2011). For Merridale (2000), silence was a conscious way of coping rather than unconscious psychological repression of trauma. In contrast, Tumarkin (2011, p. 1055) argues that silence towards Stalinist repression did not and does not equate to the non-transmission of memory: 'in the absence of any safe mechanism of transmission a great deal of remembering was displaced onto the non-verbal, non-representational planes of body, behaviour, habits, dreams and, more broadly, ways of being in the world.'

These individual-level explanations for silence can be contrasted with accounts of the deliberately imposed structural barriers that prevented the communication of memory even for those who might have wanted to discuss their experiences (Gheith 2007; Khlevniuk & Belokowsky 2015; Figs 2007). Gulag victims' correspondence was censored. Prisoners were isolated in far flung corners of the country. Upon release, returnees were subjected to 'enforced silence' and officially agreed not to discuss the camps under threat of further punishment (Gheith 2007). They were disbarred from certain places of residence making it impossible to simply settle back into life within their old social networks, assuming that these even still existed.

In the present day, there are numerous studies of the cultural and structural barriers to an honest reckoning with the past in Russia (Gerber & Mendelson 2006; Sherlock 2011; 2016; McGlynn 2020; Durdiyeva 2021). Recent cultural and educational policies are interpreted as a rehabilitation of the perpetrators of Soviet crimes as well as purposeful 'detraumatizing' of Gulag history (Sniegón, 2018; Krawatzek 2021). This abuse of the Soviet past is interpreted as aiding the legitimization of the current Russian government. The political and cultural shift towards positively reinterpreting the Soviet past's darkest episodes perhaps produces, or is accompanied by, social attitudes that exhibit an 'inert indifference' to the crimes and victims of Stalinism (Khlevniuk & Belokowsky 2015, p. 495).

Beyond the specific political pressures that might impact on acts of remembering, broader socio-cultural patterning of narratives of the past – life-scripts – have been found to exist cross-culturally (Berntsen & Rubin 2004; Fivush 2008; Erdogan et al. 2008; Koppel & Berntsen 2014). Life-scripts structure how individuals narrate stories from the past to others according to shared expectations about the timing of certain life events and their emotional and moral valence. A growing literature finds that mnemonic actors favour remembering events that are culturally construed as positive. Other than psychological factors, Berntsen & Rubin (2004, p. 2) find that cultural expectations about life scripts might account for this tendency: ‘a truthful life story will tell about one’s struggling, and perhaps one’s failing, to overcome obstacles to desirable goals whereas life scripts deal with transition points that are desirable according to cultural norms.’ Those who have undergone highly negative events in their lives might find that sharing this trauma is a ‘source of ostracism’ especially when a particular trauma is common to those in the same social groups (Harber & Penneman 1992, p. 360). These findings are pertinent to the Gulag, a punitive system that impacted all Soviet citizens to a greater or lesser degree (Khlevniuk & Belokowsky 2015).

In summary, political and cultural obstacles to remembering negative events are interwoven with individual-level conscious and unconscious psychological suppression of trauma to pattern what is remembered and how across social situations. The tendency in the above literature to focus analytically either on individual or cultural and political processes when assessing memory of Stalinist repression in Russia fits with the broader tendencies in collective memory studies to focus on either the hard memory of memorials and monuments or the soft memory of testimonies (Etkind 2013). Olick (1997) refers to this distinction as one of collective and collected memory: analyses structured around an objectified cultural representation of the past, or around aggregated, shared (or unshared)

memories of members of a group. Assmann (1995) similarly draws a distinction between the everyday social interactions that constitute communicative memory and cultural memory that is made up of representations and objects that constitute 'memory artifacts' (see Kanstenier 2000, p. 187-195).

In the 2010s, a 'third wave' of memory studies attempted to bridge the gap between accounts of the cultural and the communicative, the hard and the soft, the collective and the collected (Erl 2011; Feindt et al. 2014). These studies understand the act of remembering as an 'entangled' social action (Weber 1978). As such, remembering is an action taken from shifting subject positions, attaching to varied meanings across time and social contexts. The meaning ascribed to remembering emerges within wider socio-cultural rules of expression and patterns of interpretation. This paper adopts this understanding of remembering as a social action and the concomitant focus on the meanings ascribed to these actions as well as their patterning by norms of social appropriateness. To capture the social aspect of remembering, we use the term to recount, since this can take an indirect object – to someone – implying the active imparting of stories about the past in social contexts.

