

**9.1. Article 1: *“I Should Never Tell Anybody That My Mother Was Shot”:  
Understanding Personal Testimony and Family Memories of a  
Sámi-Norwegian-Soviet Biography***

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# 'I should never tell anybody that my mother was shot': understanding personal testimony and family memories within Soviet Lapland

by Lukas Allemann

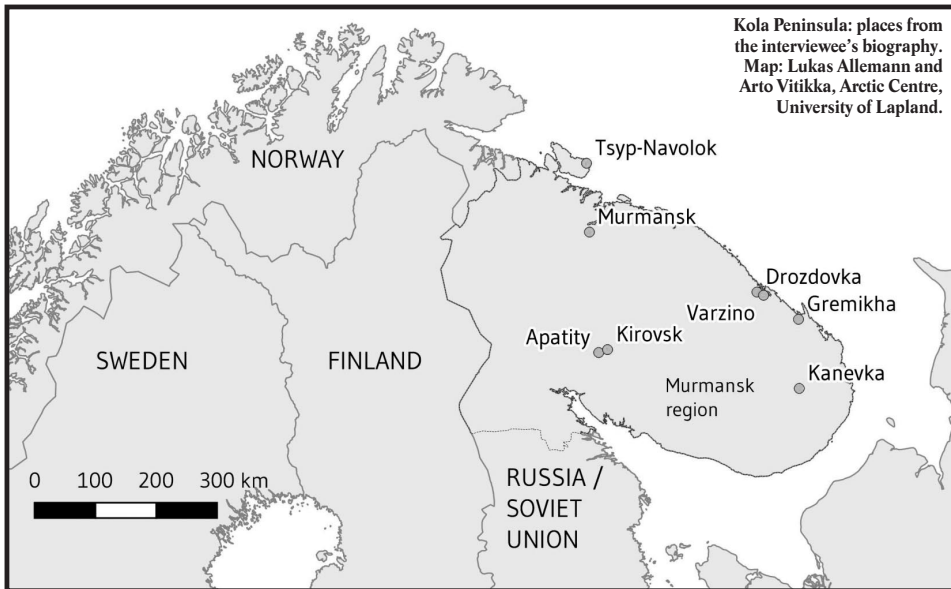
**Abstract:** This article examines the biography of a dual-heritage descendant of a Norwegian settler and indigenous Sámi on the Kola Peninsula in north-west Russia, whose parents became victims of Stalin's terror. Analysing personal experience with oral history methods reveals that the protagonists were trying to shape actively their own and their fellows' fates. This challenges the common script of passive victims within a totalitarian state. The narrator's emphasis on agency as well as her humanising of state representatives are discussed as ways of giving meaning to her family's history and strategies for coping with traumatic childhood events.

**Keywords:** Lapland; Sámi; Norwegian; Stalinism; Kola Peninsula; grassroots agency

This article explores one life history interview with a Soviet/Russian citizen with Norwegian and Sámi roots, Gidrun Aleksandrovna Mironova, who spent all her life in Russian Lapland. The historical timescale covered by the interview ranges from the end of the nineteenth century to the present, concentrating on the years under Stalin (from 1937 to the end of the 1940s). Analysis suggests that individual biographies can reveal new insights into hitherto understudied aspects of Stalinism and in particular how individuals dealt and lived with the political system. The common thread is that victims of repressive Stalinist policy, and those around them, showed forms of agency that undermine often tacitly implied assumptions about their passivity. Derrida's suggestion that individuals in history play roles that are 'simultaneously active and passive'<sup>1</sup> is also valid, I suggest, in understanding personal reminiscence from societies with a totalitarian leadership.

Approaching Stalinism through the use of oral history, I endorse Kuromiya's recommendation about being more 'attentive to the unwritten aspects of the Great Terror'.<sup>2</sup> There is already a considerable body of

