

General information

Life in Siberia

Relation to the study course / topic

Upper secondary school course IV, Contemporary History I – Estonia and the World in the First Half of the 20th Century. Topic: WWII

Upper secondary school course VI, Contemporary History III – Main Features of the Development of the 20th Century. Topic: WWII

This can also optionally be used in basic school course V within the framework of Contemporary History topics “WWII 1939–1945” and “The World after WWII 1945–2000”.

Key words

deportation, living conditions of deportees in Siberia, GULAG prison camps, Inta, Norilsk, repressions

Study results

The pupil

- has an overview of the deportations of 1941 and 1949 in the Baltic countries and of the GULAG camps;
- understands how deportation changed the fate of people’s lives;
- is familiar with the living conditions of people deported to Siberia;
- develops his capacity for empathy: places himself in the situation of a person deported to Siberia.

Background Information

On the Natural Setting of Siberia

Siberia is commonly understood to be the part of the Russian Empire situated east of the Ural Mountains. From the end of the 18th century to 1867, Russian America (present day Alaska) was also part of Siberia. Most of Continental Siberia was incorporated into Russia by the end of the 17th century. Gorno-Altai was added in the 18th century, and the Amur Lands (Priamurye) and the Ussuri Region in the 19th century (see the map below). With its 10 million m² surface area, Siberia is larger than Canada and the USA. The world’s flattest and largest plain, longest railroad, largest peat bog, deepest lake, largest reserves of fossil fuels (natural gas, oil, coal) and 5 of the world’s longest rivers are located here. The winters are colder than in Estonia (children in Yakutia can stay home from school due to severe cold only starting from -55° C), summers are warmer but shorter. Strong winds known as *purgas* blow in the northern portion of Siberia due to the influence of the Arctic Ocean and these areas experience polar night for much of the year. Permafrost, in



other words the portion of the ground surface that is continually frozen, covers 80% of Siberia's area and hinders agriculture, building construction and other such work. The ground melts in the spring to only about a metre's depth, leading to "quagmire season" (*rasputitsa*), when unpaved roads become difficult to traverse and quagmires are found everywhere. The largest area of coniferous forest in the world known as the taiga (a quarter of the world's forest reserves) and the tundra are also characteristic of Siberia's natural setting. The tundra extends parallel to the coast of the Arctic Ocean as a strip of land 300–600 km wide – the winters here are extremely cold and dark. Snow covers the ground for 220–280 days per year. There is not much precipitation but there is an abundance of lakes since the permafrost prevents water from seeping into the soil. There are mosquitoes in abundance in the tundra and they can be life-threatening.

Siberia and Estonians

Siberia is associated first and foremost with forced labour and banishment. Centuries ago, already in Russia, the penalty for serious crimes has been forced labour and for less serious crimes banishment. There were different forms of banishment (living in some larger Siberian settlement under police supervision until banishment beyond the Arctic Circle). The earliest Estonian settlements in Siberia were founded by Estonians banished to Siberia by the Russian tsar, most likely at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century. The Russian state wanted to get rid of bothersome or dangerous people by banishing them and at the same time to colonise Siberia in order to fill Russia's treasury using Siberia's resources. The focus was initially on precious metals (silver, copper, lead, gold). The industrialisation of Siberia began with the mining and processing of metals. Many foreigners, prisoners of war, and people with different religious beliefs (old believers, Jews, Muslims) were also banished. By the end of the 19th century, banished persons made up 5% of Siberia's population of nearly 6 million. According to a "ukaz" issued by the tsar in 1845, Lutherans were placed in separate colonies. Among others, Estonian Lutherans also found themselves in such colonies. Ryzhkovo became the Western Siberian centre for Lutherans and henceforth, persons convicted of lesser crimes were sent there. Eastern Siberia was selected as the place where people who had committed more serious crimes had to live. Viruküla was the first entirely Estonian village and according to August Nigol, the first people to arrive there straight from Estonia were persons who had participated in the Mahtra Uprising.