Families are a prominent case for examining how recounting is patterned and structured socially (Wegner 1987; Hirst and Manier 2008). Acts of remembering within families enable stories of the past 'to be shared, potentiating the collective consolidation of certain memory narratives while also sentencing others to be forgotten' (Shore & Kauko 2017, p. 91). Family members, for example, 'adopt specific and well-defined mnemonically relevant roles' performing subtasks within the general labour of recounting the past (Hirst et al. 1997, p. 169). The distribution of these roles and tasks 'need not occur consciously. It may simply grow out of the family's interactional patterns...[and] complex socio-historical

processes' manifested in social customs and cultural norms (Hirst et al. 1997 p. 169; Shore & Kauko 2017; Weldon 2000). The distribution of mnemonic roles, tasks and the subject positions of those taking those roles in specific social circumstances influence which stories are made meaningful at different times and places (Feindt et al. 2014; Bruner 1990).

Thus, when an individual narrates a family story of the past, their recall is in part the result of the social process of their family's recounting of that story. That process itself is structured by the conversational dynamics within the family in turn impacted by cultural templates of family organization, interaction and the appropriacy of certain stories according to accepted life-scripts (Fivush 2008). Hirst et al. 1997 distill this approach into a four-step model of family memory dynamics:

1. The type of family: frequent or infrequent interaction, for example.
2. The conversational dynamics within the family: how much conversation and who talks, framed by wider cultural norms.
3. The family's social process of recounting the past: who takes what mnemonic role and how mnemonic labour is distributed.
4. The subsequent recounting of the past by individuals from the family in varying familial and non-familial social settings.

This paper focuses on steps four and three. The paper examines acts of remembering in a particular social setting – focus groups among relative strangers conducted after a museum visit (step four above) – focusing on how participants discussed both the social structure of remembering in their family (who remembers), what was

remembered and how (step three above). In exploring what stories are spread and shared we focus on remembering the Stalinist Gulag in Russia (1929-1953). Next, we introduce the methods and data collected before analysing them. Based on the literature discussed above, the analysis of the data shows that stories shared about the Stalinist past among relative strangers in part depends on the social structure of remembering within family networks and what types of stories have come to be considered appropriate life-scripts culturally.

Methods and Data

Between July 2019 and December 2020 16 focus groups were conducted at four separate locations in Russia. Though this was before Russia's war on Ukraine, we include an Appendix on the difficulties of doing this sensitive research in an increasingly repressive atmosphere in Russia. At each research site, four focus groups were conducted. The sites were Moscow, St. Petersburg, Tomsk (Western Siberia) and Ukhta (Komi Republic). In each city, the focus groups were held as part of ethnographic fieldwork conducted at a museum that was either entirely dedicated to Gulag history or had exhibitions concerning the Gulag. A matched comparison drove the logic of case selection: a national Gulag museum (Moscow) with no exact physical relationship to Gulag sites was paired with a local Gulag museum (Tomsk) that was previously an active site of repression. We then paired a national political history museum (St Petersburg) with no direct physical link to a Gulag site, to a local history museum situated within a neighbourhood that had been built by Gulag labour (Ukhta). These museums varied in their size, funding, aims and layout. Nevertheless, all claimed to convey something of the historical reality of the Gulag. The museum experience varied across these sites depending on the location, resources and management of the

museum. However, the experience in each case was as a form of immersion into the Gulag theme for the participants, to familiarise themselves with each other, and stimulate thoughts about the Gulag topic.

The same research team of sociologists spent around one month at each site. The researchers observed visits and tours, made research diaries of their observations and interviewed local experts and museum workers. Focus group participants were recruited through various strategies: advertisements in print and online, approaching people on the street, and through social networks and media. Participants were offered small financial incentives of around \$15 USD to participate. Participants could neither be related to each other nor be friends. They were recruited to the focus groups based on age categories: Young Adult (18-25), Early Middle Age (30-35), Late Middle Age (45-50) and Elderly (60+). The groups averaged seven participants in size with a total of 110 participants across the 16 groups. The overall gender balance was 50% female, 50% male. Gender representation never fell below 33% in any focus group. Other than gender and age representativeness, we sought respondents who were long-term (10 years or more) residents of the city.

