Reordering Communities
The Latvian Orphans Released from the Siberian Special Settlements (1946-1947)

The Story of an Unusual Rescue in the Post-War USSR

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In the aftermath of the Second World War, around 1,300 Latvian ‘orphans and semi-orphans’ came back to Latvia from the remote Siberian regions to which they and their parents had been deported on 14 June 1941.¹ Their liberation from the ‘special settlements’ remains an unusual episode of the overall history of the Stalinist repression and rehabilitation, and a Latvian historical myth. To understand the singular story of the ‘Latvian children from Siberia’, one should look back into the history of the annexation, the Sovietization of Latvia and the war experience. When the Russian Empire collapsed, the former ‘Western provinces’ became independent. The three Baltic countries (Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania) were included in the ‘secret protocols’ of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact signed on 23 August 1939 and fell into the Soviet sphere of influence. They did not share the fate of Poland, which was immediately invaded and divided between the Third Reich and the Soviet Union. The USSR annexed the Baltic countries only in June 1940, after the rout of the French army by the Wehrmacht convinced Stalin to reinforce the western Soviet borders. The so-called ‘Baltic revolutions’ embedded the beginning of Sovietization. At first, the Soviet authorities cautiously took over the Latvian territory. A year after the annexation of Latvia and the two other Baltic States in the summer 1940, the Stalinist state, the NKVD and the Latvian new authorities coordinated simultaneous operations of mass repression in the newly annexed territories. These actions were aimed at eradicating the most prominent members of the old economic and political elites. Some 15,000 Latvians suffered from deportation. 6,000 people, mostly men, were condemned to severe sentences, mainly to forced labour in camps, where many of them soon perished.² The families of these

¹ A few hundred Estonian children were also concerned by the return from special settlements, but I will focus on Latvian contingents, as they were the majority of the young special settlers affected by the journey home, and because the Latvian authorities were directly involved in the organization of the return.

‘enemy elements’ – women and children – were banished from Latvia and sent to the so-called special settlements in the depth of Siberia.3

During the war, like most of the Soviet people, the Latvian special settlers (women and children) suffered from unbearable living conditions: the death rate increased, the youngest died from starvation or illness, other children lost their parents and survived in Siberian orphanages. When the war was over, Latvian deportees, their relatives in Latvia, and various officials (both in Latvia and in Russia) started to worry about the deported children. Whereas the Soviet leadership did not intend to free any special settlers, including even the young, the Latvian children benefited from an unexpected deliverance from their enforced exile in 1946, which no other national group of repressed citizens enjoyed in the immediate aftermath of war. Returning to Latvia allowed them to escape the dreadful conditions of the special settlements. Survivors later recalled their journey home as an unbelievable and extraordinary tale of suffering and individual courage with (sometimes) a happy ending. It was not only the children themselves, when they became adults and even elderly, who contributed (consciously or unconsciously) to the development of a mythological narrative of the rescue of the Siberian children. Because of the growing interest for child victims of Stalin in contemporary Latvia, some authors also considered the story a proof of the Latvian nation’s heroic resistance to Stalinist barbarism.4


However, the archives reveal a more complex and official process that saw Soviet Latvian, Russian and central authorities involved in the framework of a legal procedure.

This article aims to understand the profiles and motivations of individual, collective and official actors involved in this event. I would like to contextualize the children’s journey home within the political and social background of the post-war Soviet Union. While the case of the Latvian children at first looks marginal in the large and shattered Soviet space after the war, it nevertheless stands at the crossroads of various issues in the Soviet post-war period and in the history of Latvia’s Sovietization. These include the meaning of childhood and ‘orphans’ in the wartime Soviet Union; political networks and decision-making processes; chaotic conditions that engendered many unexpected situations; and the post-war displacements of population that occurred almost simultaneously within the Soviet borders and from other countries into the Soviet Union.5 I will argue that the return of the Latvian deported children can be understood in the framework of other post-war waves of returns to Latvia: re-evacuation from the East and repatriation from the West.6 They affected ‘legal’ and ‘free’ categories of Soviet Latvian citizens, who were forced to leave the Latvian territory before or during the ‘Great Patriotic War’ for various reasons and who returned to their homeland from 1944 on. Mix-ups occurred between these tangled waves of return to Latvia. This confusion, and the way in which different actors exploited it, allowed for a short and decisive period of clemency towards the youngest and most vulnerable Soviet Latvian deportees. Based on archival documentation7 as well as on interviews with former deportees, collected as part of the project ‘Sound

7 I mostly rely upon the archives of the department of orphanages of the Latvian Ministry of Education (Latvijas Valsts arhīvus (LVA), f.700, op.6), and I also used published or unpublished archival material coming from the Russian and Latvian state archives (mostly from the Evacuation Committee and the Sovinformbureau, Gosudarstvennyj Arhiv Rossiskoj Federacii (GARF), f.8581; the Latvian Department for repatriation, LVA, f.270, op.2.)
Archives: European Memories of the Gulag’, my article treats two matters. First, I present the general context of war and post-war displacements from and to Soviet Latvia and their influence on the return of the Latvian children from Siberia. Second, I focus on the decision-making process that led to the concrete organization of the children’s journey home.