oral history literature on dislocation and persecution among Baltic, Karelian and some northern indigenous minorities in the Soviet Union, dealing with the agency and coping strategies of the people.<sup>3</sup> However, explorations of Stalinist repressions among minorities on the Kola Peninsula have so far relied mostly on conventional written sources. Kotljarchuk's recent work on Sámi and Nordic minorities (Finns and Norwegian on the Kola Peninsula, Swedes in Ukraine) has made some significant contributions.<sup>4</sup> His research delivers a detailed analysis of the state's perspective, the motivations of its leaders, the propaganda machinery and numbers of people imprisoned and killed, based on qualitative and quantitative analysis of archival materials. This focus on political systems offers, in James Scott's words, a top-down approach of 'seeing like a state', but aspects of grassroots agency remain largely unconsidered.<sup>5</sup> This results, for instance, in Kotljarchuk's general impression that 'the ethnic cleansing of Finnish and Swedish rural communities proceeded without any protests on the part of the victims and their families',<sup>6</sup> whereas my findings show typical instances



of small subversive acts of agency that did not necessarily make their way into the archives. Thus, archive-based historiography tends to replicate the official script of the Great Terror, or any other state-directed social engineering campaign, as a well-organised, consistent process in which people were merely the 'raw material'.<sup>7</sup> Oral history, in contrast, is able to open spaces that diverge from these tropes of passive victims and active oppressors. Personal experience and memory open ways to critique and allow for greater human agency, including subtle 'slippage' from the dominant narratives about the design and implementation of such campaigns.

Subjectivity is an integral part of any historical source, written or oral: it cannot and should not be eliminated, but recognised, valued and treated as a feature worthy of exploration. Oral history analysis is rooted in the narrative character of the sources used, as anthropologist Hastrup and oral historian Portelli have both convincingly shown.<sup>8</sup> Here I support my analysis with extensive narrative-rich quotations from the interview and acknowledge the process of oral history co-creation that links researcher and interviewee. How we give meaning to and construct an individual biography, much of which happens through expression or retelling of emotions, motivations and interests, highlights how interviewees should be more than an information resource we tap into to then theorise about our findings. As Bornat identifies, 'interviewees engage themselves in active theorising about their lives'.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, the oral historian's work is not theorising on raw data, but meta-theorising on lives that have already been theorised (or given coherence via self-narration) and conceptualised in certain ways by

the interviewee. Gidrun puts herself and her ancestors into a bigger picture of being active members of society instead of passive victims, without denying the atrocities they experienced. In the following sections I analyse why Gidrun may have put such emphases into her narrative.

This discussion is part of the wider dissemination of findings from the ORHELIA (Oral History of Empires by Elders in the Arctic) project undertaken between 2011 and 2015 by the Arctic anthropology research team at the Arctic Centre, University of Lapland, Finland.<sup>10</sup> Research was conducted in Russian Lapland,<sup>11</sup> and also in Finnish Lapland, as well as among the European and the Yamal Nenets, in the Khanty-Mansi Region and in the Lena Delta Region. Approximately 450 hours of biographical-narrative interviews were recorded, ninety hours of which were on the Kola Peninsula. Within the relatively small but scattered indigenous communities, we found and reached interviewees mainly through the snowball principle of following up recommendations by others and developing contacts that evolved during our long-term fieldwork.

Such non-structured, non-directive, narrative and collaborative interviews require long conversations of several hours. I followed Rosenthal's suggested approach in which the first part of the interview becomes a narrative that is not interrupted, unless strictly necessary, by the interviewer.<sup>12</sup> During this main narration the interviewees are encouraged to develop and structure their recollections according to criteria they find relevant, their own self-understanding already fostering reflection upon the flow of memories being shared with an attentive and encour-



Interviewing Gidrun Aleksandrovna at her home. Photo: Lukas Allemann, 2019.

aging listener. In this sense, narrative-biographical interviews can have a liberating and thus curative effect. The main narration is followed by a second part of the interview in which more specific questions are asked. This section consists of questions deriving from a prepared list of topics not previously discussed during the main narrative and of follow-up questions that derive from earlier note taking. Often two or three meetings can prove useful, both for the researcher and for the interviewee.

For this project, I combined interviewing with participant observation during extensive fieldwork stays.<sup>13</sup> Through longer and recurring stays on the Kola Peninsula I built a sense of rapport and immersion with local lives and gained necessary contextual background understanding for posing meaningful questions, understanding answers and being understood. This part-time socialisation allows researchers to better maintain this relationship.<sup>14</sup> Participant observation also helps to develop an awareness of how researchers use terminology and categories on a daily basis in ways that do not necessarily match with people's perceptions, memories and utterances. Initial academic assumptions and labelling can affect and even limit the variety of different narratives and interpretative responses offered by interviewees. Among German oral history theoreticians, this phenomenon has been called 'de-typification shock [Enttypisierungsschock]',<sup>15</sup> which during comparatively short interviewing visits can result in feelings of disorientation and frustration. Through interviewing over longer periods, I suggest that we can make sense and more productive use of such initial experiences among interviewees.