Participants were first taken on a tour of the museum or Gulag-focused exhibition led by a professional tour guide. On completion of the tour, participants gathered in a quiet room provided by the museum and discussed questions put to them by researchers, including on family history and understanding of the Stalinist past. Moderators introduced a block of questions on 'understandings of punishment in the USSR' that had two questions related to memory: 1. What did you know before the museum today about the system of punishment in the Stalinist period? 2. Do you know of any people in your family history, the history of your acquaintances, friends or townsfolk who had experiences of that system? The goal was to produce open-ended discussions that allowed for subjective nuance in

understanding what constituted repression. Moderators left it to focus group participants to ascribe particular past events to the category of repression or not.

The focus groups were recorded then transcribed and analysed. Responses were coded in terms of what was remembered from family history of the Stalinist period, who had recounted the memory, how the memory was recounted, and whether this was a lived autobiographical memory or not. Codes were produced both inductively and deductively. All participants were provided with participant information and informed consent forms. Names were anonymized in transcription. Research in Ukhta was undertaken during the Covid-19 pandemic; all health precautions were taken and local rules followed. Participants wore masks and observed social distancing.

Focus groups are not a natural setting. Respondents knew that they were attending the museum, the tour and the subsequent focus group to discuss the topic of the Soviet past, though they did not know what exact questions would be asked. There is a risk that focus groups can act as networks of 'social contagion' (Echterhoff & Hirst 2012) where participants are influenced in their views by each other. Focus groups can produce 'social loafing' and free riding on the most active members (Weldon and Bellinger 1997). Focus groups also structure themselves into hierarchies in which individuals take on different roles, determined to some degree by gendered, classed, and racialized and ethnicized social norms (Breen 2006). For this research, observation of such dynamics was part of the research in analysing remembering as a social action. Participants had spent an hour or more with each other before the focus group began and moderators had observed varying degrees of interaction and acquaintance-making during the tours. During the focus group, moderators encouraged interaction and reaction among participants. However, they also

ensured a balance in talking time. An assistant helped the moderator to keep order and look after participant needs.

The time spent touring the museum immersed respondents in the theme of the subsequent focus group. The museums equipped the respondents with ideas, narratives and definitions of the Stalinist Gulag to help inform their subsequent discussion. While some of the questions concerned perceptions of the museum, that discussion is beyond the scope of the given paper. Moreover, there is no intention here to examine knowledge or moral assessments of the Stalinist past. Instead, we focus here on the personal narratives of family memory that respondents were willing to recount in a group setting. We now turn to the results of the qualitative coding. We discuss who recounts the Stalinist past within the participants' narratives, before turning to how they recount it, what they recount and why this might be.

Grandmothers as Caretakers of Family Memory

On average across the four locations 44% of focus group participants referred to repression of family members in the narrow sense of arrest, exile or deportation, execution, or imprisonment. In some cases, multiple family members were mentioned. There was very little difference across generations in terms of reporting a repressed relative. The youngest cohort were just as likely as older ones to identify repressed family members. The figure for the focus group participants is a lot higher than those reported in national surveys, for example, Gerber and van Landingham's survey (2021) find only 13.7% claimed to have at least one repressed relative. The focus group participants are of course not representative. First, there is very likely to be a selection bias at work: people that agreed to take part in the

research are likely to have a particular interest already in the topic, possibly due to family connection; second, some memories could be false and represent a form of social contagion that was transmitted by both the museum experience and the social influence of other focus group respondents. However, it is also possible that the many cues provided by the museum experience had made respondents think more about who from their close ones had been repressed.