Categories of Displaced Latvian Children in the 1940s

Latvian children in the Soviet rear: Deportees and evacuees from Latvia

To understand the roots of the population displacements in post-war Latvia – and the importance given to childhood care in the 1940s – let us briefly examine the major population displacements which occurred from 1941 to 1945 in the Baltic area and at the specific experience of the children in exile. After the annexation of the three Baltic countries, the Soviet Union carried out a severe but restricted repression of several clearly defined groups. From the end of 1940, the central authorities, together with Latvian and Siberian regional governments, started to plan a broader operation, in order to arrest local elites and to expel their families to the East. This occurred on 14 June 1941. The majority of the men condemned to forced labour died in the Soviet camps during the war: some were shot, but the great majority died because of the dreadful living conditions in the camps from 1941 to 1945. Women and children were scattered in Siberian kolkhozy. As families of ‘enemy elements’ were also affected by the operation, women and children constituted a significant proportion of the total number of ‘deportees of 14 June 1941’. From 3,000 to 4,000 children and teenagers under the age of sixteen accompanied their families into exile.

All Soviet children found themselves in harsh circumstances during the war (in occupied and non-occupied territories alike). The young ‘special settlers’ faced specific conditions. The children’s death rate was high. The youngest children suffered from the journey itself. For instance, as one of survivor testified, her eighteen-month-old sister died in the train. Her mother felt guilty until her death because she had forgotten the baby’s clothes when the Soviet perpetrators came to arrest her and her children. For those who survived the long journey (which lasted around one month because of the German invasion), the arrival in Siberia looked like a slave market. The heads of the Soviet kolkhozy did not welcome the Latvian families made up exclusively of women and children. These vulnerable families found themselves in the remotest and poorest forest kolkhozy. Many of these mostly urban and educated people, deprived of basic goods and clothes, died during the first months of deportation. The children particularly suffered from starvation and from the lack of medical care. The local NKVD and the local Soviet authorities underlined the alarming situation in the special settlements, but no one would take responsibility for improving the living conditions. However, sometimes they managed to distribute food to special settlers. Moreover, many children remained without any family support and were sent to Siberian orphanages, where the living conditions were even worse.

Latvian authorities did not have any official prerogative in caring for the special settlers, but they were able to care for other categories of children at war. Indeed, other Latvian children found themselves in the Soviet rear.  


They were included in the contingents of ‘evacuees’ who fled the advancing German army from 22 June, a week after the mass deportation of 14 June. The Latvian authorities, and especially the chairman of the Council of People’s Commissars of the Latvian Republic (SNK LSSR) Vilis Lācis were very concerned with the fate of the children at war. As early as 22 June 1941, a Latvian decree aimed to rescue the children from bomb attacks and later from the German occupation.18 No other Soviet evacuation decree showed such interest in the protection of ‘unproductive categories of population’. As the Latvian decree was published before the central order (published only on 24 June), the Latvian authorities may have benefited from more autonomy than other Soviet local republics in setting out their own principles of evacuation.19 As a result, some orphanages or childhood institutions were displaced to the Soviet rear. For instance, in the very first days of the German invasion, a pioneers’ camp from the Courland, the western region of Latvia, was moved deeper into the East – the children were already on holiday, and the staff of the camp managed to follow the evacuation movement to Russia without the parents’ agreement.20 Even if they could not complete the evacuation plan (as elsewhere in the Soviet Union) because of the suddenness of the German invasion, the Latvian republican and central authorities managed to re-settle children’s homes to the east.21 Other children fled Latvia with their parents, especially the Jewish families.22 In total, as a consequence of official and ‘self’-evacuation, around 50,000 Latvians (and among them around 15,000 Jews) found themselves in the Soviet rear, and among them 80 per cent were women and children.23 When they arrived in the USSR, the evacuated Latvian authorities tried to negotiate their integration into Siberian cities and rural communities. Some measures were taken in order to organize food supplies and winter clothes. Others measures paid special attention to the evacuated children. Many children were left to their own devices, because their parents were dead, in the army or in the production system, or simply missing. Throughout the Soviet Union, individuals or officials launched several campaigns for

