

TRAUMATIC MEMORY OF THE 1951 DEPORTATION IN AJARA¹

Irine Shervashidze

*PhD in History, Niko Berdzenishvili Institute of
Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University*

Email: ir.shervashidze@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4997-4012>

Abstract. The article examines Soviet repressions in Ajara in the 1950s, specifically the deportation of 1951, which represents one of the significant yet relatively understudied episodes of Soviet repressive policy.

The aim of the study is to analyze the experience of deportation not only at the level of historical facts, but also from the perspective of traumatic memory.

The study is based on the analysis of both archival documents and oral histories recorded within the framework of the research project "Memory Excluded from the Official Narrative: Repressions of 1951-1952 in Ajara."

The analysis of oral histories demonstrates that the experience of deportation is constructed within collective and family memory through specific narrative structures. The research identifies the main narrative models through which individuals and families represent, interpret, and transmit traumatic experiences across generations.

The study confirms that the 1951 deportation should be understood not only as an act of political repression, but also as a social and cultural trauma that has had a significant impact on the historical consciousness and collective identity of the society of Ajara.

Keywords: Soviet repressions, Deportation, Ajara, Traumatic memory, Oral history, Collective memory, Transgenerational trauma.

Introduction. The study of Soviet repressive policy represents a significant, yet unevenly explored field within Georgian historiography. Traditionally, scholarly interest has been directed toward the 1924 uprising and the "Great Terror" of 1937. In this context, the repressions of the 1940s and 1950s, including the 1951 deportation, are relatively less analyzed. It is within this framework that the research question arises: how was this wave of deportation reflected in the individual and collective memory of the victims?

In Georgia, Soviet repressive policy took on a massive character in the 1930s, though systemic persecution did not end with this period. In the 1940s and 1950s, the totalitarian system continued to actively employ mass deportation as an instrument of political control, particularly targeting individuals and social groups deemed "unreliable" by the regime.

Ajara, with its strategic geographical location and ethno-cultural peculiarities, was an object of special surveillance by the Soviet regime. The totalitarian system frequently conducted social experiments in the region for the purpose of ideological consolidation. For instance, the anti-religious campaign of 1929 provoked protests from the local population, which were suppressed by military force. This event laid the

¹ The research was conducted within the framework of a grant project funded by the Shota Rustaveli National Science Foundation of Georgia: "Memory Excluded from the Official Narrative: Repressions of 1951-1952 in Ajara." Project code: FR-23-18809.

groundwork for a long-standing distrust between the system and the local society, which became one of the determining factors of the repressions in subsequent years.

By the 1950s, despite Ajara being fully integrated into the Soviet administrative system, the region remained under strict control. Security agencies paid special attention to the borderland population, their contacts with Turkey, and clandestine religious activities. The tragic culmination of this policy was the deportation of December 1951, which was directed against "unreliable elements" and their family members. These processes had a significant impact on the structure of local society. Many families found themselves under political persecution, which created an environment of fear and distrust within the community.

Despite the scale of the event, this period remained beyond adequate attention in Georgian historiography for a long time. Only in recent years, following the accessibility of archival materials and the development of memory studies, has it become possible to conceptualize the traumatic experience from a new perspective.

The aim of the present research is to analyze the 1951 deportation not only at the level of historical facts but also through the lens of traumatic memory. The objectives of the research are:

- To outline the historical context and preconditions of the deportation;
- To identify the narrative forms of traumatic experience based on oral histories;
- To analyze the mechanisms through which this experience is transmitted to subsequent generations.

The work confirms that the 1951 deportation should be viewed not merely as a political act, but as a social and cultural trauma that had a fundamental impact on the historical consciousness and collective identity of the society of Ajara.

Research Methodology. The present research is based on an interdisciplinary approach that combines the methodological principles of studying archival materials and oral histories, as well as the theoretical paradigms of memory studies. The archival materials examined in the first stage of the research allow for the reconstruction of the political and logistical picture of the 1951 deportation.

