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The Traumascapes of Bărăgan and Siberia: Identity, Place Attachment and Resilience in the Deportees' Life Stories

Abstract: *In this article, we examine the relationship between traumatic memory, identity and place attachment through two case studies of deportation: from North Bukovina to the Soviet Union (in 1941) and from Banat and Western Oltenia to Bărăgan region of Romania (in 1951). Starting in the 1990s and continuing to present, the cultural trauma of deportation has been constructed discursively by the former deportees themselves, as well as by social groups such as Asociația Foștilor Deținuți Politici din România (AFDPR) [Association of Former Political Prisoners from Romania] and Asociația Deportaților din Bărăgan, Timișoara [Association of Deportees from Bărăgan in Timișoara], and researchers dealing with this problematic. This cultural trauma construction draws on the collective memory of a shared painful past. Trauma is an essential dimension of the identity formation in the case of former deportees seen as a community who shares it. Their collective identity is built on trauma discourse; confessing negative affect that burdens them. In this study, we explore Romanian deportees' experiences in space and related emotions within the system of communist oppression, both in Romania and the Soviet Union. Our research proposes a cultural perspective on memory and identity, and on individuals' attachment to places and resilience during traumatic experiences of their lives, such as deportation.*

Keywords: *historical trauma; political violence; human rights; deportations; communism; storytelling; identity formation.*

Introduction

In this study, we created a theoretical and analysis framework that can adequately describe and interpret people's emotional and cognitive bonds to places in the context of the traumatic historical event of political dislocation that has significantly impacted deportees' identity, place attachments and resilience. We present a qualitative study designed to improve the comprehension of place attachment under crisis situations, determined by extremist ideologically driven decisions. In doing so, the development of place attachment during such extreme crisis situations is explored through recollections of former deportees' life histories.

Our research integrates into the field of studies upon political forced relocations as repression methods, where place attachment is "critical, yet understudied" (Greer et al. 2020, p. 307). Such relocations can be considered disasters, which were defined as "place-based phenomena that alter the physical and social landscape, challenging how individuals understand where they live and their bonds with that place" (Greer et al. 2020, p. 306).

In previous research, people's relationship with traumatic places was investigated in the context of man-made and natural disasters (Erikson 1976, p. 153) and, more recently, in the case of political forced relocation of the Jews of Gaza (Dekel 2010; Dekel and Tuval-Mashiach 2012). These studies showed that the geographies of deportation memory and the geographies of place attachment intersect.

To our knowledge, place attachment has not been researched so far in relation to the memory of communist repression. For Romania, only a few studies focused on people's relationships with their relocation space (Văran and Crețan 2018; Bora and Voiculescu 2021) and none investigated place identity and place attachment in deportation spaces or where deportees had been taken from. In addition, a comparative perspective of place attachment research on the deportation of Romanian citizens to the Soviet Gulag and to Bărăgan, in Romania, is new.

To sum up, preserving and constructing place attachment in crisis situations has been under researched in general and, for the Romanian communist society, we are the first researchers to tackle the issue (Ilovan et al. 2024). We analysed the narratives of the deportees in order to understand the process of creating new bonds with traumatic places, during and after their forced relocation. However, a study connecting

place attachment construction under drastic historical changes and individual and community identity has never been conducted. This paper aims at filling this gap.