18 GARF, f.6822, op.1, d.43, ll.19-21.
19 Besides, the Latvian specificity may also be explained by the remaining Western influence in the Latvian government: one can assume that Vilis Lācis had carefully followed the Battle of Britain and the evacuation of the children of London and imitated the British example.
21 LVA, f.700, op.6, d.2, ll.100-101.
22 Interview with Have Vestermane, op. cit.; LVA, f.PA-101, op.4, d.8, ll.94-110.
23 LVA, f.PA-101, op.1, d.52, ll.132-141.
supporting and adopting the evacuated children in distress.\textsuperscript{24} The evacuated Latvian authorities, once again, paid even greater attention to Latvian children.\textsuperscript{25} Despite official measures aimed at improving the evacuees’ living conditions, evacuees usually experienced the same living conditions as deported people: both categories of displaced people found themselves in a highly vulnerable position. Moreover, the regions to which evacuees were moved were the same areas to which deported populations had been sent: although the Soviet authorities tried to avoid confusion between the categories of ‘enemies’ and ‘loyal citizens’, many mix-ups occurred, and the two displaced groups maintained epistolary and sometimes face-to-face relations.\textsuperscript{26} Such confusion continued in the post-war period.

It seems that the Soviet Union developed a policy of childhood care (mostly for ‘legal’ and ‘free’ categories of children at war), which unfortunately produced only negligible results, and that the Latvian authorities took specific initiatives to protect the younger generation from the dreadful consequences of the conflict. They gained some aptitude and knowledge in the field of childhood care, especially of the protection of the orphans.

\textbf{The Soviet Latvian Children, Victims of War: Post-War Concerns in Childhood}

In the post-war period, Soviet propaganda often referred to the tragic wartime fate of Soviet children. The image of the ‘Soviet child’ embodied the suffering of the whole Soviet people, both in occupied and non-occupied territories, and became the most valuable symbol of the sacrifices of the Soviet population. Many publications, written both for internal and international propaganda, pointed to the extermination of Soviet children in occupied territories.\textsuperscript{27} One of the most symbolic figures during the war years on the home front, the Soviet child also became the most powerful prototype in the post-war period to denounce the Nazi atrocities. Post-war Latvia was

\textsuperscript{24} Rebecca Manley, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{25} LVA, f.270, op.1, d.77, ll.2-5.
\textsuperscript{26} Interview with Diāna Kratiša, Riga, 27 March 2009, Sound Archives: European Memories of the Gulag, Cerce/Rfi, Paris; Diāna Kratiša’ testimony, Sound Archives... op. cit., http://museum.gulagmemories.eu/en/salle/diana-kratisa, UPITE Ruta, op. cit., p. 83. See also Juliette Denis, op. cit.
not an exception to the Soviet rule: the condemnation of the Nazi crimes depicted in the archives of the State Extraordinary Commission or in the public trial of German dignitaries in 1946 also presented the murder of ‘Latvian children’ as the most barbaric crime of the German invaders, but did not systematically mention the Jewish origin of the victims.28

But soon, the category of the child victims of war was enlarged to include other groups of children spared from extermination, including the Displaced Persons (DPs) in Germany. Documents produced by Latvian and central authorities as well as official publications show that the Soviet regime paid great attention to the Latvian children spread among the western zones of occupation in Germany.29 As most of the Latvian refugees, who fled Latvia on the eve of the return of the Red Army, categorically refused to be repatriated to Soviet Latvia, and as the Western authorities claimed their support, the Latvian (and more generally Baltic) DPs, the Soviet leadership and the Latvian republican authorities began to develop a large propaganda campaign.30 Both in the Soviet Union and in the western zones of occupation, they aimed to convince the DPs to come back to their homeland, and denounced the Western clemency for some famous collaborators. In this public opinion battle, displaced Latvian children in Germany again took on a particular role. For unknown reasons, some orphanages had been ‘evacuated’ by the German authorities in 1944-1945, along with their Latvian staff. These Latvian children, spread over the Western zones of Germany, became a major issue in the repatriation debates between the Soviet Union and