The primary source of empirical material consists of up to 25 in-depth interviews recorded with individuals repressed in the 1950s and their family members across various municipalities of Ajara, conducted within the framework of the project "Memory Excluded from Official History: The 1951-1952 Repressions in Ajara." This qualitative part of the research relies on narrative analysis techniques, which present the 1951 tragedy not only as a statistical datum but as a traumatic experience deposited in family and collective memory.

On a theoretical level, the work relies on the sociological understanding of memory, where emphasis is placed on the subjective perception of the past and the forms of its representation.

During the research process, the confidentiality of respondents and the standards of academic ethics are maintained.

Discussion. The 1951 deportation was not merely a local event. It represented a part of a large-scale cleansing planned by the regime, which changed the fate of thousands of families. This time, the targets of the repressive machine were individuals who had connections with foreign capitalist countries. For the regime, the existence of such contacts automatically signified potential "treason." The repressions also affected former prisoners of war from World War II, individuals returning from the front, and their family members. Security agencies fabricated artificial charges against these people, on the basis of which war-hardened soldiers, Georgians exiled to Turkey, and their family members were declared "traitors to the motherland."

The deportation was particularly painful for the border villages. The Soviet authorities considered this part of Ajara politically unreliable, as the population strove to maintain ties with relatives living in Turkey and

occasionally crossed the border in secret. The grounds for exile were not only kinship ties but also economic factors. The stories recorded within the research project 'Memory Omitted from Official History: The 1951-1952 Repressions in Ajara' describe instances where even clothing purchased in Turkey was sufficient reason for the deportation of an entire family - a testament to the extreme forms of control.

The scale of this ideological segregation is made evident by archival statistics. According to the documents, approximately 4,000 people were deported to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in 1951. The number of deportees from Ajara is distributed by district as follows: Batumi - 140, Kobuleti - 219, Khelvachauri - 1,235, Keda - 860, and Khulo - 1,308 individuals (MIA, f. 31, op. 1, d. 80; Turmanidze, 2019).

The high figures for Khulo and Khelvachauri (accounting for nearly 65% of all deportees) are not coincidental and can be explained by various factors. While for Khelvachauri the decisive factor was its immediate proximity to the Turkish border, in the case of Khulo, we are dealing with a more complex social and cultural 'unreliability.'

Beyond being a large administrative unit, Khulo was particularly distinguished by its preservation of traditional and religious lifestyles, which Soviet security organs directly associated with 'anti-Soviet sentiments.' This situation was further compounded by the extensive kinship ties in Turkey resulting from waves of *Muhajirism*. Under the conditions of Soviet paranoia, any family connection existing across the border (even at the level of memory alone) was qualified as 'espionage' or being a 'Turkish agent.' Ultimately, it was these close-knit social bonds and traditional autonomy that made this region a primary target for strategic 'cleansing' during the 1951 operations.

The archival documents feature terms such as: "Georgian traitors to the motherland from Ajara," "harmful elements," "smugglers," "Pan-Turkists" and "Pan-Islamists" (MIA Archive, f. 31, op. 1, case "Groza"). Such classification confirms that one of the primary characteristics of the repressive system was the collective, impersonal nature of responsibility. "Crime" was not perceived as an individual act. The accusation automatically extended to the family, relatives, and social circle of the repressed. Consequently, the deportation served not only to punish specific individuals but to persecute an entire social group, which in practice amounted to total control.