Our research is interdisciplinary (History and Geography). It (re)presents the cartography of trauma in connection to these deportees' place attachments. Insights into cultural trauma related to Gulag deportations have been published so far in the fields of History and Cultural Studies. On the Soviet Gulag, Leona Toker's seminal work emphasizes the importance of literature in domesticating trauma as well as in making it known to the world (Toker 2000). In the same vein, Cristina Antoni wrote about the poetics of the Gulag and its connection to the Bessarabians' trauma of deportation (Antoni 2019). The trauma inflicted to the Romanians of Bessarabia by the deportation to the Soviet Gulag was recorded through a series of interviews and life stories by Ludmila Cojocaru (2016), Elena Postică (2016), and Lidia Pădureac (2017). They followed in the steps of Alain Brossat, Sonia Combe, and Leonid Moukhine (1991) and Daniel Bertaux, Paul Thompson and Anna Rotkirch (2003), and most recently of Tyler C. Kirk (2023) who examined the Soviet memories of Gulag through the lens of survivors' testimonies. The traumatic aspects of the Bessarabian deportations were analysed by Ludmila Cojocaru (2008, 2014), and Zinaida Bolea (2024). The Moldavian researchers point out that the traumatic events subscribed to the deportations were not isolated or unique events, because the deportations implied a continuum of traumatic events, which conditioned a lasting, cumulative trauma (Bolea, 2024). The trauma of Bărăgan deportation and its consequences were analysed by Smaranda Vultur (1997, 2011) and Claudia-Florentina Dobre (2020 (a), (b); 2024 (a), (b) (c)).

Sources and methodology

The sources used in the analysis are memoirs published by Anița Cudla (1904 – 1986), and Dumitru Nimigeanu (1906 – 1991), peasants from Northern Bukovina. At the time of their deportation, they were both adults and parents. Anița Cudla wrote her memoirs during communism (in hiding) as a request from her brother, a well-known Romanian intellectual who lived abroad, while Nimigeanu wrote his text and published it in exile, in 1958, in Paris. Anița Cudla's memoirs were published after the fall of communism in Romania, in 1991. The Bărăgan former deportees' interviews were collected and published in an edited book (Antonovici and Dobre 2016, 2024).

Based on these sources, our study examines the connection between political violence and place attachments, by qualitatively analysing and interpreting deportees' memories. As a result, we employed a social constructivist approach to place, place attachment and trauma in the context of small rural communities that coped with drastic changes and where inhabitants became resilient under harsh circumstances. Textual culture and oral transmission of knowledge about deportation are part of the local heritage, where this heritage is "a cultural process that engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present" (Smith 2006, p. 44).

Space relates people and objects to their memories, as these all exist within a spatial setting. This process of bonding people and objects with memories in a certain space creates place identity, a sense of place, and thus place attachment (Lewicka 2008). Place identity consists of both communal (group) and personal aspects. Place attachment is an affective bond between people and meaningful places to them. This has been studied especially by environmental psychology and geography. It was defined as always a positive emotion connecting people to places, even under difficult circumstances. This positive emotion is developed towards significant places in people's lives. One of the strongest predictors of place attachment is length of residence: the longer people live in an area, the more attached they feel (Lewicka 2011). Positive connections to places form both at the individual and group levels (Scannell and Gifford 2010; Hernández et al. 2007; Lewicka 2008).

People's bonds to places appear in the routines of everyday life. Such bonds are shaped by individuals' previous social identities, experiences, and actions. Place attachment includes both objective and subjective sides of time. The human experience of time and space is an active one and, therefore, place attachment is a process, part of individuals' cultural background, where the tangible and intangible features of place can foster place identity, attachment and resilience (Lewicka 2014; Diener and Hagen 2022; Markuszewska 2022).

Various dimensions of place attachment appear in deportees' life histories: place identity, place dependence (i.e., economic; it refers to functional or practical connections that people have to places), and detachment (alienation from once meaningful places). Place identity is part of individual's identity. Individuals' place identity is integral to developing a sense of self; it "captures the emotional or psychological ties to place, and ways in which place is part of one's identity." (Greer et al. 2020, p. 317). Place identity also means identifying with place. Place

identity is "a construct of connection to place which is more stable than attachment; therefore, it is more difficult to modify in a short period of time" (de Jesús et al. 2022, p. 14). Place attachment develops easier than place identity, and it is based on place identity (de Jesús et al., 2022, p. 14).