The recollections of repressed family members provided by the respondents were also coded by the first mention, if given, of the reason for the repression of the family member. Dekulakization during the collectivization campaigns of the 1930s was by far the most common reason that participants identified for the repression of a relative. This was particularly true in Tomsk, a significant destination for the kulak class of rich peasants and other deported peoples. Other than dekulakization, the most common reasons for repression included being an enemy of the people, deportation due to ethnic group, belonging to the priesthood, and either being captured or living under German occupation in WWII.

Who carried the burden of originally recounting stories of these experiences to the focus group participants? In many recollections the story was of direct experiences, that is, autobiographical episodic memory. Grandmothers were overwhelmingly identified as the recounters of these autobiographical memories, making up 64% of all mentions of the recounters of such memories across the focus groups. Sociological research on the role of grandmothers in Russian culture highlights their socio-economic role in providing unpaid child care in Soviet and post-Soviet families (Semenova 1996). This important economic role may result from both the historical experience of short male life expectancy in Russia as well as wider gender norms. These norms are manifested in everyday discourse about the stoic

endurance, practicality and survivability of grandmothers (Ries 1997). The symbolic capital of the family survivor makes grandmothers indispensable for intergenerational socialization and the reproduction of family values, the shaping of intra-family relations as well as the maintenance of wider family networks (Semenova 1996; Tiaynen 2013). These 'affectual micro-powers' enable grandmothers to use their position to influence, monitor and discipline younger generations (Tiyanen 2013). This influence includes deciding on what family memories are communicated, when and in what way.

When it comes to recounting indirect experiences (distant semantic memories) mothers, fathers, aunts and uncles compete with the grandmothers' prominent mnemonic role. However, grandmothers were still prominent narrators of indirect experience too. How did grandmothers recount stories of the repressions according to the focus group participants? The next two sections focus on this question. We break modes of recounting into two categories: memories of victimhood where acts of remembering are traumatic and difficult; and apparently 'victimless' stories where the recounting interprets traumatic events as part of positive familial narratives, likely shaped by broader cultural life-scripts.

Remembering Victimhood: Affective, Veiled, and Reactive Modes of

Recounting

In this section we analyse painful stories, mainly told to participants by grandmothers, that involved victimhood. Modes of recounting of these stories involved stunted, difficult conversational dynamics and memories that were reportedly not recounted very often. We identified three such modes. Affective recounting involved both

non-verbal and verbal transmission of affective states that pointed to traumatic events.

Veiled recounting refers to silences and non-verbal forms of communication that were understood as meaningful by receivers. Reactive recounting refers to reaching back into the difficult past only when asked. In the selected quotations below, we mainly quote female participants. This is not accidental: female participants spoke a lot more than males about acts of remembering in their families and the role of grandmother-narrators. Hypothetically, grandmothers may form closer ties with daughters and granddaughters leading to gendered patterns of intergenerational recounting of the past (Tiaynen 2013).

In terms of affective recounting, in participants' recollections grandmothers displayed strong feelings as much as verbalizing particular stories. Evgeniya (Tomsk, 60+) explained 'I remember my weeping grandma crying out "where are my sons?" Now that really stuck in my soul, I mean I have remembered that ever since childhood.' Evgeniya's memory of this event contains only information about the emotional state of her grandmother rather than what had happened to her relatives. Displays of emotion conveyed the memory of undefined past events. For Evgeniya, this affective form of remembering did not necessarily provide an opportunity to further explore the past. To the contrary, emotions could communicate that repression was an inappropriate topic for narratives of the family's past. As Svetlana (Ukhta 45-50) recalled: 'It was so heavy, grandma cried and cried. I sometimes recall the tears in her eyes. She would say: it's not something you can communicate...We tried not to bother her. You could sense all that had been carried through such pain.' Svetlana's grandmother's trauma was itself traumatic for Svetlana; further exploration of her grandmother's lived experiences was curtailed by these emotions.

In terms of non-verbal and veiled recounting, many study participants noted that silence, particularly for the older generations in the years before the 1980s and *glasnost*,

had been common. However, these silences were not necessarily interpreted as empty or deliberate attempts at forgetting. In these cases, participants attached significance to silence and understood that this was a specific silence *about something*. As Vinitzsky-Seroussi and Teeger (2010) argue, overt meaningful silences and covert silences involving veiled talk and omissions should not be seen necessarily as a means of forgetting but instead as both one possible form, and part of the process, of remembering. For example, in some cases silence was understood as protective, implying an awareness that there was something to be protected from. For example, participants recalled a mutually understood desire to avoid stigma on the side of both the narrator and the potential receiver. Zhenya (SP 40-45) explained: 'they didn't tell children anything...and we didn't want to know about it. Because anything connected to prison, for us it was negative and it meant it was deserved...It's straightaway a label, and so many people just hid it.'

