



MEMORIAL TO THE VICTIMS OF
COMMUNISM
TRIBUTE TO LIBERTY



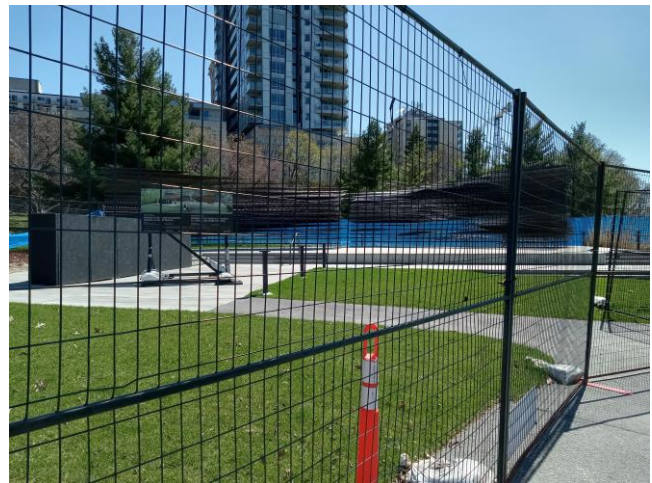
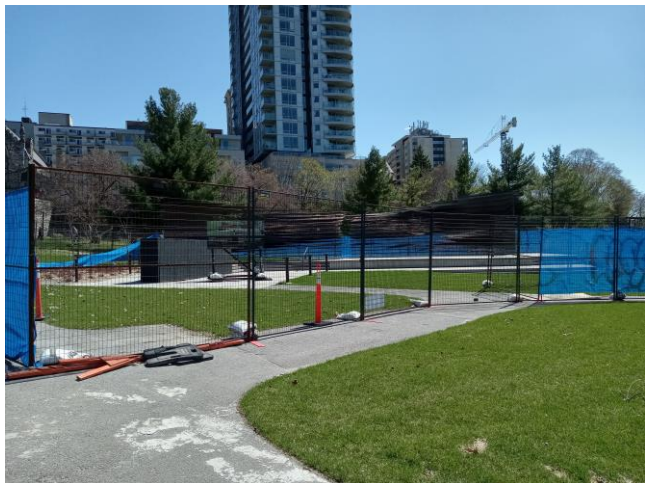
Newsletter

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Project Update

The extended process of completing the final details of the Memorial that started in October 2023 still continues. Unfortunately, Tribute to Liberty has not received an update from Canadian Heritage about when the process will be completed. We are waiting for Canadian Heritage to provide clarity about when the process will be finished, as we expect the inauguration to take place in the coming months.



The Memorial site at the Garden of the Provinces and Territories in Ottawa on April 25, 2024.

Tribute to Liberty is a Canadian organization whose mission is to establish a memorial to the victims of Communism in the National Capital Region. Tribute to Liberty's Newsletter is published four times a year. If you would like to add an email address to our subscriber list please email info@tributetoliberty.ca.

Mailing Address: 629 Mill Park Drive, Kitchener, ON, N2P 1V4

www.tributetoliberty.ca

Charitable #: 814999660RR0001

History Unhidden

A Black Hole in Recent History

The late 80's in Romania was a time of acute exacerbation of all systemic problems caused by the Communist regime, which had taken over the country four decades before. The people were deeply resentful for the severe drop in the standard of living, the curtailment of civic liberties, the international isolation of the country, the erratic state policies and the everyday abuses; many felt they were drawn to the brink of despair.

Freedom, as penned in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to Romanians meant only defecting to the West. Beyond the water border of the Danube River; beyond the land border – finely plowed to catch the trail of anyone stepping on it; beyond the waves of the Black Sea – only there was the place of freedom to be found.

Some turned this quest for freedom into a personal obsession, and age had nothing to do with the actual pursuit of getting beyond the border. This may explain why many of the border jumpers were minors. It is easy to judge them in hindsight as reckless youngsters in search of an adrenaline high. As it is hard to imagine how walking in their shoes might have been, and relive those times of a fenced-up society, when you living now, and are this educated adult, who has access to education and information, and had acquired a discerning insight, and has freedom of choice on the aspects of life they did not...

Documentation Papers As Their Only Valuable

They trained and toned their bodies, they collected information, they got maps, they got money, they contacted guides, they swam laps after laps, they got their papers ready and they dared to hope. Those who left swimming over the Danube had their papers tied to their bodies, in plastic bags. That was their whole fortune. The luckiest ones had family or friends in the West, and having their contact details on them was to defectors their ticket out; it gave them some assurance that they would not be returned to Romanian authorities.