The first larger Estonian villages in Siberia, however, were established at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century as a result of voluntary emigration. Before the 19th century, few Estonians lived outside of their ethnic



territory. Under the conditions of serfdom, extensive emigration was not even possible. The peasant laws of Estland in 1856 and Livland in 1861, and the new system for issuing passports implemented in 1863 gave peasants greater freedom of movement. People did not begin settling in Siberia in greater numbers until the 1890's when regions closer to home had for the most part already been occupied. The opening of the Trans-Siberia Railroad in 1894 and the working out of the tsarist government's resettlement policy (the tsarist government stimulated settlement in Siberia by giving new settlers state and crown land) were important in providing impetus to the process. Kovalyovo (founded in 1890) was the first village founded by Estonian emigrants in Siberia, yet most of the people who settled in Siberia during the first wave of emigration came from Southern Estonia. It was only at the beginning of the 20th century that a more significant wave of emigration came to Siberia – emigrants came from all over Estonia. Those emigrants replenished the populations of all existing Siberian settlements and also established a number of new settlements. Emigration also took place between settlements – people who had first moved to Northwestern Russia, the Crimea and Samara founded several settlements in Siberia. There were around 90 Estonian settlements in Siberia in 1918. The number of settlements grew later on as well. The main wave of emigration was to rural regions of Siberia.

Deportation and Siberia

Stalinist repressions and terror gathered momentum in the 1930's and a new era began in banishment to Siberia. After the occupation of Estonia in 1940, the Soviet Union's People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD), and the People's Commissariat for State Security (KGB) that was separated from the NKVD in 1941, began carrying out repressions against the Estonian people.¹ The first mass deportation was carried out in the Baltic countries on 14–16 June 1941. People were divided into five categories for repression: active members of counterrevolutionary parties and members of anti-Soviet, nationalist and White Guard organisations; former gendarmes, policemen, prison employees; owners of large estates, industrialists and governmental officials; former officers; criminal elements. People were arrested and sent to camps for 5–8 years and thereafter into exile in distant regions of the Soviet Union for 20 years. The family members of arrested persons were also sent into exile for 20 years and their property was confiscated before they

¹ A comprehensive overview of the background of communist crimes is presented in the teaching material published in 2009 compiled by Meelis Maripuu and Mare Oja.



were deported. According to data from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), 9156 people were repressed in Estonia during the first wave of repressions (3178 arrested and 5978 deported). A residual deportation was carried out from Estonia's islands on 1 July 1941. After Soviet rule was restored in 1944, extensive waves of repression were once again unleashed in areas recaptured by the Red Army. In 1944–45, approximately 10 000 people were arrested in Estonia according to research that has been carried out thus far. Half of this number died during the first two years. Up to 1953, a total of 25–30 000 people were sent from Estonia to forced labour and prison camps, of which nearly 11 000 did not return home. In August of 1945, Estonia's Germans (407 persons) were taken away and sent to do logging work in the Komi ASSR. The second more extensive deportation in the Baltic countries began in Lithuania when 12 000 families were deported in 1948. In March of 1949, the second mass deportation was carried out in all three Baltic countries. In accordance with the decision of the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union, 29 000 families, in other words over 87 000 people, were to be sent out of the three Baltic countries. People in 3 categories were deported: kulaks together with their families, and the families of "bandits" and nationalists. In the course of Operation Priboi/Breaker, 20 723 civilians were sent into exile from Estonia² (70% of which were women, children and elderly persons). Deportees were sent primarily to Novosibirsk, Omsk and Irkutsk oblasts and Krasnoyarsk krai.

The primary form of incarceration employed in the period of Stalinism was labour-prison camps. Their initial form was concentration camps and in 1929 they were renamed corrective labour camps. People who were exiled for a fixed period of time were known as temporarily banished persons, or compulsory settlers (compulsorily banished persons), while persons who were deported for no fixed term were known as persons sent into special banishment, or special settlers (persons in special banishment). At the beginning of 1953, there were a total of 1.8 million adults in special banishment (of these 75 024 Lithuanians, 33 102 Latvians and 16 070 Estonians) in the corrective labour camps and colonies of the Soviet Union's Ministry of Internal Affairs Main Administration of Camps (GULAG, *Главное управление лагерей*).³ Precise records were not kept of persons under 17 years of age. After Stalin's death in 1953, the gradual dismantling of the GULAG system and release of deportees began, lasting until 1960.