Studies describe the difficult social and living conditions of those exiled as a result of the repressions in the regions of Central Asia, where they held the status of "special contingent" (Turmanidze, 2019; Polian, 2004). The deportations were carried out unexpectedly. An operational group of three people and two soldiers was assigned to each family. Families were given a few hours to gather their belongings, after which they were forcibly moved to pre-mobilized echelons at the Batumi station and dispatched to the places of exile. A significant portion of the deportees was never able to return. Among them, more than half were women and children. There were also many elderly and ill individuals who could not endure the difficult journey and often died during the process of transportation. The deceased were left on the roadside directly from the wagons. The accounts gathered in Ajara provide a detailed portrayal of the inhumane conditions of the deportation process. Respondents recall several weeks spent in freight wagons, unbearable cold, hunger, and high mortality rates. Upon arriving at their destination, a new ordeal awaited them - they were settled in mud huts (*dugouts*). The high temperatures characteristic of Central Asian countries and water unfit for drinking contributed to the spread of epidemics, to which entire families often fell victim. Oral histories confirm cases where individuals died just a few days before their release, further aggravating the already tragic fate of the repressed families.

Mass deportation had a profound social, cultural, and psychological impact on society. The repressive environment created a constant sense of fear and insecurity, which led families to avoid speaking publicly about their past experiences. This situation resulted in the establishment of a so-called "culture of fear,"

which in historiography is often discussed as a mechanism of individual and collective self-censorship (Figes, 2007).

The rehabilitation process that began between 1954 and 1956 proceeded in a contradictory manner. Returnees were denied the right to re-occupy their homes, which created social tension and led to so-called 'secondary repressions.' The property of the deportees (houses, livestock, land) had already been distributed among local collective farms or individuals resettled from other villages. The victims received neither restitution for their material losses nor adequate moral compensation. Consequently, the 1951 deportation remained a 'secondary' tragedy in Soviet and post-Soviet narratives. These individuals were, in effect, 'omitted' from the process of restoring historical justice. The relevance of the present research is determined precisely by the historical-cultural rehabilitation of this forgotten tragedy and the attempt to return it to the official narrative.

Historians agree that reconstructing the full picture of the 1950s deportation is impossible without oral memories, as archival documentation often falsified or concealed the real scale of the tragedy. Memory studies, however, offer the possibility of reconstructing those historical layers that are not reflected in official sources.

For years, many families avoided speaking publicly about the past, as such disclosure was politically dangerous under the Soviet system, effectively turning them into "invisible" repressed persons. In the post-Soviet period, a more active public discussion of Soviet repressions began. Contemporary historians and researchers strive to cross-reference archival documents with oral histories to more fully analyze the historical significance of these events and restore the lost links of collective memory.

According to the theory of Maurice Halbwachs (Halbwachs, 1992), a traumatic historical event often remains in "hidden memory" until society becomes ready for its public reflection. This is precisely the process we observe today in the case of Ajara. The oral memories collected within the framework of the research project "Memory Excluded from Official History: The 1951-1952 Repressions in Ajara" play an irreplaceable role in perceiving events "from below." These stories are valuable not only for documenting the past but also as a source of subjective meanings, which is essential for the construction and analysis of the region's contemporary social memory.

Interviews recorded in Ajara confirm that the difficult experience passed down to subsequent generations is particularly vividly preserved in family memory and occupies an important place in traumatic narratives. The article analyzes specific cases that clearly demonstrate the process of formation and transmission of this memory.

Analysis of the interviews reveals that respondents often recount their experiences fragmentarily and inconsistently. This phenomenon is a specific characteristic of oral sources (Portelli, 1991). In the context of traumatic experience, memory preserves not a full chronology of events, but those episodes that carried the greatest emotional and symbolic significance for the individual. Consequently, the subjective meanings of the experienced reality are deposited in the memory, which leads to the discontinuity and fragmentariness of the narrative.

Collective memory is not limited only to direct participants. It extends across different generations and social groups. Respondents who were not themselves deported describe their family members' experiences in detail, indicating an active transmission of traumatic memory. According to Jan Assmann (Assmann, 2010), such a process belongs to the sphere of communicative memory. In the case of Ajara, this memory was kept alive precisely through family narratives for decades, as public discussion of this topic was impossible under the Soviet regime.