Furthermore, in line with Gheith (2007) and Tumarkin's (2011) emphasis on non-verbal communication of the past, some participants recalled habits of speaking in veiled forms, such as hushed tones, and the recognisable inscription of fear in behaviour, including the complete avoidance of certain topics. 'We grew up in some form of fear, I'll say it left its imprint. [My father] paid attention to every little granular detail of everything he did...because God forbid that anything of any kind would happen. So, some stamp of fear left its mark on all of us' (Evgeniya Tomsk 60+). These recollections invoke a sense that those in mnemonic roles communicated, perhaps unwittingly, mimetic memories for the purposes of discipline and self-preservation. Maria (Moscow 45-50) noted 'as an echo of the past, take, like, "eat up all your bread," or my mum always used to say – "less of the chatting". I mean, like, "don't talk so much". So, perhaps, people of that generation they are really scared to say too much.'

In other cases, silence did the job of forgetting. As a result, some participants only understood their family history of repression later. Recollections of how silence had produced forgetting became a traumatic memory in its own right. Alena (Ukhta 45-50) explained that 'we are a different generation, we didn't know anything about this [repression] at all. How can that be? My granddad...couldn't find anywhere to work [due to a prior conviction]. His children only found out about it once he was gone. Is that justice?' A dearth of indirect semantic memory, however, did not prevent the communication of affect: 'fear lives on somewhere, it lives in me, it was passed on to me through my grandma, grandpa, mum.'

In some other cases, however, mnemonic narrators took on the labour of recounting the past only in reaction to certain conditions: as the end of life approached and only when asked. Irina (Tomsk 60+) recalled how her grandmother 'in a whisper was dictating her story to me, she was scared. It would have been 1982 I suppose. She told me how they were dekulakized and she was even scared to go into details, I literally had to ask her [for them].' The following exchange from the youngest cohort in Tomsk (18-25) reveals the importance of being asked for recollections of the past:

Moderator: where did you hear about [the Stalinist system of punishment]?

Gennady: My grandma had told me that [my family] had been dekulakized.

I...that was the first time I'd heard anything about it. Then I read about the collective farms and about the whole system of repression in general.

Moderator: Can you say a little about what your grandma told you? How did she start talking about that?

Gennady: Yeah, I just asked her – 'granny, what's the deal with you? How did your family end up in Kazakhstan?' And she told me that they were

dekulakized, that before that they had lived in Sochi region. I can't recall more details – was it, was it exactly her dad and mum who were deported? Was it some other relatives? Anyway, they were all taken away.'

Gennady continued: 'the strangest thing is that granny, and grandpa too, they thought very positively of the Soviet state, despite all this. Their parents were dekulakized and they worked in a collective farm in Ust'-Bakchar. And grandma was satisfied, despite all that she said about life in the collective farm, she said, like, well, that it had all been OK. Sort of, good enough.' This extract provides an example of a further category of recounting: those modes of recounting that attempted to reframe the story as a positive family narrative, framed by a socially appropriate life-script.

'Victimless' Memories: Nested and Negated Modes of Recounting

A large number of participant recollections were coded as stories that were framed as victimless. Two modes of recounting were found to make up this category. Firstly, nested recounting occurs when stories of repression were couched in wider, positive, reminiscences of the past. Secondly, negated modes of recounting involved the denial that any repression had taken place. This mode of recounting involved family protagonists who - through their own resilience, cunning or morality - avoided repression. In contrast to affective, veiled and reactive modes of recounting nested and negated recounting invoked the notion of reminiscing in Fivush's (2008) sense of producing an appropriate narrative to build individual and collective identity. These narratives are structured by culturally

appropriate life-scripts. In line with findings from other cultures, nested and negated recounting conveyed the emotional valence of repressive events as positive rather than negative. Such life-scripts can serve the purpose of building a we-feeling of familyhood that helps maintain kin networks and the social and symbolic capital within them (Shore & Kauko 2017). However, for those receiving and evaluating these stories – those who take the mnemonic role of monitor in Hirst et al's (1997) terms – it was difficult to make moral sense of these narratives.