Place attachment helps adaptation during and after traumatic experiences, building individual and community resilience and eventually shared identity. It is a catalyser for protective actions towards place and self. Place identity and attachment coincide in natives (characterised by rooted local identity), which is not the case with non-natives. Place attachment or people's affective and cognitive bonds with their living environment provides a feeling of security and resistance to leave even in the face of high risks (de Jesús et al. 2022, p. 12). Research has already proved that residence time is the most important in measuring the strength of people's attachment to places (Hidalgo and Hernádez 2001). Rooted local identity (Lewicka 2014; Boţan et al. 2016, 2024; Diener and Hagen 2022; Markuszewska 2022) gives residents a feeling of control over dire circumstances due to their self-perception as more knowledgeable individuals (de Jesús et al. 2022, 12). Although attached, the non-natives do not necessarily include in their personal identity a layer of place identity that refers to the new place they affectively and cognitively bond with (Hernández et al. 2017). However, a place identity made of adverse events can prevent attachment to place. Therefore, people need to redefine themselves and former place attachments can enable a state of some stability in the face of existential hardships and insecurities.

Against this conceptual framework, we focus on the person, place and process components of place attachment (Scannell and Gifford 2010), based on deportees' experiences and argue that place attachment can be identified and interpreted at the intersection of memory, trauma and identity. Place attachment is seen from a cultural perspective: through memory and pondering on past times, deportation and related trauma. Thus, place attachment depends on the situatedness in space and time of the social groups whose members are the deportees.

Building new identity through storytelling, place attachment, and resilience

In order to (re)construct their identity, the deportees rely on space. Space becomes place due to stories and experiences that are contextually meaningful for them. In this process, place attachment is created,

too. Places of the past are kept alive during deportation and after by bringing them into the present through storytelling.

Place attachment is based on familiar and secure environments, while the space of deportation in the Soviet Gulag is one of fear, hunger, cold, disease, death, and forced labour. However, when environment was more welcoming and similar to that of home, the adaptation/attachment might eventually occur as Anița Cudla's pointed in her memoirs:

> *"It was spring, they even gave us a piece of land, horses, a plough and we ploughed, we planted potatoes. Now we also felt that we had something of our own, the locals also encouraged us, they told us that if we lived there, we could also keep a cow, some goats. Finally, one could live there"* (Cudla, 2024, 101).

> *"... work on the land was almost like here [Bukovina], to plough, to sow, to mow. There were cattle, horses, sheep, geese, chickens, in short, it was fertile land, and everything could be grown"* (Cudla, 2024, p. 101).

However, as she and her three sons were eventually forced to move further north, place attachment to Siberia, which could foster new identity and resilience, never happened. Describing the harsh, physical environment at the Arctic Circle, Anița Cudla recounts:

> *"... only in the month of May did the soil start to get wet, the streams to flow and around the middle of June to clear the icy waters..."* (Cudla, 2024, p. 182).

> *"... the frost was 40 degrees, a blizzard closed one's soul, and the snow was up to the waist"* (Cudla, 2024, p. 182).

Although living there for a long period, deportees' lack of attachment to the Soviet Union deportation space only confirms the strenuous relationship they continued to have with the environment they inhabited, but also to local people and authorities. Nimigeanu recalls that the deportees' identity was criminalised during deportation, this also hindering attachment to place: "They called us only 'Romanian bandits'" (Nimigeanu, 1958, p. 95).

The impossibility of building new place attachment in the Soviet Union for the deportees from North Bukovina made them feel even more attached to their home, as only positive experiential spaces produced attachments, while enduring ties were created, transformed and persisted for long periods of time. The joy of returning to the familiar space and environment (even if difficulties occurred)(i.e. Northern Bukovina) is recounted by Anița Cudla in her memoirs:

> *"... we comforted ourselves that we entered the house we made, but in the garden, there were only a few trees, and the house was left*

empty, only the walls and those also damaged. No table, no chair, no stuff. We put the blankets we had down on the ground, laid down and slept on the ground, we sat and ate on the ground." (Cudla, 2024, p. 186).

Home ownership was very important in the rural area of Northern Bukovina, which was not exactly so in Banat, where many Romanian refugees from Northern Bukovina and Bessarabia did not receive ownership papers over the properties (many of these properties belonged to German ethnics who fled Romania or were deported to Siberia after World War II).