28 Soobshchenie chrezvychajnoj goudarstvennoj. komissii po ustanovleniju i rassledovaniju zlodeyanyx nemecko-fashistixh zakhvatchikov i ikh soobshikov o prestuplenijakh nemeckixh zakhvatchikov na territorii Latvijskoj SSR (Riga: VAPP, 1945).
29 LVA, f.270, op.2, d.6130, l.56.
30 Indeed, when the Red Army launched the decisive attack on the Baltic area, many Latvians fled to escape the re-establishment of the Soviet order. At first they gathered in Courland, where the German army remained until 9 May. Most managed to flee to Germany before the capitulation. In 1945, between 160,000 and 200,000 Latvians found themselves in the Western zones of Germany. Just a few thousands were ‘forced labourers’ displaced by the Third Reich during the war, and quickly repatriated by the Soviet military administration in Germany. The others managed to escape the Soviet zone of occupation in Germany, and, once in the Western zones, refused to be repatriated to Soviet Latvia. Estonians and Lithuanians also fled to Western Germany. The Baltic Displaced Persons claimed their right to reject ‘forced repatriation’ to the USSR and the Western Allies, as they did not recognize the annexation of the Baltic States, supported them. Unlike other groups of ‘former’ Soviet citizens (POWs and forced labourers from Russia, eastern Ukraine, etc.), the Baltic DPs were soon excluded from the global resolutions taken in Yalta and stayed in Germany, waiting for some possibility of emigration. Juliette Denis, ‘Complices de Hitler ou victimes de Staline? Les déplacés baltes en Allemagne, de la sortie de guerre à la guerre froide’, Le Mouvement social, 244/3 (2013), pp. 81-98.
the Anglo-American allies and a weapon in the rhetorical battle between former Allies in the very first steps of the Cold War. The Soviets argued that their innocent victims of the Third Reich now became victims of the Latvian traitors and their Western supporters. They published many articles denouncing the ‘despicable task’ of the fascist Latvian DPs and of the imperialistic Allies – who tried to avoid a legitimate return of Latvian children to their homeland. As a result, the repatriation of Latvian children from the western zones of Germany became a political task. From 1946, Molotov and the Latvian authorities manipulated the ‘Latvian orphans’ question’ and popularized the legitimacy of the return of the Latvian children to their Motherland through mass media. That specific concern constituted a global political background that allowed for the return of other categories of orphans.

The ‘orphans’ question’ was not only a (geo)political issue: it also gained some social and police-related aspects. Because of the demographic losses of the war and the catastrophic food situation, many children gathered into criminal bands that terrorized the countryside and some city centres. Lots of children escaped the orphanages, which they considered a kind of penitentiary. The local NKVD agencies in the liberated territories and in the remote eastern and central Asian regions felt overworked by the children who roamed though Siberia, and tried to find solutions to this juvenile criminality. Sending them back home appeared the most efficient response to the drastic situation. In this particular matter, the wishes of Latvian deportees, citizens and authorities coincided with the preoccupations of the Soviet State police. Therefore, from 1941 to 1946, different inclinations reinforced the ‘children question’ in Soviet Latvia. War experiences and post-war stakes revealed both general Soviet tendencies and specific Latvian issues. They participated in the overall context that led to the return of the Latvian deported children. Gradually, the category of ‘orphans’ emerged from different social and political issues. In 1946, the necessity of bringing back the ‘free’ categories of Latvian orphans to Latvia, both from East and West, was a preoccupation shared by many Soviet officials and institutions.

31 GARF, f.8581, op.2, d.195, ll.30-31.
32 IVA, f.700, op.6, d.2, ll.100-101.
33 N.V Smirnova, Deiatel’nost’ organov UNKVD-UMVD v bor’be s detskoi besprizornost’iu i beznadzornost’iu v Leningrade i Leningradskoi oblasti godi 1941-1949 (PhD thesis, Saint-Petersburg, 1997).
The Return of Latvian Deported Children: An ‘Organized Saga’

Re-evacuation and repatriation: The return of ‘free’ categories to Latvia in 1944-1946

Following the decision-making process that led to the return of the Latvian deported children is not an easy task: many actors were involved in the process, and evaluating their respective roles remains difficult because of the lack of archival material.\footnote{In particular, the role of the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union should be clarified.} However, one can compare the measures with regards to other waves of return to Latvia: official re-evacuation and repatriation, from East and West. The post-war Soviet context (and especially the Latvian situation), the chaos and confusion between different kinds of population displacements, contributed to existing policies towards ‘free’ children being extended to banished Latvian children.