² Over the course of Priboi, 42 149 people were deported from Latvia and 31 017 from Lithuania.

³ The GULAG system of camps grew out of the SLON complex of special camps established in 1922 on the Solovets islands as a forced labour experimental laboratory. A regulation adopted on 11 June 1929 by the USSR Council of People's Commissars laid the foundation for the GULAG system.



Living conditions worsened abruptly in the GULAG camps during the war in 1941–45 when the “living space” permitted for each internee dropped from 1.5 m² to 0.7 in the overcrowded camps. Thus, internees took turns sleeping on the floor and bunks were reserved for shock workers. The caloric content of food rations dropped by 65% compared to what it was before the war. The internees starved and typhus and cholera epidemics broke out in the camps in 1942. The mortality rate approached 8% in labour camps alone, not including the labour colonies. Several hundred thousand internees in the GULAG were assigned to work in munitions factories, metallurgy and mining of mineral resources. Special camps with strengthened guard regimen were located in places with particularly severe natural conditions in Kolyma, in other words in the Far North and the Arctic. The annual mortality rate in those camps extended to 30%. A particularly strict regimen was established in the spring of 1943 in the Kolyma and Vorkuta (including Inta) region, where prisoners had to work 12 hours a day in gold, coal, lead or uranium mines. By the summer of 1944, 56 corrective labour camps were under the jurisdiction of the GULAG. Political prisoners and criminal offenders were interned together in camps until 1948. Then, however, it was decided to set up strict regimen special camps for interning “particularly dangerous state criminals”. Five camps were established initially, later there were a total of 12 such camps bearing numbers and code names – for instance, special camp no. 1: located in the Komi autonomous republic with its centre in Inta; special camp no. 2: Gorlag (*Горный лагерь* – mining camp) with its centre in Norilsk⁴ (grew out of Norillag). An isolated prison camp on Lake Lama was set up within the framework of Norillag in 1941 for army officers deported from the Baltic countries. Norillag prisoners built the city of Norilsk in 1936. Later they worked in nickel, copper, cobalt and coal mines and built facilities for metal processing enterprises. In 1953, there were about 2.75 million internees in GULAG concentration camps who were divided up into 3 types of penal settlements: about 500 labour colonies that existed in every oblast, where prisoners convicted mostly for non-political reasons were interned; nearly 60 large, complex penal institutions, labour camps located in northern and eastern oblasts, where prisoners convicted for non-political reasons and political prisoners were interned; 15 special regimen camps where “particularly dangerous” political prisoners, numbering around 200 000 were interned. In addition, another 2.7 million persons in special banishment were in Siberia.

⁴ The primary employer nowadays in Norilsk is the mining branch of the enterprise Norilsk Nickel.



Background concerning sources

Helmi Übius's husband Julius was taken away from Estonia in 1948. Julius had been a member of the Omakaitse because he wanted to own a hunting rifle since he lived at the edge of the woods. The head of the family left Helmi together with 3 little daughters (1, 5 and 7 years old) and their 79-year-old grandfather behind in Epri near Rakvere. The family's property was requisitioned and Helmi was deported to Siberia with her children. Helmi returned from Siberia in 1957. Other people lived in her home then. Helmi stayed with her mother in Pandivere.



Lesson plan

Life in Siberia

Introductory attunement about 10 min

The teacher displays a poem written by someone who had been deported to Siberia on the board and asks the pupils to read the poem on their worksheets, after which they are asked to guess the topic that will be considered in the lesson. The pupils individually try to find an answer to the questions posed at the end of the poem:

- What feelings are expressed through the poem?
- What caused the emergence of such feelings?
- From whose position is the poem written?
- Based on your previous knowledge and on the poem, describe the nature and natural resources of Siberia.