If they had feelings of being anchored in the place before deportation, deportees decided to return. Anița Cudla wanted to return home, while Dumitru Nimigeanu wanted, first of all, to escape the Soviet Gulag so that he could save his life and his family's (wife and daughter). They were desperate to return. However, the moment was not entirely joyous because former deportees experienced also a feeling of loneliness in their village. The mixture of homecoming joy and stress is a reality deportees had to cope with:

"Heading home, I felt like a newcomer to the world, with no luck: everything destroyed ..." (Nimigeanu, 1958, p. 181).

"I was happy that I got to see the places where I was born, but then I was sad that I couldn't find anyone from my family [...] The house was occupied, strangers lived in our house and I didn't want to go in [...] Of course, many people were missing from the village..." (Cudla, 2024, p. 179).

The deportees who returned demonstrate a high level of place attachment even when they discovered that their households were ruined. The traumascape of the village unfolded: no household artefacts were left; all family memorabilia disappeared, except the house for some lucky ones, and some land. They experienced sadness when seeing what was left from what they once knew, but happy to be back anyway. As natives, they feel that their respective place is part of their identity. They feel rooted. Due to this rootedness, they prefer to come back (i.e., in the case of Northern Bukovina) or leave the deportation space for other places than their former temporary location in Banat or Western Oltenia.

The role of place attachment is to build individual resilience, high resistance and adaptation to experiences of crisis, distress, and trauma. Through resilience and hope of change, place attachment to former places is maintained when deportees' personal history is invaded by the

communist regime. Place attachment stories are a form of resistance, and resistance through place attachment is an identity feature in Northern Bukovina. During their deportation, for Aniţa Cudla and Dumitru Nimigeanu, we cannot identify a disruption in their place attachment caused by their involuntary and forced displacement. On the contrary, place attachment seems to have strengthened from "a distance", since it appears in their writings as a factor for resilience, together with values such as family and faith in God.

For the deportees of Bărăgan, creating bonds to the new place and community represented one of the coping strategies of the dispossessed in order to survive, and to build their resilience (Figure 1).

Fig. 1. The Danube Valley near Borduşani village – place of deportation for Bukovinian people from Banat to Bărăgan. *Source:* **photo by Vasile Zotic, 2018.**

In the face of oppression, human solidarity and individual agency were manifest irrespective of any ethnic, religious, and class differences. Solidarity among deportees was a first step towards building a community in the new villages of Bărăgan. This solidarity and other types of interaction enabled the social ties that made life bearable and attachment to community and place possible:

> *"They made friends there at school. I want to tell you that the youth, as they were in that situation, were still having fun. Balls were organised at the farm"* (Daria Gogu (Andronache), in Antonovici, and Dobre, 2024, p. 175).

Deportees recollect placemaking through solidarity and place attachment in the face of evil and danger and reflect on the trauma of

deportation and the social construction of place attachment at the individual level and community level. If, at first, they were left feeling adrift, attachment to the deportation village was possible. Their practices of survival and the resources they used in that process kept them together and also built their group identity and individual resilience. Former deportee, Vasile Sârbu, exemplifies this transition for his case:

> *"Fundata is something special for my soul. Fundata was equivalent to the completion of my childhood, youth, training – when I graduated as a doctor I also lived in Fundata – degree of knowledge"* (Valeriu Sârbu, in Antonovici and Dobre, 2024, p. 210).

Place attachment is one of individual's basic needs, relating to that of belonging, besides those of shelter, nourishment and security. Security and confidence are feelings associated with forming and maintaining place attachment (Ruiz and Hernández, 2014, p. 280). Having these needs satisfied, either at present or by recollecting past feelings, individuals become resilient:

> *"I don't regret that I returned to Bărăgan to help my parents. I thought I was doing a very good thing, going with the 380 lei that we used to get, that 400 was the salary, 20 lei was the tax, we bought flour, my mother baked bread in the oven, and it was very good when she baked bread in the winter that it was warm in the house. It still smelled like food... I don't regret it, I really don't. You know, sometimes, with nostalgia, I go back to the past. Why do I return with nostalgia? Because I was with my parents, I was next to my parents and children don't feel so much the hardships of life when they have their parents next to them"* (Daria Gogu (Andronache), in Antonovici and Dobre, 2024, p. 177).