By the '80s, the dream to defecting was a mass one, and many of us cherished it in silence, for anyone made privy to our escape dreams or plans could have turned out to be a snitch. The ugliness of the political system was most obvious in these devilish details: who snitched on whom back then? Many of the former border jumpers, who went over their Securitate files – now in

the custody of the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Files, or CNSAS –, were stunned to find out the snitches were their own relatives, be they spouses, children, brothers and sisters, or in-laws, and also neighbors, co-workers, friends or priests.



The CNSAS archive.

Tracking the human ugliness oozing out of the CNSAS files would merit a journalistic investigation of its own ... It is impossible to feel otherwise, while sifting through those files ...

Unprecedented Migration Wave

Youngsters – some of them minors, grown-ups, and even people past their prime – they all came to believe death on the border stripe of land, or in the Danube River were a better option to living in the cage Romania had become. Fleeing the country was a dream worth pursuing for many. The result? After 1985 Romania was faced with an unprecedented migration wave, of its own people willing to jump the border at all costs. That human hemorrhage was trickling over the border since 1948-1949, but never at the levels recorded in the late '80s.

To legally immigrate was not an option, except for the rare cases of people able to claim their right to permanent family reunion. Freedom of movement in communist Romania was not restricted only for traveling abroad, but also inside the country, as traveling to border localities had to be justified and notified to authorities.

The legal one-way out of the country was also an option for ethnic Germans and Jews, but at a price: the Federal Republic of Germany and Israel were paying for each individual who was allowed by the communist regime to

leave Romania. The others, left with the option of fleeing the country illegally, either on foot or swimming, were simply the border jumpers.

Many of those defectors, however, did not survive their attempt to escape to freedom. They died by gun shots fired by the border guards, beaten to death, or drown in the Danube River.

Jumping the border was a criminal offense, under the communist-time Penal Code. Those attempting to do the deed, who were returned to Romanian authorities by the neighboring communist countries, were charged under Art 245 in the Penal Code, and faced prison time penalties of six-month to three-year long. That article was repealed by Law-Decree 12, of January 10, 1990, practically days after the fall of the Nicolae Ceausescu regime.

Witnesses, but also statistical data, show that the Romanian-Yugoslav border was the bloodiest in Europe, between 1988 and 1989. Following closely in this ranking was the Bulgarian-Yugoslav border, where a lot of people fell victims – particularly East-Germans – while jumping borders in their attempt to reach West Germany.

Foreign media, and particularly *Radio Free Europe*, were keeping the Romanian defectors in focus. These were the true information channels Romanians got their news from, to find out what was going on behind the Iron Curtain. On *Radio Free Europe* one could listen to letters sent by defectors succeeding to jump the border, or letters sent by families distressed for their loved ones disappeared after attempting to leave the country illegally.

The foreign media was very vocal on the topic, and after 1985 the Romanian border was already coined as the bloodiest in Europe. Newspapers in Hungary and West Germany carried in-depth reports about Romanians killed at the border, while attempting to cross it.

The Hungarian daily *Magyar Hirlap* wrote in 1988 that 4,000 Romanian citizens jumped the border during that year to Hungary. The West German publication *Niedersächsische*, in its December 30, 1988 issue, wrote about Romania's border as the bloodiest in Europe. While the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* stated that some 400 defectors would have been shot dead by the border guards during 1988; the article was picked-up by *The Oregonian*, and carried the title “*Romanian refugees deserve to be recognized as such*”. Also, the newspaper *Vecernie Novosti* in Yugoslavia, carried several articles on the Romanian defectors jumping the

border, and put the number of those killed during 1989 to over 4,000 people!

A Black Hole In Recent History

Twenty six years passed since the demise of communism, and the Romanian State has still to come up with an official stance on the matter of defectors being killed, or arrested and subsequently abused by authorities, after failing to jump the country borders.

This is a genuine black hole in Romania's recent history; it is a collective wound left untended to; it is “*a moral meningitis*”, as one former defector put it – this cannot be without consequences. This is one of the reasons we, as a nation, cannot move forward.

Defectors were killed at the border all the time, during the communist regime, but the peak was reached in the very last years of the regime: 1988-1989. People who gave the orders back then and people who over-zealously executed them are still around; are still able adults. No one ever kept them accountable for their deeds.