In the accounts of the deportees and their descendants, the traumatic experience takes various forms. A central place in this process is occupied by the emphasis on the family's past status and dignity, which

functions as a kind of narrative compensation (Javakhishvili, 2018). In the memories of the victims, the feeling often figures that it was precisely their social, economic, or cultural superiority that became the reason for their repression:

"My father was a self-educated man, he knew two or three languages, literacy, Russian, Georgian... Our surname never had an 'Ogli' [suffix]" (Male, 76 years old, Khelvachauri district, child of a repressed person);

"My father was very educated, renowned, authoritative, and at the same time, he was a brave man" (N. Sh., Female, 79 years old, Khulo district, repressed / child during deportation).

By bringing forward special status, education, or economic well-being, respondents achieve a symbolic restoration of family dignity. Such accentuation serves not only the reconstruction of the family's social status but also ensures the strengthening of positive self-representation in memory.

In the telling of oral histories, emotional contrasts clearly emerge, confirming that traumatic memory is not homogeneous and takes form within various narrative strategies. In this regard, the radically different emotional reactions of the same respondent are noteworthy:

"A person [relocated from another village] lived in our house, a very great man... (voice changes, starts crying). [After the return] he went to my father and asked: 'Why don't you come to your home?' My father told him: 'You are in my home, and how can I come?' The next day, this man got up and left [vacated the house]";

"If someone died, they would throw them out right there... My father hid one deceased person so they wouldn't throw him out... They dropped the body off right at the station and told my father, 'If you do this a second time, we will leave you in the cold' (laughs)" (Male, 76 years old, Khelvachauri district, child of a repressed person).

This emotional diversity demonstrates how the narrator reinterprets events from the present. Here, crying is an acknowledgment of collective empathy and solidarity, while laughter appears as a form of narrative distancing from the tragic experience, where the respondent arranges the past not as a tragedy, but as a surmounted experience, which ultimately changes the subjective meaning of the story itself.

When analyzing traumatic narratives, it is also important to highlight episodes where respondents engage in a positive reconstruction of the past. From the period of living in Kazakhstan, memory often singles out cases of good neighborliness and relatively stable economic activities:

"We had a good neighborliness with the Kazakhs... I learned the language at a young age..." or *"The income from the collective farm was so good that it was better than here"* (Male, 83 years old, Khulo district, repressed / child during deportation).

Bringing economic success to the foreground is a manifestation of resistance, allowing the narrator to transform the story of exile into a narrative of personal victory. In this way, the respondent rejects the passive role of a "victim" and transforms their past into a story of self-assertion. It is important to note that these positive accents are also based on real historical circumstances: in the collective farms of Central Asia, compensation and working conditions often did indeed exceed the possibilities of the mountainous villages of Ajara at that time.

In the accounts of the repressed, the figure of Stalin also acquires a dual meaning - he is simultaneously perceived as a symbol of the repressive system and as a force restoring justice:

"My father's application reached Stalin... through one of the officers, letters reached the Kremlin. After consideration, he was acquitted and returned" (Male, 76 years old, Khelvachauri district, child of a repressed person).

Such a perception of Stalin's figure is a result of the influence of the political cult, which is reflected in a specific form within traumatic memory. The notion that "Stalin did not know about the repressions" serves

to shift responsibility from the center to a lower hierarchical level, giving systemic violence a morally "comprehensible" form (Figes, 2007).

"They were given lists for deportation, saying [the person] is harmful. How could Stalin know who was harmful [in our village]?" (Z. I., Male, 69 years old, Khulo district, child of a repressed person).

The personification of responsibility toward local officials or neighbors allows an individual to transform Soviet terror into a specific social conflict. In the context of Ajara, this had a solid foundation: totalitarian violence was precisely based on the practice of denunciation, which turned repressions into a part of everyday social relations. Consequently, the localization of responsibility on specific individuals by the respondents is, on the one hand, a form of subjective understanding of trauma and, on the other hand, a reflection of historical reality.