Place attachment is a source for identity construction in the case of those who remain or decide years later to come back to Bărăgan, the former deportation space, even after the interdiction of obligatory residence is lifted and the deportees are rehabilitated. When deciding to leave or remain in the deportation space of Bărăgan, places have a significant role and make even more transparent the fact that human agency has never been lost (Figure 2); the deportees are the constructors of their lives and life-stories.

This was true in the case of few of the deportees from Banat or Western Oltenia, who felt they had nothing to return to in Banat or Western Oltenia after being freed from the deportation in Bărăgan:

> *"After the lifting of the restriction, the Germans left, some to Germany, others back to Banat. The Bukovinians and Bessarabians,*

because they were refugees, had nowhere to return to" (Greta Donțu (Anghelache), in Antonovici and Dobre, 2024, p. 144-145).

Thus, the post repressive setting of the Bărăgan Plain became home on the long term for some of the deportees, after deportation was annulled:

> *"They stayed in the same two-room house for maybe ten years. Then, when they decided to remain here, they also built a summer kitchen, a room, a shed, a pantry next to the house"* (Greta Donțu (Anghelache), in Antonovici and Dobre, 2024, p. 143).

Fig. 2. Zotic family from Tereblecea (Northern Bukovina), deported to Lătești village (Bărăgan), 1965. Left to right: Zotic Aurel, Dubău (married: Zotic) Eugenia, Zotic Vasile, Constantin (married: Zotic) Elena, Zotec Arcadie, Zotic Constantin and their children Zotic Eugenia and Zotic Constantin Ilie. Source: personal archive of Zotic (married: Petcu) Eugenia, Fetești town, Romania. Reproduced with permission.

The pain of deportation is balanced by the love for Bărăgan of some of them. The places of their childhood come with memories of instances when deportees expressed attachment to people, places, animals, and objects. Therefore, some of the deportees experience mixed feelings towards the deportation space. "Suspended citizens", out of

time and space, the Bărăgan deportees are special cases, out of the ordinary (Dobre, 2020, p. 12), concerning the relationships they could develop with space:

> *"I have to say that deportation marked me deeply. When I go to Bucharest, I never forget to sit down on the left side of the bus and, in passing, spot the former place of the village where we suffered through so many things. The village was located between a knoll which flattened out with time – if you go Bucharest you will see a knoll on the left side, after the intersection at Ceacu – and the first line of trees still visible in the direction of Bucharest. That's exactly where Iezeru village was. I could go there in the evening, or at dawn, and find the very place where our house was, that's how well I remember it"* (Marcela Burlacu (Bent), in Antonovici and Dobre, 2024, p. 125).

However, for Bărăgan, we see a plurality of perceptions regarding what home means. Greta Donţu (Anghelache) does see herself as a native of Bărăgan, her attachment being built on place identity and on what she considers home: "where I opened my eyes" (Greta Donţu (Anghelache), in Antonovici and Dobre, 2024, p. 144).

Deportees' stories show the nuanced and complex nature of memory when constructing a shared history of traumatic events. Trauma became part of their collective and personal identity. Through their connection to places, old and new, they form an imagined community who still lives within a traumatic memory.

Social identities nourish place attachment. Place identity, place attachment and social identity are entangled because place identity is a component of personal identity, and people tend to return or refuse to leave significant places because of this. Our explorations in memory, place and trauma reveal again that "places are inherently social" (Brown, 2022, 20). Therefore, belonging and familiarity are engendered by places and cannot be erased solely through material destruction. Sense of place is not destroyed by having their houses and villages destroyed. Nevertheless, the loss of place engendered trauma. Recovering place attachment means healing at the personal and community level.