The re-evacuation of children who left Latvia after the German invasion played an important role in the subsequent return of deported children. As the Soviet Army and authorities entered Latvian territory in the summer of 1944, the Soviet government began to organize the re-evacuation of the Latvian evacuees spread throughout the Soviet Union. The department of orphanages of the Ministry of Education was entrusted with the task of dealing with the evacuated Latvian children who remained without any family support. In some cases, the staff of the ministry managed to find their parents – who were mobilized into the Red Army, posted elsewhere in the Soviet Union, or had stayed in occupied Latvia. Other orphans re-entered their pre-war orphanages or other childhood institutions. The re-evacuation was largely completed by 1945, but it became a model for further displacements of children from the rear in Russia.\footnote{IVA, f.700, op.6, d.2, ll.100-101.} The necessity of repatriating Latvians from Germany promptly replaced the task of re-evacuating Latvians from the Soviet rear. From November 1945, the Soviet central authorities involved in the repatriation of Soviet citizens deported to Germany pressed for a stronger focus on the Latvians remaining in Germany. In Riga, the Latvian department for repatriation, the government and the Ministry of Education raised the issue of the Latvian children in the Western zones of occupation in Germany. They searched for their relatives in Latvia, made them write official requests for the repatriation...
of their children, and published several lists of Latvian orphans living in the Western zones of Germany.36

Between 1944 and 1946, the effort to bring these children back to Latvia was a real concern. This interest resulted from the drive to rebuild the nation, from the international situation, and also from humanitarian considerations. Indeed, post-war living conditions in Latvia (and in the other Baltic republics) were much better than in other Soviet territories: because of structural and circumstantial reasons, the economic infrastructure had been more or less preserved, whereas other formerly occupied territories, and even non-occupied Soviet regions, suffered from serious shortages of primary goods. Some liberated Soviet territories went through a period of real starvation in 1946.37 Therefore, from the Latvian authorities’ point of view, the return of the Latvian orphans was also a priority in order to rescue them from the hardship they faced in other Soviet territories. The dreadful living conditions of the young special settlers also started to be known in Latvia. After the end of the war, special settlers had could write to their relatives in Latvia and depicted in their letters the high mortality, the shortage of food, the lack of medical care, and the harsh working conditions in the forest kolkhozy38 that even the children and teenagers had to face. Even if the post-war living conditions in Siberia were slowly improving, families of deported children requested authorization to raise the children in Latvia to save them from the risk of perishing in the special settlements.39 According to semi-mythological stories, some isolated free Latvian citizens who happened to find themselves in special settlements also alerted the Ministry of Education of the risks of dying that the special settlers faced constantly.40 The main executives of the ministry seemed to agree to give

36 LVA, f.270, op.2, d.6130, l.56, 159, 181; d.6120, l.88.
38 Ruta Upīte, op. cit., p. 85.
39 LVA, f.700, op.6, d.12, l.37, 52.
40 Interview with Silva Linarte, op. cit. One of these adventurous Latvians, a certain archaeologist named Urtan, became quite famous in Latvia in the end of the 1980s. Local newspapers paid tribute to him as the sole originator of the salvation of the children. According to an article published in a newspaper in Latgale, he went to Siberia to rescue a single family, and then he agreed to the Latvian mothers’ urgent demand to rescue their children, too. As a result, he bribed a station manager who gave him the permission to use a few wagons to bring the children back to Riga. Therefore, in the opinion of many survivors, only one individual’s initiative saved them from the special settlements. If this ‘Urtan’ actually took part in the organization of the journey home (LVA, f.700, op.6, d.14, l.25, 27), he was far from being the only one involved in the process.
the Latvian families a positive answer, but then a specific event allowed them to start asking other institutions about the fate of the Latvian children.

Organizing the return of the Latvian deported children

These processes provided the general context for the return of the Latvian orphans. The concrete process began thanks to a chaotic and unexpected episode that launched the organization of the rescue. In the beginning of February 1946, the Soviets managed to repatriate from Germany the boarders of a Latvian orphanage located near Liepāja before the beginning of the war (‘Mladenca’). The Latvian children disembarked in Russian Crimea by mistake. Therefore they had to be ‘re-evacuated’ from Russia, although at first they were ‘repatriated’ from Germany. Confusion between re-evacuation and repatriation often happened, ‘lost’ Soviet citizens displaced during the war for different reasons had an undetermined status and needed to be taken charge of by various institutions.41 The permanent delegate of the Latvian republic in Moscow first heard about the situation of the Latvian orphans in Crimea and informed his Latvian colleagues in the Ministry of Education.42 Everybody agreed that the ‘repatriation-re-evacuation’ of these children should be planned for the summer, when the weather was less harsh. In the meantime, the Minister of Education suggested him to ‘re-evacuate’ not only the children of Crimea, but also the orphans of the regions of Krasnoyarsk and Tomsk: he had in mind the group of deported children, even if he did not use the official terminology. Many requests the Ministry sent to the central authorities remained deliberately vague about the children’s official status: the Latvian Ministry of Education asked for the ‘re-evacuation’ of Latvian children spread over the western Siberian regions without specifically mentioning why they found themselves in those Siberian regions: as if they were other ‘free’ Latvian children who had been unexpectedly uprooted during the war.43 However, while negotiating with other local Soviet institutions – the Latvian Supreme Soviet, and the Latvian MVD – the main leaders of the Ministry of Education did reveal the profile of the children thus targeted: they asked for official authorization to free ‘orphans and semi-orphans’ from the special settlements.44