### **Ethnic diversity on the Kola Peninsula**

Of all far-north regions of Russia, Lapland is closest to the country's central European areas. At the same time, it has common borders with the Nordic countries. It shares with them its indigenous population, the Sámi. During different historical periods, the geographical proximity contributed to a relatively dense settlement by Russians (Pomors), Komi, Nenets, Norwegians and Finns in Russian Lapland, which has resulted in the region's long tradition of ethnic diversity, even before the demographic policies of the Soviet era. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, various non-Russian ethnic groups inhabiting Russian Lapland, both indigenous people and settlers, were in constant contact with each other, trading and intermarrying. They consistently contributed to the Kola Peninsula's population before the start of a large-scale Soviet influx of people into what eventually became the Murmansk Region today.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the Russian Empire encouraged settlers from neighbouring countries to move to the Russian shores of the Barents Sea so that this strategically important northern edge of the Empire became more densely populated. Settlers were granted free land as well as exemption from military service and tax payment, under the condition that they take Russian citizenship. This policy mainly attracted Norwegians and Finns. However, Finns had been living in Russia long before on the long common border area, while for Norwegians the settlement of Tsyp-Navolok on the Rybachii Peninsula became the first and main point of entrance to the Russian Empire.<sup>16</sup> In 1895, the Kola Peninsula had a population

of 8,690 people, which included 220 Norwegians and 1,940 indigenous Sámi.<sup>17</sup> According to the first all-Soviet census of 1926, there were 168 Norwegians and 1,708 Sámi, while the region's entire population had increased to 23,006.<sup>18</sup> The comparison of census data shows that the intense colonisation of the Kola Peninsula by non-Northerners had begun, and that many Norwegians had returned to Norway. According to my interviewee, up to the beginning of the 1930s direct connections with Norway across the sea were still common, with people and goods moving across the state border and some people leaving for good.

Currently, only a handful of people self-identify as Finns or Norwegians on the Kola Peninsula. The numbers of indigenous Sámi and quasi-indigenous<sup>19</sup> Komi and Nenets have remained stable in absolute terms, but today they amount to no more than 0.5 per cent of the Murmansk Region population.<sup>20</sup> During the twentieth century, all the locally born people living in this area from pre-Soviet and pre-urban times experienced considerable transformations in their lives. State policies during the decades between the 1930s and 1970s displaced, uprooted and killed people for reasons as diverse as collectivisation, sedentarisation, economic rationalisation, industrial and infrastructural development and the requirements of the military.<sup>21</sup> During Stalin's Great Terror, those groups who had ethnic kin abroad, no matter whether indigenous or settler, experienced a higher than average percentage of imprisonments or executions. In the Murmansk Region those affected were mainly the Sámi, Finns, Norwegians and Swedes.<sup>22</sup> The rate of death sentences among people arrested in the Great Terror was 64.7 per cent among the Sámi people and 77 per cent among the Kola Norwegians (compared with a 73.8 per cent death rate among people arrested in all so-called 'national operations'<sup>23</sup>). Among those not sentenced to death, many died while serving their sentences. Altogether, on the Kola Peninsula 694 Finns, sixty-eight Sámi, twenty-three Norwegians and six Swedes were arrested in 1937 and 1938. Thus, while the rate of Great Terror victims among the whole Murmansk Region population was 0.9 per cent, the percentage for these ethnic groups was much higher.<sup>24</sup> This allows us to speak of an ethnic component to Stalin's Great Terror in the Murmansk Region. Gidrun's life story illustrates how individuals tried, in different ways, to navigate those turbulent times.

### Introducing Gidrun Aleksandrovna Mironova

The following biographical details are distilled from my meeting with Gidrun Aleksandrovna Mironova (henceforth Gidrun) at her home in Apatity (Russia) in 2014. There, as part of the ORHELIA project, I interviewed her for approximately three and a half hours. The summary omits some of Gidrun's narration but the details help to contextualise the analysis that follows.