Thereafter a discussion is held involving the entire class to find answers to the questions. The pupils write their answers down on the worksheet. The teacher introduces the different meanings of Siberia using the map (see the map below) and shows some photographs of natural settings in Siberia (taiga, tundra, permafrost, natural settings around settlements in Tomsk oblast, Khakassia Republic and Norilsk, and Inta. Excerpts of sources to be read later on are associated with those regions). The teacher introduces a map of the main GULAG camps located in Siberia and recalls / introduces the main waves of mass repressions in the Baltic countries. The teacher's narration can also be replaced by a brainstorming session where pupils recall concepts connected with deportation from their previous knowledge. The pupils fill in their contour map, where they mark the main destinations of people deported from Estonia and the main locations of GULAG camps.

Study about 25 min

The pupils individually read excerpts of text (2 different excerpts) and work through the text that they have read using the magnetic card method: this means that they first of all find 4–5 so called magnet words (such as place of residence, working conditions, free time, destination) on the basis of the text they have read. Thereafter they write a 2–3 sentence summary of the magnet words they have found. Thereafter pupils share their magnet words and summarising sentences with classmates who have received a different text to read. The result of this work is a combined list of magnet words (that may overlap) and sentences written down by both bench-mates based on the two stories.



Reflection about 5 min

The pupils look at photographs and recall the excerpts of the sources they have read. Based on their knowledge, they write a story based on true life on the topic Life in Siberia, describing living conditions in Siberia, what kind of clothes were worn, what kind of food was on the table, what kind of work was done and what people did in their free time. The writing of this story can be continued as homework and the topic can be summarised once again at the beginning of the next lesson.

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Maps

Hellerick (talk), *Siberia – Federal Subjects* – Own work. Licensed under Public Domain via Wikimedia Commons – <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Siberia-FederalSubjects.svg#mediaviewer/File:Siberia-FederalSubjects.svg>

Dedering, Uwe, *Russia edcp relief location map* – Собствена творба. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons – http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Russia_edcp_relief_location_map.jpg#mediaviewer/%D0%A4%D0%B0%D0%B9%D0%BB:Russia_edcp_relief_location_map.jpg
 «Gulag Location Map» участника Antonu – Собственная работа, основанная на материалах справочника «Система исправительно-трудовых лагерей в СССР», подготовленного правозащитным обществом «Мемориал». Под лицензией Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 с сайта Викисклада – http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gulag_Location_Map.svg#mediaviewer/%D0%A4%D0%B0%D0%B9%D0%BB:Gulag_Location_Map.svg



Siberia Geographically and Historically, and Russia According to the Current Administrative Division