Thus, a number of participants, especially within the youngest cohort focus groups, reported their confusion that recounting of repression within the family was so often couched in positive reminiscing about the Soviet past. For example, in Moscow, participants in the youngest cohort (18-25) described befuddlement at the overwhelmingly positive narratives they had received about the Soviet period from relatives side by side with stories of deportation:

Vasilli: 'I grew up in a family, that, well, on my dad's side absolutely all my relatives, the older generation, ended up being deported. And nevertheless, primarily they say that the USSR was amazing, that it was the best country. So, for a long time, I couldn't understand how I should relate to this country and to this day I don't get it because in my family it's such a weird relationship.'

In contrast to Vasilli, whose relatives were repressed, many participants provided stories that were framed as having no victim and no repression but where repression had impacted the family indirectly. These stories fit with Khlevniuk & Belokowsky's (2015) conceptualization of Stalinist society in terms of a repressive continuum between Gulag and

non-Gulag. Repression was on such a scale during the Gulag that this system of punishment was porous and touched everyone in Soviet society. For example, millions were sentenced to punitive labour that involved no forced movement or imprisonment, and wide circles of relatives of the repressed were discriminated against as were whole classes and nationalities without necessarily any arrest, exile or execution.

These gray areas between Gulag and non-Gulag were significant in all the focus groups: they were the second most common narrative theme after that of dekulakization. The story of repression-avoidance in some cases may have been recounted repeatedly within families, becoming part of family identity and a socially appropriate life-script for retelling in public. The focus groups provided just such an opportunity to rehearse these stories. The narrative units within these memories – the words that give the content of the story – were longer than for stories of repression. For example, a participant on average used 86 words to describe what could be recounted of how a family member was dekulakized, whereas a memory of avoiding repression on average was retold using 130 words.

Negated modes of recounting repression involved either a narrative of an evasive action or a near miss. In terms of the former, in some recollections, family members are credited with anticipating that the repressions were coming and for taking appropriate action:

'My great granddad was a clergyman, when he realised that the whole thing could blow up [delo pakhnet kerosinom], he just moved to another part of the country where nobody knew him and became a labourer. Thanks to that, we have no repression [in my family].'

(Semen, St Petersburg, FG 45-50)

This gray area of actions taken in the shadow of repression that involved painful, life-changing decisions to avoid arrest was present in other cases concerning collectivization where participants recounted family members voluntarily giving up property: 'On the one hand...one of my, it works out, great, great grandfathers...when collectivization began, [he] took a decision to give up a couple of cows, well, and give up a part of his property, well, to the kolkhoz, because he foresaw that things would turn bad' (Maxim, Moscow, 30-35). Maxim was not sure that this meant his great, great grandfather had not been repressed - 'for me, it's all so ambiguous' he said. But in his family's retelling his ancestor had voluntarily given up the property.

In Tomsk, some participants described how family members had simply physically removed themselves from society into the expanses of Siberia as they witnessed the coming of the repressions: 'With us it seems that, on my mother's side, we just headed off into the forest onto unsettled land [*na zaimku*], that is, collectivization came, and in order not to fall into that meat-grinder two families just settled in the forest, ran off and life carried on...only afterwards we moved to Tomsk' (Elena, Tomsk, 45-50). Still others described how the looming shadow of repressions forced the abandonment of certain relationships or shaped choices in the production and reproduction of the family. As Konstantin (Tomsk 45-50) described: 'my grandmother...her parents [intended] matchmaking her with a priest since [my grandmother's parents] were themselves priests. But in order to avoid repression, they gave up their daughter for marriage to a peasant [instead]. That's a common story.'