41 In 1946-1947, the Latvian ‘department of arrivals and integration of the repatriated Soviet citizens’ had to deal with both repatriation and re-evacuation; the department was not responsible for the returns from other parts of the USSR. See, for example, LVA, f.270, op.2, d.6146.
42 LVA, f.700, op.6, d.2, l.89.
43 Ibid., l.10.
44 Ibid., l.13.
The Crimean case not only provided an impetus for the return of all the Latvian children from Russian territories; it also provided a pattern of the organization of a displacement from Russia to Latvia. The Latvian Ministry of Education sent delegates to Russia to help the orphanages to move back to Latvia, and exchanged correspondence with its Russian counterpart to get transportation facilities and food supplies.\(^{45}\) This collaboration between the Latvian and Russian authorities, launched to solve the Crimean issue, remained operative during the whole process of the ‘re-evacuation’ of the Latvian children from Siberia. After their requests were accepted, the Latvian Ministry of Education began to cooperate with the RSFSR Ministry of Education and the Krasnoyarsk and Tomsk local authorities to help them in finding the scattered deported children and providing them with supplies for their journey home.\(^{46}\)

Even though I have not yet found an official Soviet decision that sanctioned the return of the deported Latvian children, I have not found any documents documenting the refusal of the central and Russian authorities either. One can explain the Soviet clemency largely by the chaotic situation generated by the growing number of orphans in the post-war period, especially in remote Soviet regions where many young evacuees and deportees lost their parents. The Soviet authorities may have turned a blind eye to the return of Latvian children, even if their return was partly outside the boundaries of the Soviet principles of definitive exile. But they needed to empty the overcrowded orphanages, and the special settlements more generally, of the great number of orphans, of whom the regional authorities could not take care.\(^{47}\) The Latvian initiative did not present any political danger (because of the small number of children concerned) and at the same time could have relieved some childhood institutions of their burden.

Progressively, the Ministry of Education subtly enlarged the categories of children involved in the process of return. At first, it officially concerned inmates of Siberian orphanages and ‘semi-orphans’ residing in the special settlements with their mother. Finally, even children of large families, or those whose mother was not able to take care of them, were also included in the lucky groups of ‘re-evacuated’ children. As the same time, the age of the children was also raised from 16 to 18 years old.\(^{48}\) More than one hundred

\(^{45}\) LVA, f.700, op.6, d.2, l.38.
\(^{46}\) LVA, f.700, op.6, d.2, l.57, l.76.
\(^{48}\) LVA, f.700, op.6, d.2, l.13; op.13, ll.14-17.
Latvian children came back to Latvia each month from May to November 1946. The Latvian Ministry of Education played an essential role in the decision-making process that led to the formalization of the return of the children from exile. They did not encounter any refusal from any of the other actors they addressed, either in Latvia or in the Russian and even central institutions. The post-war social context and the chaotic interlacing of displacements of various population categories may explain the success of the Latvian project. One can assume that the return movement to Soviet Latvia, both from the East and from the West, provided the background for the return of the Soviet deported Latvian orphans: the infrastructure and the legitimacy of the return of the deported Latvian children were established by the population displacements that occurred after the war.

The epic journey from Siberia to Latvia: Between State supervision and deportees' individual efforts

As one might expect, the documents of the Ministry of Education and the Siberian children’s past and recent testimonies present different, sometimes opposite versions of the same episode. The very different nature of the sources explains the contradictions between the two narratives. Indeed, who could expect the deportees, especially the youngest ones, to understand the political processes that led first to their exile, then to their unexpected liberation? However, the discrepancy between archival materials and oral testimonies also allows for a more complete understanding of the political and social mechanisms of the journey home.