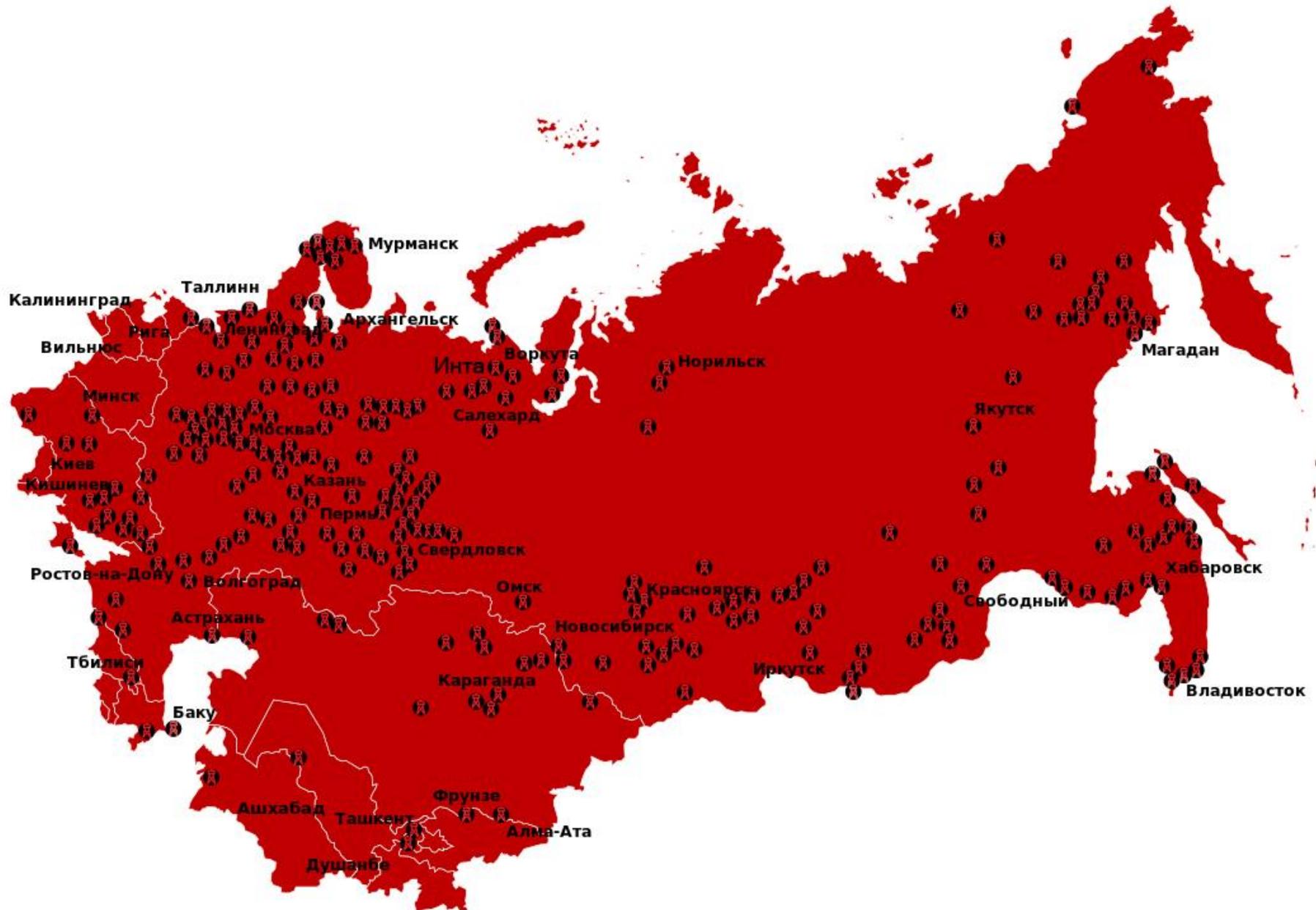
Administrative division of the Russian Federation: Federal District of Siberia; Geographical Siberia; Historical Siberia, also in today's broader meaning. 1) Sverdlovsk oblast 2) Chelyabinsk oblast 3) Kurgan oblast 4) Tyumen oblast 5) Omsk oblast 6) Novosibirsk oblast 7) Kemerovo oblast 8) Khakassia Republic

Source: Wikimedia.org



Locations of GULAG Camps, mapped on the basis of materials from the Memorial Association

Source: Wikimedia.org



Settlements of Estonians who voluntarily emigrated to Siberia – established at the end of the 19th century / beginning of the 20th century

Source: Korb, Anu, *Siberi eestlaste elud ja lood* (Lives and Stories of Estonians from Siberia), Wikimedia.org.



Worksheet I

Life in Siberia

Read the following poem and answer the following questions together with your partner.

Why do I hate you, primeval Siberia?
 Why do I despise your beauty and
 honour?
 Why do I despise your woods and
 lands?
 I don't want your riches either
 Thousands have cursed you
 Whoever has lived here long since
 Would curse your beauty even now
 The future will probably curse you as
 well

Your beauty I cannot see
 When my homeland is before my eyes,
 Your hillocks like ghostly walls
 Valleys like graveyards all
 I despise you because I'm here though
 innocent
 You land of thieves – robbers
 Even they've gotten away from here
 Why should I die here then

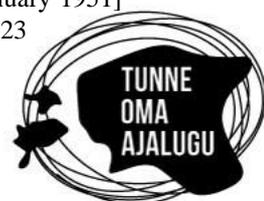
My heart, why do you pain me
 You still long for your Fatherland
 Isn't Siberia good enough for you
 Soil as your bed on your final journey
 Here mountains tower on high
 and turn blue in the sunshine
 and rivers flow in the valleys
 that rush in the grip of spring