Gidrun was born in 1934. She lived in Varzino, a

Sámi settlement on the Barents Sea coast, until the age of ten. Her mother, Gidrun Margaret Fredriksen (henceforth Gidrun Margaret), was a Norwegian whose parents had moved as settlers from northern Norway to the Russian Empire at the end of the nineteenth century. Gidrun's father, Aleksandr Petrovich Zakharov (henceforth Aleksandr) was Sámi, and his ancestors were indigenous to the settlement of Varzino.

While most Norwegians stayed in Tsyp-Navolok, Gidrun's ancestors had established themselves further to the east, in the village of Drozdovka, where they had thirteen children. They owned several fishing boats and a large two-storey house. These were symbols of considerable wealth in that locality and period. In the wake of de-kulakisation (the political campaign aiming at eliminating wealthy or supposedly wealthy peasants or *kulaks*),<sup>25</sup> the family were forced to leave their home, which was then re-allocated to needy people. They were resettled to Khibinogorsk (Kirovsk), a new town for resettled former *kulaks*, euphemistically called 'special settlers', from all over the country.<sup>26</sup> When Gidrun Margaret married Aleksandr she moved back to the Barents Sea coast, to her husband's home village Varzino, where daughter Gidrun and son Sasha were born. In 1937 Gidrun Margaret and her father, Martin Fredriksen, were arrested on charges of espionage and were executed in 1938. Gidrun and her younger brother, who was still a baby, remained alone with their father Aleksandr and paternal grandmother. Aleksandr was the chairman of the village council (*sel'sovet*) in Varzino. He, too, was soon arrested. Remarkably, the villagers tried to prove his innocence, and unusually, the charges were dropped and he was released. Aleksandr resumed his former council role but he volunteered for the army and was killed in action three years later. Thus in 1941, his children Gidrun and Sasha became orphans. Gidrun was entrusted to relatives' care in another village, Kanevka, on the Kola Peninsula, where she attended school between the ages of twelve and sixteen. She then moved to Gremikha, a significant military base on the Barents Sea coast. There she worked as a nanny and as a cook. After a serious accident she was treated for two and a half years in Kirovsk. Once recovered, she remained there, found a job as a secretary and attended evening school. She completed her secondary school education at the age of twenty-six, which was not uncommon due to the preceding wartime turmoil. Gidrun married the ethnic Russian Aleksei Mironov in 1967. They had no children. Gidrun became a nurse and worked in Apatity until her retirement. Only in the 1950s did she learn from trustworthy sources that her mother had been executed. Gidrun's mother and grandfather were both posthumously acquitted. Some of her relatives were offered Norwegian citizenship through a repatriation programme in the 1990s and moved to Norway,<sup>27</sup> but Gidrun preferred to stay in Russia where she had spent all her life.

### Humanising the oppressors

Although Gidrun does not mention or does not know the details of the charges against her mother and grandfather, the accusations of espionage were probably linked to the so-called Blue Cross of the Order of Rosicrucians, a fictional espionage organisation invented by the Soviet authorities.<sup>28</sup> Kola Norwegians were accused of spying within this organisation for Germany, while Norway and Sweden were gateway countries allegedly for these espionage activities. These allegations were made public through the local state newspapers as part of widespread efforts to promote fear of external threats and thus foster Soviet-nationalist fervour. The alleged foreign agents' work in remote collective farms (*kolkhozes*) was emphasised in the media: to disorganise the build-up of collective economy from the inside and to destroy the Navy.<sup>29</sup> While Gidrun did not know anything about the charges brought against the other detainees of her village (all men), we may assume that a majority of them were Sámi because Varzino was a Sámi settlement. Most of the Sámi arrested in those years were accused of being part of another fictional conspiracy against the Soviet state.<sup>30</sup> Gidrun recalled many details about her mother's arrest, and it is not surprising that this early turning point in her life formed the core of her biographical account, as shown in her recollection of this event:

Mum went to milk the cow, milked it, set down the pail and came back. Dear Sasha was sleeping on the bed. I had already awoken, and Dad was dressing me, and Mum was making the bed. [...] Mum made the bed and put Sasha there, fed him, and turning, said, 'Aleksandr, two policemen [*milit-ionery*] are coming to us'. But Dad just says, 'Well, so what? It may be anything'. Dad is dressing me, they are coming, they knock, come in, rifles, two rifles. 'Hello.' – 'Hello'. Well, they were in the living room, went in there, said greetings, were silent for a moment, then said, 'Does Fredriksen-Zakharova live here?' – She says, 'It's me'. – 'Get dressed'. Well Dad took me too, little Sasha in his arms, and led us to the village council [...]. They kept her there until evening, until the steamboat was scheduled to leave. [...] 'All right', they said, 'say your goodbyes'. And the people, the whole village was going, after all they took seventeen men, Mum was the only woman. Seventeen! [...] And they tried to tear me apart from Mum, I was screaming bloody murder and clung on to her. Dad barely unclenched my hands and took me into his arms. 'Let's go, my daughter, we have little Sasha there [...], let's go'. And Father carried me the whole way, and I cried the whole way, and we came to Grandmother. There of course everybody wailed, tears, everybody was shedding a sea of tears. My own Aunt Masha, Father's sister, they also took her husband, and she had six children. And all, all of our relatives also suffered. They took all of the men, in the end nobody came back.



Gidrun's memories about life under Stalinism reveal narrative spaces that do not always fit the stereotypical images of arrest and oppression during a totalitarian regime. More than once, amid the emotional intensity surrounding Gidrun's recollection of the brutality of that era, she adds to her narration rather surprising instances of agency by the victims of oppression. Furthermore, she identifies traces of human kindness and empathy that were shown by the oppressors, as seen in how she talks about her mother's arrest:

And when Mum was arrested, still dear Sasha was only a few months old. She breast-fed him. [...] Grandmother lived next to the village council and she went and asked two policemen sitting there, and some other representatives of the state authorities were there. She says, 'Please let my daughter-in-law go so that she can breast-feed her son, he is still an infant'. 'It's not allowed, not allowed'. But my grandmother was a brave woman you could say because she went and got the child, stood on the doorstep, and the child is crying. She says, 'All right, I will leave the child for you to feed and care for, what can I do, I cannot feed it, after all it is still a breast-fed infant. What am I going to do, give it sea *tura*?' Sea *tura* is this kind of seaweed.<sup>31</sup> That seaweed was collected and fed to the cows mixed with hay. [...] And then one police officer says, 'Well, let the woman go out on the porch'. – 'Well go to the ledge, she may feed him'. And then my grandmother says, 'My dear daughter-in-law, feed the child quickly, I will bring you something to eat'.

Gidrun humanises the guards as she implies a sense of empathy in their treatment of her mother. She high-



lights how they gave permission for her baby brother to be breast-fed outside. Similarly, the previous quotation identifies the guards' uneasy silence when they had come to arrest her mother. Such details suggest that Gidrun portrays the militia sent to arrest an ordinary rural woman as humans with feelings and intuition, possibly even having difficulties in believing that the woman was a highly dangerous enemy of the people. We may see in this humanising narrative a coping strategy, lessening the horror of her mother's detention and removal from her childhood by shifting responsibility for her mother's death away from the guards to some faceless other or higher authority.

Othering the evil is not only performed by Gidrun when looking back to the traumas through which she lived. It was also a collective coping strategy in her village at the time when the events were happening. When Gidrun's father Aleksandr was arrested, the solidarity and self-empowerment evidenced by the people towards their village chairman seems striking. Despite the intimidation of previous arrests, the villagers were supportive in their efforts to gain Aleksandr's release. Their responses reflect an attitude seen elsewhere towards detention by the authorities: people were often convinced that it must be a mistake or an arbitrary act by a faceless state bureaucracy, and they were confident that, if it were only possible to reach out and be heard at a level high enough, decisions taken by over-eager lower-ranking officials might be over-ruled. This faith in the ultimately 'good tsar', seen also in Eugenia Ginzburg's autobiography of her Gulag path,<sup>32</sup> is, again, a way of othering the horror. The evil, faceless other is thus located between a perception of an omnipresent and just leader Stalin at the top of the power structure and the persons at

the bottom entrusted with arresting the people and handing them over to the anonymous bureaucratic apparatus.