How did the Latvian authorities manage to locate several hundred children spread out among Siberian orphanages and special settlements? In the first case, they could rely upon the local educational authorities, which registered the ‘Latvian orphans’ in the childhood institutions. They also requested the Krasnoyarsk and Tomsk regional authorities to carry out the same research in kolkhozy, but it seems that many special settlers heard about it thanks to their own networks. As many former deportees remember, in the spring of 1946 in Siberia, many deported families heard this unbelievable news that came out of nowhere: Latvian ‘orphans’ and ‘semi-orphans’, who lost one or two of their parents during the war, were allowed to leave Siberia and return to Latvia! This was sudden news for

49 IVA, f.700, op.6, d.13, ll.14-17, l.15.
50 IVA, f.700, op.6, d.12, l.150.
51 IVA, f.700, op.6, d.2, l.10; d.23, l.15.
which many families were unprepared.\textsuperscript{52} It is still not easy to understand how the Latvian families, spread over thousands of scarred kilometres, heard about it. Sometimes, Latvian families received letters from others deportees, or from their relatives in Latvia, who informed them about the opportunity to send back the children.\textsuperscript{53} Latvian deportees quickly decided to send back their children, allowing them to escape the awful local living conditions. But they had to prove that they could provide them with a decent life (because of sickness, for example). Besides, as expected by the Latvian Ministry of Education, they needed to obtain official authorization for their children to return to Latvia.\textsuperscript{54} Therefore, even if the Latvian deportees were not well informed by the \textit{kolkhoz} authorities or the commandants of the special settlements, they latter had to follow a legal and formal procedure that no testimony reveals.\textsuperscript{55} In order to help the children to get on the trains back to Latvia, the Latvian Ministry of Education sent a few workers to Siberia (as it already did in Crimea).\textsuperscript{56} They supervised the journey home from the main train stations, but were not able to pick all the children from the \textit{kolkhozy}. Thus, in many cases, children and teenagers went across huge forests or sailed along the Siberian rivers by themselves to Tomsk or to Krasnoyarsk.\textsuperscript{57} They were then taken in charge more officially and efficiently when they arrived in major Siberian cities, and travelled the rest of the way back by train.

Due to post-war circumstances in the USSR, the journey was quite epic. It was a long and disturbing journey through a devastated country, where food was scarce and the infrastructure gravely damaged. Sometimes, food was unavailable or a child was sick and needed special care. In such circumstances, the Latvian delegates contacted the Ministry of Education and asked for some more money or official support to get supplies.\textsuperscript{58} Most of the time, their presence remained too episodic to be noticed by the children. The story told by Silva Linarte shows that the children did not pay attention to the adults who came to rescue them. Silva’s older sister was in charge of an entire carriage crowded by children (actually, she may have been the ‘head of the brigade’ constituted by Latvian officials to coordinate the children’s

\textsuperscript{52} Interview with Silva Linarte, op. cit.; Interview with Austra Zalcmane and Lilija Kajone, Riga, 14 January 2009, Sound Archives: European Memories of the Gulag, Cercec/Rfi, Paris.
\textsuperscript{53} Ruta Upite, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{54} LVA, f.700, op.6, d.12, l.150; d.13, ll.14-17.
\textsuperscript{55} Interview with Silva Linarte, op. cit., LVA, f.700, op.6, d.12, l.150.
\textsuperscript{56} LVA, f.700, op.6, d.13, ll.14-17.
\textsuperscript{57} Ruta Upite, op. cit., p. 111.
\textsuperscript{58} LVA, f.700, op.6, d.14, l.8, 10, 13, 25, 27.
groups). She left the carriage for a few minutes to bring back some hot water. While she was away, the train left. All the children were screaming and crying but had no way of stopping the train. According to Silva, a few hours later the train was ordered to go back, because there was no available holding siding for it at the next station. It came back. The children looked at the window, and saw the little girl, sitting on the platform, all alone with her hot water, silently crying. She got on the train, and never got off until her arrival in Riga. One could imagine that the train went back to the previous station because some Latvian delegate asked for it.