Why do you long for fields full of
 stones
 And juniper pastures as well
 Siberia will offer you gold
 You can harvest a hundred grains from
 one
 I don't want your beauty, Siberia
 I don't want your gold either
 I prefer Estonia's charm
 That is all I dream of

- What feelings are expressed through the poem? What generated these kinds of feelings?
- Why does the author call Siberia a land of thieves and robbers?
- Describe nature in Siberia and its mineral resources relying on the poem and on your previous knowledge.

This poem⁵ was written by Helmi Übius, who was deported in 1949 to the Khakassia Republic. Helmi's husband was arrested in September of 1948 and their 3 little daughters remained in Estonia in the care of relatives.

⁵ Übius, Helmi: [Memories of the deportation of 1949, and of life in Siberia. October 1941 – 31 January 1951] Songs composed in the Siberian steppes [5 June 1949 – 16 January 1951], EKLA-12038-54666-49723



Contour Map of Russia

Source: Wikimedia.org



Worksheet II

Life in Siberia

Read the excerpts from the sources and write down 4–5 so called magnet words (for instance, place of residence) based on the text. Next write a 2–3 sentence summary for each magnet word. Introduce the story / stories you have read and your magnet words along with the explanatory sentences to your classmates. Together with your partner you will come up with 3 different stories that characterise living conditions in Siberia.

Excerpt I

Leida Palm was deported on 25 March 1949 from Lügänuše Rural Municipality in Eastern Viru County with her two older children, her 6 and 4-year-old sons, to the Khakassia Republic near Abakan in Siberia. They arrived back in Estonia in September of 1956.⁶

"We arrived at ABAKAN station on 10 April. People were already waiting for us but they weren't thrilled by what they saw when we got there because they were looking for various kinds of skilled workers and mainly for men. They got cattle cars full of women, little children and older men.

Five families were put in one room to live. In the summer, we built ourselves a zemljanka. We dug a hole in the bank and lined it with birch poles. Three families lived in there (9 people).

The commandant advised us in the spring that we should plant potatoes, otherwise we'll starve. We asked around for seed potatoes and planted potatoes. Later I got to take a piglet and thus we somehow survived. The children were little but regardless of that I had to go to work. Boys weren't given any mercy. They had to start working at the age of 9, initially during school vacation, but they had to go to work every day. There was also a school in the village. There were 4 classes and one teacher in one room. My younger son completed 4 grades. My oldest son went on to the 6-grade school in the centre (in Kuragina).

I got 40 roubles as my first wages. That was a big surprise. We thought we had to work for free. The average wage was 20 roubles per month at today's exchange rate. I worked in agriculture and logging. I was briefly assigned to look after the calves but I asked to be transferred somewhere else. There was no food for the animals and I couldn't stand the noise the hungry calves made. Calving cows and newborn calves

⁶ Normak, Tiina: Purtse village. Leida Palm's memories of deportation and life in Siberia [1949–1957], EKLA–11199–50608–71611



were initially looked after well but as they grew, the animals moved from one room to the next and finally they were practically out in the open.

I also worked in a quarry in Siberia. The rock there was granite. We pried rock strata loose by hammering crowbars between them. My hands suffered a lot. The rock lay in strata and if you got the bar under one end, it started coming loose.

Digging silo pits was also women's work. Ilse Männi and I dug many silo pits together. In the spring we cleaned those silo pits out and later we covered them with soil.

The locals did not treat us badly but the difference was that we were always sent to the end of the queue to get anything from the store.

The store sold bread, sugar, fabric and dishes. There were no other foodstuffs. People in the village had their own cows, pigs, chickens and geese.

In the winter, little calves and chickens were often kept indoors.

The store didn't sell groats. Then we secretly brought wheat from the granary, soaked it, put it through the meat grinder and cooked porridge. We even used those grains to make blood sausages.