The feeling of injustice caused by absurd accusations is often revealed in oral histories:

"A letter came from Moscow saying that you smuggled goods in 1925... My father laughed because he was born in 1925" (D. F., Male, 67 years old, Khelvachauri district, child of a repressed person);

"He knew that they deported him unjustly, but he was not given the means to prove the truth" (Male, 76 years old, Khelvachauri district, child of a repressed person).

Stories of so-called moral compensation, where informants later express remorse, serve the symbolic restoration of truth:

"At the time of death, one person sent for my father and told him: 'I have committed a sin before you, before your family, and forgive me'" (Male, 76 years old, Khelvachauri district, child of a repressed person).

One of the most prominent characteristics of traumatic memory is the culture of silence. Silence induced by fear was deliberately passed down to subsequent generations to protect them from expected danger:

"We forgot all of that. We were so afraid that we couldn't say anything" (Male, 83 years old, Khulo district, repressed / child during deportation);

"No matter what someone asks me, I can't tell anyone which person it was" (Male, 67 years old, Khelvachauri district, child of a repressed person);

"They didn't say anything to the youth in the family, so that the feud wouldn't continue" (Male, 69 years old, Khulo district, child of a repressed person).

This silence is an expression of transgenerational trauma, where the ancestors' experience is transmitted to descendants not only through stories but also through the "language of silence" and behavioral models. Subsequent generations internalize this trauma, which is often manifested in mistrust of the social environment and cautious behavior:

"The teacher couldn't make me recite a poem about Stalin, so much hatred had already been instilled in me" (Female, 79 years old, Khulo district, repressed / child during deportation).

Interviews also revealed interesting examples of the materialization of traumatic memory, where the ancestral home acquires the function of a "site of memory" (Nora, 1989). In the respondent's narrative, maintaining the grandfather's house is directly linked to the symbolic life of the repressed ancestor:

"...If this house remains, my grandfather will always be alive" (Male, 67 years old, Khelvachauri district, child of a repressed person).

This form of memorization is a symbolic reconstruction of the ancestor's dignity for the respondent, replacing the sense of injustice with a moral victory in the present. Here, the house becomes a point of symbolic resistance and survival.

In contrast to the house, the phenomenon of "lost graves" creates a completely opposite pole in the narratives. A grave, as a "site of memory," is a necessary condition for traumatic experience to become part of the past and history. Its absence hinders the ritual process of remembrance and leaves the trauma as an "open wound" in the present:

"Within a year and a half, my father's mother and father died of grief... My grandmother and grandfather are buried there" (Female, 78 years old, Khelvachauri district, repressed / child during deportation).

Thus, the absence of a grave represents a broken chain in collective memory. This sense of individual loss is further intensified by a deficit of institutional recognition. The repressed note that moral recognition from the state has not occurred even at a symbolic level:

"They apologized to those from '37, but not to us. On the contrary, we are in debt because they brought us back" (Female, 79 years old, Khulo district, repressed / child during deportation).

The tragedy of the 1951 deportation victims failed to fit into either the state's official narrative or the process of full legal rehabilitation, which keeps the sense of injustice alive to this day.

Analysis of the field materials reveals that the trauma did not end with physical displacement alone. It continues in the form of symbolic and geographical alienation. The attempts of descendants to locate their ancestors' graves in the former special settlements of Central Asia often end in a confrontation with a harsh reality. The places preserved in family memory as symbols of reverence are now part of a developed and functionally altered landscape. This spatial erasure clearly echoes Pavel Polian's (Polian, 2004) vision of the logistical nature of the Soviet repressive system, where the victim is deprived not only of life but also of their post-mortem place in history and geography.

The narratives discussed above confirm that the respondents' reconstruction of the past relies not on official documentation, but on emotional relics. This reinforces Halbwachs's theory of collective memory, where a social group (the family) preserves the history that has been erased from the public sphere.

Analysis of the interviews demonstrates that the memory of the deportees is a living, dynamic process where silence, symbolic reconstruction of the past, and the search for "sites of memory" alternate. These narratives fill the gap left by official historiography and present the tragedy of 1951 as an integral part of collective identity.