Deportees' sense of place comes through strong images of their homes and villages. The lost property (household, village), lost security and dismantled communities with the related identities, the destruction of their families affected the place identity of Northern Bukovina deportees who survived deportation and returned. When back home from the Soviet Gulag, they narrate their loss, contrasting it with the beloved past before deportation. Many deportees faced access limitations to what was once their place. They needed to buy back their houses, as

deportees' attachment and belonging was supported by old possessions. Through objects, individuals fasten themselves to places, even if those objects transform. However, personal reactions to drastically changed environments differed: Aniţa Cudla stays, reconstructs place urged by her place attachment, while Dumitru Nimigeanu leaves, for a free life, as his bond with the home place is weakened.

Place attachment to their homes enabled deportees to articulate their love and loss both in deportation and after they returned. Once back, the symbolic, emotional and institutional amends for the injustice done to them were barely there. No symbolic gestures and compassion are recorded by the former deportees after their rehabilitation, no official attestation of their loss. On the contrary, for many the deportation is a social stigma they will carry their entire lives. The disappearance of their village community as they knew it, of part of its people, of relatives, to some extent disrupts their place attachment and further inflicts pain and reinforces their trauma.

Conclusions

This article develops original points in the field of place attachment research, combining the geographies of memory with research on deportation. We bring valuable insights and new knowledge to the relationship between deportation trauma (forced political relocation), crisis periods (in a broad sense), identity and place attachment. We researched bonds to place and disruptions in the aftermath of an important change: displacement through deportation. The spaces of deportation are Siberia, Kazakhstan, and the Polar Circle in the Soviet Gulag for deportees of Northern Bukovina (of 1941), and Bărăgan region in Romania for deportees of Banat and Western Oltenia (of 1951). We used a common framework, that of interpreting deportees' memories about their relationships with space and social and personal identity.

When addressing questions to our primary sources, we connected the memory of communist repression with the concept of place attachment. Due to its temporal dimension, besides the spatial and social ones, place attachment is a significant presence of deportees' memories. Based on deportees' experiences, place attachment is dynamic, it is constructed and transformed throughout their lives. Deportations, as acts of violence against "the enemies of the people" during communism, impacted people's bonds with places and their social and individual identity.

Common culture is a key factor for creating attachment in the space of deportation. The cultural reality of deportation is acutely felt by deportees from Bukovina in a foreign space and culture, and from Banat and Western Oltenia – in an unknown and confined space, but within the Romanian territory and culture. However, in Bărăgan they were still in the same country. They were able to locate relatives with relatives, so together with the extended family. For Bărăgan, the sense of community was crucial in the formation of the deportees' new identity through place attachment. This feature was not possible to develop upon deportation to Siberia, Kazakhstan, and the Arctic Circle. For the Siberian deportees, the communal dimension of place was missing, while the individual one was extremely hard to create. Dislocation brought about a disruption in their identities, because place identity is part of who they understood they were, they identified with their home places (i.e., the family house, the village) and found nothing familiar in the space of their deportation. All they knew was that God and work could save their lives.

Their flashbacks in the past before deportation highlight fragments of life, images and events that defined their identity and place identity, respectively. Place attachment for their birthplace was one of the meanings and emotions from the past that they kept as worthy for both present into deportation and future. Place attachment reminded them of values worth striving for: faith, family, land, freedom – all that shaped their personal and community identities and self-esteem.

Experiences cultivated the meanings attached to place, which formed the identity of the place. Part of the place identity, and thus of the local heritage, place attachment was reflected in written and oral history sources. The function of place attachment, old and new, in place-based trauma was that of producing individual resilience, because place attachment manifested as a personal and community value, established on other values that supported and reinforced people's positive emotions in place.

The meaningful relatedness of place attachment consisted of the fact that it connected people to their past and to each other, when sharing similar memories and discourses about home places and/or deportation spaces. Remembering places enabled deportees' reflexivity about loss. We focused on individual trauma and on how, through narratives, it transformed into (group or) cultural trauma and it became an interpretative tool for events and places, for people's bonds to significant landscapes: traumascapes.

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