Learning Russian proceeded very arduously. At first, I didn't even want to speak Russian. Later, knowledge of Russian seemed to come by itself because we worked together, Russians and Estonians. The children stayed at home more at first since they were shy, but they learned the language quickly."



10. aprillil jõudsimme ABAKANI jaama. Seal juba meid oodati, kuid meist ei olnudki vaimustatud, sest oodati mitmesuguseid oskustöölisi ja peaaesjalikult mehi. Tulid vagumid täied naisi väikeste lastega ja vanemaid mehi.

Viis peret pandi ühte tuppa elama. Suvel ehitasime omale "zemljanka". Kaevasime kalda sisse augu, panime kaselaid ümber. Selles elasime ka kolm peret koos (9 inimest).

Komandant andis kevadel nõu, et kartul tuleb maha panna, muidu jääte nälga. Ostsime inimeste käest seemet ja panimegi kartuli maha. Hiljem sain ka seapõrsa võtta ja nii saime kuidagi elatud. Lapsed olid väikesed, kuid sellest hoolimata tuli tööl käia. Poistele ei antud ka armu, 9-aastaselt hakkasid tööle, esialgu koolivaheajal, aga tööl tuli käia iga päev.

Külas oli ka kool. Ühes ruumis oli 4 klassi ja üks õpetaja. Noorem poeg käis 4 klassi, vanem läks edasi keskusesse 6-klas-silisse kooli (Kuraginas).

Esimese palga sain 40 rubla, see oli suureks üllatuseks, arvasime, et peame niisama tööd tegema. Keskmise palk oli praeguses rahas 20 rubla kuus.

Käisin põllutööl ja metsatööl. Korraks pandi lauta vasika-te peale, kuid mina tulin ära. Süüa loomadele anda ei olnud, ma ei kannatanud vasikate karjumist. Poegivaid lehmi ja sündinud vasikaid hoiti küll esialgu hästi, kuid kasvades loomad liiku-sid ühest ruumist teise ja lõpuks olid peaaegu lageda taeva all.

Siberis töötasin ka kivimurrus. See kivi oli graniit. Tagu-sime kangudega kivikihte lahti. Käed jäid väga haigeks. Kivi asus kihiti ja kui otsa kätte said, siis hakkas tulema.

Naiste tööks oli ka siloaukude kaevamine. Kaevasime kaheke-si Männi, Ilsega mitmed siloaugud, kevadel puhastasime neid silo-auke ja hiljem ajasime mulda peale.

/.../

Kohalikud inimesed meisse halvasti ei suhtunud, ainult poest saime kõike viimases järjekorras.

Poest oli saada leiba, suhkurt, riidet, toidunõusid. Muid toiduaineid ei olnud. Külas olid inimestel omad lehmad, sead, kanad, haned.

Talvel oli tihti väike vasikas ja kanad toas.

Tangu poest saada ei olnud, siis tõime salaja aida juurest nisu, leotasime, ajasime läbi lihamasina ja keetsime putru. Tegime nendest teradest isegi verivorsti.

Vene keele õppimine läks väga vaevaliselt, esialgu ei täht-nudki rääkida. Hiljem tuli vene keele oskus nagu iseenesest, sest töötasime venelased ja eestlased koos. Lapsed olid esialgu roh-kem kodus, võorastasid, aga nemad said keele kiiresti selgeks.





In Siberia 1953.
We lived in this kind of zemljanka.

Photograph 6. Normak, Tiina: Purtse village. Leida Palm's memories of deportation and life in Siberia [1949–1957], EKLA–11199–50608–71611. Leida Palm is second from the left in the photograph. Her sons are in the front row: Peeter and Lembit Palm.



At hard labour in a quarry.

Photograph 7. Normak, Tiina: Purtse village. Leida Palm's memories of deportation and life in Siberia [1949–1957], EKLA–11199–50608–71611. Leida Palm is on the right in the photograph.