Therefore, in oral or written testimonies, survivors mostly ignored the Latvian officials whom the Ministry of Education sent to Siberia, and their role in their salvation. They used passive sentences to describe their journey, such as ‘our names were entered into a register’ or ‘so far, three hundred children from the Krasnoyarsk region had been transported to Latvia’. Of course, most of them were far too young to understand what was happening to them or to whom they could be grateful. But even older teenagers do not pay tribute to the different Soviet actors, including the Latvian delegates, who helped them to go home. For example, Ruta Upite, aged almost eighteen, was aware of the presence of a Latvian delegation, but considered their members as dreadful communists, as representatives of the state that banished her and her family from their homeland. On the way back home, in Moscow, she met one of them. This was how she remembered, in 1950, Comrade Luss (Luze), a woman whose role was essential: ‘Soon a motorcar stopped near the tracks and from it emerged Comrade Luze – a woman who had escorted the first orphans’ group from Krasnoyarsk. I was glad that she wasn’t our escort. With her stern looks and mannish attitudes she was the stereotypical female communist. She was stout, with a broad face, and wore a big shiny brass comb in her short hair.’ Children and teenagers, whether right after their return or later when they old, could not face the fact that the state that had condemned them to exile could also release them from Siberia.

From the spring of 1946 to the end of the year, more than one hundred children left Siberia for Latvia each month. The number of families requesting to benefit from this measure was constantly growing, and Latvian
delegates had to organize new convoys of children until the middle of 1947. Together with deportees’ relatives, they continued to search for Latvian orphans in Siberia. Some Estonian children also benefited from this measure and went back to Estonia through Latvia. When they arrived in Riga, many relatives or directors of orphanages, alerted by telegram, were waiting for the children. The young ‘returnees’ started a new episode of their life and later their fate diverged. Some of them succeeded in quickly adapting to local circumstances and languages that they had forgotten or fantasized about, others faced more difficult situations, other were even sent back to Siberia (with or without their relatives) for a second time in 1949–50.

**Conclusion**

This case study concerns a very small number of people: some 1,300 Latvian and a few hundred Estonian children. However, it helps us to understand many aspects of post-war Soviet Latvia and post-war displacements in the Soviet Union. The story of the Latvian orphans from Siberia raises four questions about the aftermath of war and its remembrance. First, it shows how population displacements in post-war Latvia were closely linked to each other. A broad wave of returns to Latvia involved many different categories of displaced people, and for the authorities the different kinds of displacement were very close to each other. Each wave of return involved a specific interest in children for social, political or even geopolitical reasons. The return of Latvian children from both East and West provided infrastructures and legitimacy for the return of the deported Latvian orphans. Moreover, the confusion rooted in the post-war circumstances in Europe and the USSR allowed for the return of people of ‘enemy descent’ in the context of a more general re-evacuation and repatriation to Latvia. As far as the Latvian case is concerned, this example shows that the post-war movements of population should not be evaluated separately. They all closely shared the same chronology, patterns and actors. Second, the gradually increasing interest in the fate of an ‘un-protected’ child and, even more, an ‘orphan’ stemmed from the tragic losses of the war in the Soviet

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64 LVA, f.700, op.6, d.14, l.5, 6, 7, 9, 12, 16.
65 LVA, f.700, op.6, d.16, l.56.
66 Interview with Austra Zalcmane and Lilija Kajone, op. cit.; Interview with Peep Varju, op. cit.
Union that accelerated the necessity to forge some kind of ‘state policy of childhood care’. Internal social and policing issues, as well as international debates, reinforced the urgent need to take care of the children, especially the orphans. Latvian and Soviet concerns converged: for different reasons, Latvian individuals living in the Republic and in Siberia, Latvian officials, the NKVD and the Russian local authorities agreed on the necessity of emptying Siberian orphanages and the special settlements more generally. Third, the return of the outcast children from Siberia was a reflection of a post-war period in which the course of the Sovietization of Latvia was not yet settled. Facing many structural, social and policing issues, the Kremlin continued to give to some institutions and population categories a degree of flexibility. Its policy towards Latvia became more radical from 1947 onwards. The story of the Latvian children remains an exception in the Soviet post-war space: one can assume that the Ministry of Education in Latvia took full responsibility for this return. But this initiative was made possible, once again, thanks to other post-war official and general displacements, and thanks to the collaboration between Latvian and Russian authorities concerned by the waves of returning Soviet citizens. To conclude, I wish to underline the meaning of this episode for both the history and memory of Latvian Sovietization. It allows for a more precise comprehension of the fate of the deportees and the involvement of different institutions, and it also remains a mythological aspect of the ‘national history’ of the newly independent country of Latvia. The story plays an important role in the disqualification of the ‘Soviet’ institutions (even if the Latvian Ministry of Education was Soviet as well) and in the glorification of Latvian national ‘heroes’ (even if many communists, both Latvian and Russian, made the return possible). It contributes to the memorial conflicts that regularly set Latvia and Russia, or the most nationalistic fringe of the Latvian ‘ethnic’ group and the Russian-speaking minority, in opposition to each other.