In the narratives above there was no formal repression, yet the people in the stories lived in a state of foreboding, under the shadow of potential dispossession and punishment. The evasive action to avoid repression was surely painful and disruptive. Yet, these stories

negated the notion of victimhood and were therefore less likely to be recounted through affective, reactive, or veiled modes. The participants and their families had chosen to interpret the story as one of empowerment in a context of overwhelming disempowerment of huge numbers of people (SimanTov-Nachlieli and Shnabel 2014).

As well as stories of evasive action, victimless narratives also took the form of memories of near misses. Again, in these narratives, according to the narrators themselves, the protagonists do not count as formally repressed. We quote Ekaterina at length below to get a sense of the narrative arc of her remarkable story that negates the presence of repression:

'My grandma had been made the director of a local school in one of the villages in Tyumen region when a rumour goes around that some sort of audit is incoming. The head of the NKVD [secret police] there, his deputies, they gathered everyone in the school assembly hall – this is what grandma told me – and said: 'a complaint against the director has come to our attention. The history classrooms have not been decorated and a bust of Lenin has been placed out in the shed.' She had ordered the bust to be broken up and the material to be used for decoration. Clearly that was something, a serious charge. But nothing happened to grandma because she started seeing the NKVD boss, and from that romance my mother was born, then of course they broke up. If it hadn't been for that romance who knows what could have happened to grandma.'

(Ekaterina, Ukhta 45-50)

Ekaterina fronted this story by stating that there had been no history of repression in her family – 'well, the Gulag also didn't directly intersect with us either' – before telling the

story of why. For her, this is a story of a near miss rather than evasive action, though this clearly depends on interpretation. It was a, perhaps lucky, romance that saved the family from the Gulag and produced her mother, and ultimately, Ekaterina. There is no factual denial of these events, but there is interpretative denial of their meaning (Cohen 2013). This denial could emerge from the family dynamics of how this memory was recounted over time and by whom. Kogan (2002) has observed that children who strongly identify with parents and grandparents that have suffered serious trauma may reproduce their denials of that trauma.

Karina also denied any family history of repression. She recounted a near miss experienced by her great grandfather as told to her by her grandmother:

'My grandma told me how her dad was the kolkhoz director during the war. An order comes through – collect this amount from the harvest! But there had been terrible rain. How to collect the harvest? If you don't collect the harvest on time and at the right quantity, they'll take you to the headquarters and [grandma] was saying that they're shaking a pistol [at you] – "I'll, yeah, I'll have you shot." And [great grandpa] was like 'better to be shot than to have to go through this every year.'

(Karina, Tomsk, FG 30-35)

One possible reason why the story was retold in the focus group is precisely its denouement - the dark yet humorous punchline delivered by Karina in the voice of her great grandpa. This story can once again be interpreted as a negation of repression due to a near miss – great granddad got lucky – or an evasive action – ingenuity, pluckiness and hard work saved his skin. The level of detail makes it seem likely that this memory has been repeated a

number of times within Karina's family. Karina's grandma, the empowered keeper of the stories which represent the building materials for life-scripts, may have coded this memory as an appropriate one for family recollection. In that sense, the narrative becomes a reminiscence, speaking to a life-script which highlights everyday heroism, humour and humanity in the face of senseless brutality. These significant nested and negated forms of recounting reflected both the search for appropriate narratives within culturally expected life-scripts as well as the blurring of the Gulag and non-Gulag in the period of Soviet history that those families lived through.

Conclusion

This paper has provided an empirical analysis of the mechanism that Gerber and van Landingham (2021) logically inferred was driving the finding that Russians whose relatives had been repressed were statistically more likely to be aware, knowledgeable and morally condemnatory of Stalinist repression. The stories of our focus group participants indeed suggest that direct and indirect stories of the repressions are recounted in families, yet which memories are shared, by whom and how, is socially and culturally patterned. In the family certain actors, particularly grandmothers, have assumed the burden of recounting the Stalinist past, often to daughters and granddaughters.