Research Results and Conclusion

The repressions of the 1950s led to several long-term consequences in the society of Ajara:

- **Breakdown of Social Relations and Mistrust:** One of the severest consequences of Soviet terror was the establishment of an atmosphere of fear and the erosion of social bonds. In the context of Ajara, this manifested as mistrust emerging at both interpersonal and community levels, becoming a part of everyday life. Consequently, the traditional solidarity, which had previously served as one of the primary pillars of social life and survival, was dismantled.
- **Specific Structure of Traumatic Memory:** Subjective emphases characteristic of traumatic memory clearly emerge in the accounts of the repressed. The symbolic details and emotional contrasts selected by the respondents represent an authentic map of trauma, which demonstrates the real cost of repressions better than archival documents. This non-linear nature of memory confirms that the system left its mark not only on human biographies but also on their psychic structure, resurfacing as suppressed fear even decades later.
- **Marginalization of Memory and "Invisible" Trauma:** The research revealed a specific hierarchy of tragedies in the collective consciousness, where the experience of the 1951 deportation is viewed in relation to the "Great Terror" of 1937. The latter occupies a dominant place in the public narrative, casting the repressions of the 1950s into the shadows and presenting them as a secondary historical event. Accordingly, the experience of the 1951 victims remains a marginalized and "invisible" trauma in the public sphere, maintaining its vitality only at the level of family narratives.

Narrative analysis has shown that the memory of the deportees manifests in several central forms: a permanent sense of injustice, transgenerational silence, and the search for moral compensation. These forms

represent the pillars through which families represented the past and reconstructed their own dignity. In the absence of state recognition, personal and family narratives became the only space where the symbolic restoration of historical justice was possible.

Thus, the deportation of 1951 was not merely a physical exile; it was a deliberate blow to the social structure and traditional way of life. In the context of collective trauma, forms of self-perception changed, where individuals define themselves not only by individual biography but also on the basis of being descendants of the repressed and members of a surviving community. In this process, family stories became spaces not only of loss but also of symbolic resistance, where the restoration of dignity occurs through the act of narration.

Ultimately, this collective pain existing at the level of communicative memory must be transformed into public historical consciousness. A complex historical, sociological, and legal evaluation is the only way for the trauma of the past to cease existing as an "inherited burden" and become the foundation for the formation of a healthy civil society.

References

- Assmann, J. (2010). Communicative and Cultural Memory. In A. Erll & A. Nünning (Eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*. Walter de Gruyter.
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Figes, O. (2007). *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia*. New York: Metropolitan Books.
- Halbwachs, M. (1992). *On Collective Memory*. University of Chicago Press.
- Herman, J. L. (1992). *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence-From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic Books.
- Javakhishvili, J. (2018). *Totalitariuli represiebit gamotsveuli psikhososialuri travmis gavlena da taobatashoris gadatsema Sakartvelos magalitze* [The impact and intergenerational transmission of psychosocial trauma caused by totalitarian repressions: The case of Georgia; Doctoral dissertation]. Tbilisi: Ilia State University.
- Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia Archive (MIA). Fund 31, Inventory 1, Case 80 (Case "Groza", Vol. I, pp. 1-7).
- Nora, P. (1989). Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire. *Representations*, (26), 7-24. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928520>
- Oral Histories (2024). Recorded within the project "Officially Excluded Memory: Repressions in Ajara in 1951-1952". Unpublished interview data. Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University, Niko Berdzenishvili Institute.
- Polian, P. (2004). *Against Their Will: The History and Geography of Forced Migrations in the USSR*. Central European University Press.
- Portelli, A. (1991). *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Turmanidze, O. (2019). *Sabchota rejimi da masobrivi represiebi acharashi 1921-1952 tslebi* [Soviet regime and mass repressions in Ajara 1921-1952]. Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University, Niko Berdzenishvili Institute.