### Ascribing agency to victims

It is this faith in ultimate justice from above that triggered the villagers' remarkable agency. Gidrun recalls the moment when her father returned from imprisonment to the village and the circumstances that led to his release:

Dad says [...] to my grandmother, 'Mum, I was in prison for eight months because of my wife, eight months they beat me'. Dad came back, his head covered in bumps [...]. After Mum they arrested Dad. This means Dad was made out to be the accomplice of a spy, roughly speaking. And eight months he was locked up, [but] our *kolkhoz* – they got him out. [...] They took him away for embezzlement, but wrote him up for something else. [...] And they started to write, repeatedly, under pressure of the village, the whole village council, and everybody started to sign that he was the most decent person in the village [...]. And Dad returned. Dad returned – it was a sea of happiness, an ocean of love. Then Grandmother says, 'Well, Aleksandr'. – 'Mum, they beat me. You walk and they hit you with the butt of the rifle either in the back or try to go more for the head'. What bruises! [...] 'And Mum', he says, 'don't tell anyone. They made me sign an agreement that I will not tell anyone about this'. I hear everything although I am a child, but I understood that Dad is important to me [...]. I will tell nothing to anyone, of course. And then I hear again, for how many times when I sleep there on the stove [...], Grandmother would come, collect the milk, all the time talking with her son nose to nose early in the morning. And always I would wake up and listen to what they were saying.

However, while Gidrun's father was lucky enough to be released and reinstated in his former position, the arrested chairmen of four other Sámi national *kolkhozes* experienced the more common detainees' destiny of those days and were sentenced to death.<sup>33</sup> The reminiscence shows that there were limited possibilities to influence the unpredictability of detention, release or execution at a grassroots level, but that the arbitrary nature of these outcomes could not be disrupted systematically. Gidrun's account of her uncle's experiences also illustrates the mix of agency and chance:

Uncle Ludvig lived in Murmansk, he never married. They were pursuing him. Every three months he used to change his place of living, he travelled the whole coast [...]. One policeman told him: 'You know, you're a good guy. Every three months change the place of living. Before they find you, you're already in another place'.

This police officer (not from the secret police NKVD) had hinted to Ludvig that the state's slow-moving bureaucracy could save his life. By regularly changing his place of residence, he could avoid the registration duty (*propiska*) and thus stay out of sight of the authorities. According to Gidrun, the police officer realised that Ludvig was an 'ordinary' man and not a spy and used his insider knowledge in order to save him from prosecution. Another administrative loophole also saved the lives of three of Gidrun Margaret's brothers and their families, thanks to a far-sighted suggestion by their father Martin:

Grandfather had been arrested in Tik-Guba, they took him away. Grandfather told his sons in Norwegian, 'get your mother and get the hell out' – I'm speaking now improperly – 'to Karelia. We'll then find each other there'. And when Grandfather and Mum were shot, they remembered their father's will: all three of them, three brothers, left to go there – to Karelia.

Karelia, located east of Finland between the Murmansk and Leningrad Regions, was another administrative territory in Soviet Russia, and it had no history of settlement by Norwegian settlers. Moving there turned out to be a good strategy to escape Stalin's purges, because identifying and targeting victims was based on population statistics about class and ethnicity made for each region in the 1920s: detailed ethnographical knowledge generated in the early years of the Soviet Union was now used for mass arrest operations. With no statistics about Norwegians in Karelia, no orders were issued there to take measures against them as potential traitors of the country. In Karelia, even before the war with Finland, the spy and traitor role was assigned to Karelians, the local transnational ethnic group with relations to nearby Finland.<sup>35</sup>

Gidrun's recollections of family experiences reveal how individuals directed their own actions as they navigated through upheaval and atrocities. Survival depended both on personal agency and on chance: knowing and using the loopholes of the system, as well as simple arbitrariness and luck. As Chappell proposes: 'Everyone is acted on every day, no matter how independent they may be persuaded to be. Victims need not be passive, nor the passive weak, nor actors free agents.'<sup>36</sup> He discusses the idea of overcoming the active-agent-versus-passive-victim dichotomy in terms of decolonising the historiography of peoples who are usually considered colonised. More generally, this dichotomy is assumed to be often present in research about states identified as being totalitarian, whether or not their populations have been colonised.

In the case of the Soviet Union under Stalin, we do not usually encounter the small acts of agency in written historical sources. Conversely, open resistance and rebellion, often ending in disaster for the insurgents,<sup>37</sup> are more likely to find their way into written and archived documents. Small-scale agency can be

anything from resistance over accommodation to collusion, with blurred boundaries between these categories. However, it is precisely the cautious and deliberate nature of minor forms of agency that could yield, as Gidrun's account shows us, some positive results and broaden our understanding of life under totalitarian systems.