The authors of this journalistic investigation managed to find out about a single case of a border guard being brought to justice and convicted for killing a defector, while jumping the border. That story we will address in one of the subsequent articles of this series.

This article was written by Marina Constantinoiu and Istvan Deak and was originally published on Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso, August 26, 2016: [Fleeing Romanians: Who Clipped Their Wings in Mid Flight? / Romania / Areas / Homepage - Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa \(balcanicaucaso.org\)](http://www.balcanicaucaso.org/romania/areas/homepage)

History Unhidden ‘Siberian Exiles - Freedom Fighters’

In a monumental book project a Dutch-German author has recalled the Baltic States’ darkest hour – and paid homage to the memory of tens of thousands of people forcibly exiled to Siberia during Soviet times.

It was a special presentation devoted to the oppression of communism, abuse of power and crimes against humanity: just a few days after Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania marked the 75th anniversary of Soviet mass deportations, the book “Siberian Exiles – Freedom Fighters” was presented at the National Library of Latvia in Rīga.

The English-language photobook of the Dutch-German author Claudia Heinermann is part of a monumental trilogy about the mass deportations in the Baltic States and the fight for freedom and justice. It contains portraits and testimonials of eyewitnesses that tell of the deportations of women, men and children to remote parts of Siberia, life in the Gulag camps, the resistance against the Soviet occupation, and the beginning of the Cold War.

“I was overwhelmed by the horrors I learned about and by the scale of the deportations that tore so many families apart and that has left deep wounds and scares in the society to this day”, Heinermann said in her speech at the presentation, adding that she got the idea for compiling the publication while working on a previous project about the 'wolf children' (German war orphans) in Lithuania.

Heinermann knew about the Gulag camps but was not aware that thousands of people were deported from the Baltic States to remote areas in Siberia. “I felt ashamed that I and most of us in the West knew so little about your history. That motivated me to start this project in 2016 because I think your history should be part of our collective memory as well,” the documentary photographer from Delft in the Netherlands told the audience at the event supported by the Dutch and German embassies in Rīga.

“I am truly touched and grateful that Claudia Heinermann gathered life stories of Latvian, Lithuanian, and Estonian men and women who joined resistance to fight for freedom of their country”, said Dutch Ambassador Claudia Pieterse in her welcoming speech at the presentation of the book, a copy of which later was also donated to the People’s Bookshelf in the atrium of the National Library.

The life stories and testimonials captured in the book are an inspiration for current and future generations to stand up for freedom and justice, according to the hosting envoy.

Recalling the mass deportations under the Soviet regime

In total, Heinermann worked for seven years on her long-term documentary project that resulted in the chronologically structured trilogy ‘Siberian Exiles’, all three parts of which she published between 2020 and 2023.

Hundreds and thousands of Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians were subject to mass deportations by the Soviet authorities and sent to Siberia in cattle trucks to

scratch a living from the permafrost at the frozen ends of the world. The “crime” for which most deportees were punished and sent to labor camps, prison or exile was either non-existent or a vague suspicion of potential disloyalty to the Stalin regime. Others were even deported without any conviction. For many it became a death sentence.

The mass deportations began on 14 June 1941 – less than two years after the Soviet Union signed a secret pact with Nazi Germany to carve up Europe and one year after the Soviet occupation of the Baltics. They recommenced on 25 March 1949 after the Soviets reoccupied the three countries again at the close of World War II following a few years of the Nazi occupation and continued later also during the partisan resistance movement that lasted until the mid-1950s.

The well-planned operations were carried out by the Soviet regime on a massive scale and saw people seized from their homes without warning and transported to the most remote and disadvantaged regions of the Soviet Union. Some died on the way, some died under the harsh conditions as the years passed – and a few made it home alive, often only decades later.

Significant contribution to consolidate European history

Among the returnees was European Parliament member and former Latvian EU Commissioner Sandra Kalniete who was born in Siberia after her parents were deported from their homeland. “Claudia Heinermann's photo exhibitions and written trilogy are a fundamental contribution to documenting the history of Latvia and the Baltic states and exposing communistic crimes”, she praised the work of the Dutch-German authors, underling that “it is important that different people from other European nations tell about our history”.

In Kainiete’s opinion there is too little knowledge in Europe and the world about what really happened during Soviet times in the Baltic states and that it needs to be brought to light what victims of communism have experienced. “When I was elected to the European Parliament, I set myself the goal of helping to integrate the history behind the Iron Curtain into the common history of Europe. But I did not think that it will be that hard as it was”, the 71-year-old politician and former diplomat said. “That is why Claudia Heinemann's contribution is so significant because it helps to consolidate European history”.