As caretakers of family identity those assuming these mnemonic roles aim to select and fit memories of the repressions into appropriate narratives shaped by broader cultural life-scripts. We argue that this incentive to find a culturally appropriate narrative within given acceptable life-scripts is one mechanism that patterns the content and modes of recounting. This mechanism produces a partial answer to our initial question of why some

memories are shared and others forgotten. We have not broached the subject of how the life-scripts come to be formed. The political structuring of what is acceptable to recount presents itself here. It is possible that intensive and targeted government messaging about the past influences understandings of life-scripts and hence the stories that are shared (Sherlock 2016; McGlynn 2020). It is also possible that this messaging helps to maintain a lingering sense of shame and stigma concerning arrest even during the wanton injustices of the Stalinist period.

The paper has brought up some potential future avenues for memory studies research. Firstly, the paper married the notion of acts of recounting as social actions with the focus group method. Appropriately structured focus groups provide one way to observe acts of recounting within chains of social interaction. Nevertheless, such research would benefit from integrating this methodology with other data collection techniques. Ethnographic observation of recounting in everyday settings and within common and repeated interactions might enable more detailed analysis of social distance within networks, distinguishing family types as well as conversational dynamics within families and other social units. Such a research agenda would aim to delineate the structure and performance of the act of recounting across subject positions and social situations in order to better understand social impacts on interpretations of the past.

Secondly, in Russia communicative memory appears to travel along gendered pathways. Grandmothers recounted to daughters and granddaughters and those latter women were, in the focus group setting, much more likely to engage with the questions about family memory than men. This might be accounted for by constructed gender roles – for example, a belief that such recounting is more an emotional woman's task than a stoic man's. It could however also be a function of memory resources – women simply have more

recollections to share due to closeness to grandmothers who survived longer than grandfathers and took on the role of family keeper of memory. How gender norms shape Russia's culture of memory at the societal level is a question that requires further investigation.

Thirdly, our analysis suggests that both qualitative and quantitative memory research on Russia should pay more attention to memory of the non-Gulag. Those who were not 'formally' repressed (at least in the memory of descendants) but whose lives were turned upside down by the threat of repression do not necessarily make it into survey research. However, the descendants of such people must make up a significant swath of Russian society and their stories of the non-Gulag are all the more likely to be selected and amplified within family narratives.

Appendix

The data from this research come from sensitive research sites and are on sensitive topics. A number of laws of the Russian Federation passed in the years leading up to this research had the potential to impact on data collection, informant and researcher safety. Certain laws targeted the spreading of false or discrediting information online. Other laws required institutions and individuals receiving financial support from outside Russia to declare themselves foreign agents. The authors wish to stress that the empirical research for the current work was conducted by a team of experienced and trained researchers from a highly reputable Russian research institute, XXXX, acting as a collaborator on an international grant. The lead institution on this grant, XXXX, held many consultations with university legal teams in the lead up to the data collection. It was agreed at these meetings that there would be an embargo on the posting of any information online in any language on the activities of the research team. Indeed, public posting in any official capacity on the cultural, social or political situation in Russia by any of the Co-Investigators and researchers on the grant was barred while the research occurred.

Only the Russian team were to make contact and negotiate access with the local cultural institutions involved. Only the Russian team were to recruit respondents for the focus groups. This was a painstaking activity that took many weeks of in situ recruitment. The Russian team had experience of collaboration on international grants and had the

support and name recognition of their state-funded university. They were therefore able to be open with participants and local institutions about the international connections in the research. The transcripts show that some participants found the involvement of a XXXX institution questionable and made queries to that end. Nevertheless, focus group respondents were free to leave at any point in the process and museums were free to withdraw their participation at any point. All involved had detailed participant information and informed consent forms that they signed. The content of these forms passed through ethics committees at the lead institution XXXX.

None of the participants left the museum tour or focus group until the end. However, some did express negative – in some cases very negative - feelings about the project and the questions asked. For the most part these concerns revolved around what they perceived as politically motivated (anti-Soviet or unpatriotic) questions. In all cases, personal details were irreversibly anonymized and any contacts deleted immediately following the focus group. Audio recordings were held in password protected locations on a hard drive and destroyed after transcriptions had taken place. The anonymized data was transferred through secure, encrypted means and then deleted from any online storage space. In every case, contact was maintained after the research with the museums involved for the purposes of accountability. Events were planned in 2022 to present reflections on the project locally to stakeholders in the respective research sites. These plans were suspended due to the war.

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