### Coping with the past

Revealing unknown aspects of known events is, as Portelli identifies, one of the advantages of oral history sources.<sup>38</sup> However, we can gain more insights by questioning why Gidrun gave them prominence in her life history account. Adult understanding and childhood perspectives are interwoven in Gidrun's account from the outset. Gidrun mediates the terror partly through the lens of a child's perception. She listened to the secret conversations between her father and grandmother as a child by which the details of the terror were disclosed to her unintentionally. While this is certainly part of Gidrun's childhood trauma, it was also part of growing up, understanding what was going on and thus coping with the trauma of enforced separation. From her adult perspective, Gidrun deliberately shows her grandmother as a courageous, enterprising woman who was able, through her own relatively small actions, to deploy agency and subtly subvert state power. This is important for Gidrun because her grandmother was a key person in her upbringing after she became an orphan. The grandmother's repeated ironic comment over feeding her grandson sea *tura* challenged the guards as they carried out orders. In Gidrun's account, the positive response of the guards to her grandmother's little act of defiance demonstrates her grandmother's strength of personality. Gidrun's sense of familial pride helps her to process and accommodate her recollection of childhood trauma.

Gidrun's account suggests that her response to past atrocities, whether unconsciously or consciously, is to counterbalance trauma with pride, brutality with human kindness and oppression with agency and chance. These are predominantly emotional responses that, on the one hand, challenge an implicit binary that narrowly sees subjects as either passive victims or active agents and, on the other hand, help Gidrun to cope with the past. Gidrun's choice of what to prioritise in her account may be seen as part of her efforts to attach meaning to what she lived through, as positive meaning making offers a way of coping.<sup>39</sup> How one makes sense of past experiences is, of course, not only linked to the past itself but to current discourses and to the specific conversational setting in which talking and listening occur.<sup>40</sup> Grief and vulnerability are, to a large extent, socially constructed: 'Some lives are publicly acknowledged as more grievable than others and some as not grievable at all'.<sup>41</sup> It is possible that I, as a Western researcher, was implicitly perceived by Gidrun as somebody one-sidedly looking for downtrodden victims of an oppressive regime. I had discussed this previously as



a widespread pattern in Russian Lapland among members of transnational minorities used to the presence of well-meaning visitors from the neighbouring countries, be it reporters, NGO representatives or researchers.<sup>42</sup> This is also the case for Gidrun, who enjoyed multiple attention, on the one hand from Norwegian writers and state officials, and on the other hand from Sámi ethnic activists. This specific context may have prompted wishes to counterbalance widespread accounts of victimisation by emphasising the strength and agency of Gidrun's ancestors and acknowledging the decency of the people among whom

she continued to live. Thus, Gidrun's retelling may be understood in relation to her decision to stay in Russia despite the Norwegian repatriation programme. Her conscious choice over where to live and the balance between early pain and happier experiences in later life may have influenced how she narrates certain parts of her story, as 'ageing is characterised by a search to find a personally meaningful way of life which connects the past with the present'.<sup>43</sup> Had she moved to Norway, perhaps other discourses and a different life trajectory might have framed her recall of oppression and agency differently.