Kalniete herself previously captured the tragic events of the history of Latvia and Europe in the 20th century through a very personal narrative story of her deported

family in the autobiographical book “With Dance Shoes in Siberian Snows”. It was a best-seller in Latvia and has become the most translated work in modern Latvian literature – a must-read for anyone interested in the Soviet era and the pain it brought to the Latvian nation that affected basically every family and ruined thousands of lives.

The same is true for the comprehensive and intense trilogy of Heinermann. For her works, she travelled many times through the Baltic States, carried out extensive interviews with eyewitnesses and delved deeply into the archives. The documentary photographer also went to the places where the communist crimes took place – and kept coming across new traumatic stories that she considered worth and important to tell.

Poignant memories and life stories

All three parts of ‘Siberian Exiles’ are based on individual stories but each part has a different angle to tell about the deportations and the cruelty of the Soviet regime. The first part is about six Lithuanian survivors who were deported to the Laptev Sea above the arctic circle and the third part about an Estonian woman, who was deported to the border of Kazakhstan where she eye-witnessed upper ground nuclear tests. Heinermann also went there on site with her camera and recorded what she encountered: the landscape of remote areas, the villages, the culture, and the indigenous people.

The second part ‘Siberian Exiles – Freedom Fighters’ presented in Rīga depicts the moving life stories of 14 elderly resistance fighters. Eight of them are from Latvia: Ernests Rudzroga, Biruta Rodoviča, Hilda Miezīte, Imants Grāvītis, Jānis Zemantis, Lidija Lasmane, Marta Vuškāne, and Mihalīna Supe. The main features of the photobook are poignant recollections by the eyewitnesses themselves that are complemented by brief information about the historical background. All of them are illustrated by fine artistic portraits and photos from personal archives, KGB files, prisons camps in Siberia and from the forests that had been a hiding place and refuge for many partisans for so long.

Heinermann was particularly moved by the story of Latvian dissident Lidija Lasmane whose portrait is also on the cover of 465 pages hardcover book. “I was really fascinated and impressed by the fact that she did not stop, that she just kept going until the 1980s and even Vorkuta did not break her”, Heinermann told LSM on the sidelines of the event, adding that she considers it “incredibly impressive” to have such energy and strength to stand up against the Soviet regime over and over again.

Having been an active member of resistance during the Soviet occupation, the 1925-born Lasmane was first punished for supporting Latvian national partisans from 1946 to 1954. From 1970 to 1972 she was punished for dissemination of anti-Soviet and religious publications and from 1983 to 1987 for anti-Soviet propaganda. “There is only one thing in life that really matters – to choose to do good. And you always have that choice”, the former candidate for the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize is quoted in the book. Due to health reasons, Lasmane was not able to attend the event in person and also the other Latvian freedom fighters featured in the photobook were missing or represented by their relative and family members. The only one present was the 1929 born Ernests Rudzroga, whose family was deported to Siberia on 25 March 1949, while he managed to avoid deportation and, seeing no other option, went into the forest and joined a small, mobile unit of Latvian partisans. He came to the book launch together with his grandson and to great applause received his personal copy of the photobook. It was a moving moment – not only for Heinermann and him.

History is being repeated in Ukraine

While in some Baltic families the traumatic stories experienced under the Soviet regime were not talked about openly, Rudzroga shared his memories about the deportations, the occupation of his homeland and the resistance movement with his descendants.

“About all these things and events that he back then went through, he spoke openly already when I was a school boy”, Rudzroga’s grandson Dainis Pāls told LSM. “Through the stories from my parents and grandparents, I know all about what happened and I knew very well what it was like. And I also clearly know that I would never want to have to live in such a system and would never want that my children have to grow up in such a regime”.

“What I have heard and was told to me when I was a boy, I now see with my own eyes, many of these things have not disappeared anywhere. Therefore, it is very important for Europe as a whole to understand what we are dealing with”, Pāls said, while his grandfather Ernests Rudzroga sitting next to him in his wheelchair nodded in agreement. “This is why this book is very important”.

This article was written by Alexander Welscher and was originally published on LSM.lv on April 8, 2024: [A monumental project reaches completion: 'Siberian Exiles – Freedom Fighters' / Article \(lsm.lv\)](#)