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### NOTES

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- 14.** Dudeck, 2013, p 64.
- 15.** Lutz Niethammer, 'Fragen – Antworten – Fragen. Methodische Erfahrungen und Erwägungen zur Oral History [1985]', in Julia Obertreis (ed), *Oral History: Basistexte*, Stuttgart: Steiner, 2012, pp 31-71.
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- 18.** Vsesoiuznaia perepis' naseleniia 1926 goda. Natsional'nyi sostav naseleniia po regionam RSFSR. Murmanskaiia guberniia' [web page]. Accessed online at [www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus\\_nac\\_26.php?reg=79](http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus_nac_26.php?reg=79), 24 April 2018.
- 19.** While sharing similar livelihoods, only the Sámi have a legal indigenous status in the Murmansk Region. The Komi and Nenets may be aptly called para- or quasi-indigenous. See Yulian Konstantinov, *Conversations with Power: Soviet and Post-Soviet Developments in the Reindeer Husbandry Part of the Kola Peninsula*, Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2015, pp 32, 238, 313. Accessed online at <http://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2:865695>, 12 April 2018.
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- 21.** Konstantinov, 2015, pp 96-196; Anna Afanasyeva, *Forced Relocations of the Kola Sámi People: Background and Consequences*, MA thesis, Tromsø: University of Tromsø, 2013. Accessed online at <http://munin.uit.no/handle/10037/5241>, 18 September 2017; Lukas Allemann, *The Sami of the Kola Peninsula: About the Life of an Ethnic Minority in the Soviet Union*, Samisk Senters Skrifiserie, vol 19, Tromsø: Septentrio Academic Publishing, 2013; NN Gutsol, SN Vinogradova and AG Samorukova, *Pereselennye gruppy Kol'skikh saamov*, Apatity: Kol'skii nauchnyi tsentr RAN, 2007.
- 22.** Kotljarchuk, 2017; Kotljarchuk, 2015; Kotljarchuk, 2014; Kotljarchuk, 2012.
- 23.** Attention must be paid to the different use of the terms nation/national/nationality in the 'West' and 'East'. In Soviet and post-Soviet terminology (and also today in most former socialist countries), nation/national/nationality refer to ethnic belonging as a category distinct from citizenship. Alongside 'citizenship' (USSR), 'nationality' (for example, Sámi, Norwegian, Polish, Uzbek, Korean etc.) was a mandatory field in passports and other official documents during Soviet times. See Rogers Brubaker, 'Ethnicity without groups', *European Journal of Sociology / Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, vol 43, no 2, 2002, p 178; Terry Martin, 'The origins of Soviet ethnic cleansing', *The Journal of Modern History*, vol 70, no 4, 1998, pp 813-861.
- 24.** Kotljarchuk, 2017, p 90; Kotljarchuk, 2012, pp 67-69, 74.
- 25.** See for example Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- 26.** Vyá Shashkov, *Spetspereselentsy v istorii Murmanskoi oblasti*, Murmansk: Maksimum, 2004.
- 27.** Jentoft, 2001.
- 28.** Kotljarchuk, 2015, p 21.
- 29.** Kotljarchuk, 2017, pp 101-106.
- 30.** AA Kiselev, 'Saamskii zagovor', *Zhivaia Arktika*, no 3-4, 1999, pp 58-60.
- 31.** The term is not in use anymore but can be found in historical documents, such as the travelogue by VI Nemirovich-Danchenko, *U Okeana: Zhizn' na krainem Severe*, St Petersburg: Tipografiia i khronolitografiia A. Transhelia, 1878, p 305.
- 32.** Eugenia Ginzburg, *Journey into the Whirlwind*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967.
- 33.** Kotljarchuk, 2012, p 72.
- 34.** Kotljarchuk, 2014; Martin, 1998.
- 35.** Irina Takala, 'Natsional'nye operatsii OGPU/NKVD v Karelii', in Timo Vihavainen and Irina Takala (eds), *V sem'e edinoi: natsional'naia politika partii bol'shevikov i ee osushchestvlenie na Severo-Zapade Rossii v 1920-1950-e gody*, Petrozavodsk: Iz-vo PetrGU, 1998, pp 161-206; Auvo Kostiaainen, 'The Finns of Soviet Karelia as a target of Stalin's terror', in John Morison (ed), *Ethnic and National Issues in Russian and East European History*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000, pp 214-229.
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- 39.** Crystal L Park and Amy L AI, 'Meaning making and growth: new directions for research on survivors of trauma', *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, vol 11, no 5, 2006, pp 389-407.
- 40.** A classic text here is Erving Goffman, 'On face-work', *Psychiatry*, vol 18, no 3, 1955, pp 213-231; see also Heiko Haumann, 'Geschichte, Lebenswelt, Sinn: Über die Interpretation von Selbstzeugnissen', in Emil Angehrn, Brigitte Hilmer, Georg Lohmann and Tilo Wesche (eds), *Anfang und Grenzen des Sinns, Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2006*, pp 42-54.
- 41.** Jenny Harding, 'Talk about care: emotions, culture and oral history', *Oral History*, vol 38, no 2, 2010, pp 35.
- 42.** Lukas Allemann, 'Yesterday's memories, today's discourses: the struggle of the Russian Sámi to construct a meaningful past', *Arctic Anthropology*, vol 54, no 1, 2017, pp 1-21.
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Address for correspondence:  
lukas.allemann@ulapland.fi