Excerpt II

Sixteen year old **Aksel Merede** was deported with his family on 14 June 1941 from the town of Tapa to villages along the Parbig River in Tomsk oblast in Siberia – his father August Merede, an official in the Tapa municipal government, his mother Ella Merede who worked as a hairdresser, and his 21, 11 and 6 year old brothers. His father August Merede was shot on 21 April 1942. Aksel escaped and returned to Estonia in December of 1946 and was sent back into exile. Aksel returned to Estonia once and for all in April of 1958 with his wife and daughter.⁷

⁷ Merede, Aksel: [Memories of the deportation of 1941 and of life in Siberia, 14 June 1941– 4 April 1958], EKLA–11334–61252–45427

"The spring high water had risen over the banks and its consequences could be seen everywhere. Our camp in the territory of a centre for receiving grain had disintegrated as a consequence of the flood. Soaked and rotten grain residue was everywhere. We did not yet know then that it was that grain that would become our scanty food in the future that somehow helped to keep us alive. Local "slave merchants" had gathered here and we were divided up into two kolkhozes. We ended up in the village of Sabalinka 10 km away in the Pervyi Shag kolkhoz.⁸ We covered that distance by foot through the primeval taiga, warding off swarms of mosquitoes the whole time. There were 20 families that had also been deported living in the village, but they had been deported in the 1930's already. Most of the population were women, children and elderly men. The younger men had been mobilised. We were housed in the houses (more properly huts) of local residents. The walls were of rough-hewn timbers and the roofs were mostly of soil. There was one room for living with a large Russian stove. Our host family slept on the stove and we slept on the floor, lying on the clothes we had been wearing during the day. We were given one day to settle in and the next day, everyone who had the strength to stand was sent to make hay. Scythes and rakes were our tools. The time where living conditions were the hardest of all time began for us. If the local residents already lived in extreme hardship, what kind of life could we have? We weren't allowed out of the village. On rare occasions, we were given special permits allowing us to go to a slightly more prosperous village a couple of dozen km away to exchange our best articles of clothing for a few kilograms of flour and potatoes. But that didn't last for long since we didn't have that many of those clothes along either. We lived somehow in cold and hunger. Especially in winter. Yet we had to go to work every day without any days off. We sewed tunics for ourselves out of grain sacks insulated with tow. I was sent to do logging work in the winter with my older brother. Our younger siblings weren't guarded particularly closely and so they constantly wandered from village to village begging. "Pomagite, radi hrista!"⁹ – and people gave them food: a piece of bread here, a potato there. The soil was cultivated in the kolkhoz using 2–3 pairs of horses. I worked with a pair of oxen while my brother ploughed using cows. Women dug using shovels and their daily quota was 150 m². Sowing was done by hand while scythes and sickles were used for harvesting. Threshing was done using a horse powered thresher. We ground the few kilograms of grain that were given for food using a hand mill. We had only enough grain for cooking watery gruel (and even

⁸ Commentary of the compiler: a kolkhoz named *The First Step*,

⁹ Commentary of the compiler: "Help us in the name of Christ!"



that was not always so). We still fell short in fulfilling our annual labour quota for the kolkhoz. /.../ In May of 1945, I was sent to the city of Tomsk to do maintenance work. I worked mainly on paving roads.”

Georg Leets was deported to Siberia in 1941 as the leader of an artillery unit of the 22nd Territorial Corps. As a rule, army officers from the Baltic countries were sent to forced labour at the isolated Norillag prison camp in the GULAG system near the city of Norilsk on the shore of Lake Lama. Georg Leets returned from Norilsk to Estonia 16 years later.¹⁰

“What was that new home like for our academic group when we arrived at Lama on 11 August 1941? The Norilsk mining metallurgy integrated plant was building /.../ a recreation centre for integrated plant workers here on the shores of Lake Lama. /.../ After we were searched on the lakeshore, we were taken to /.../ a tent. It contained double-decker bunks in a railcar system, a floor of wooden boards, it had corridors in between with an iron stove and a vestibule. There were pillows and sleeping bags stuffed with hay on the bunks. We were issued bed linen and blankets by the quartermaster in the tent warehouse on the lakeshore. We divided up the bunks in the tent as follows: when stepping into the tent from the vestibule – Estonians (15) on the left, Lithuanians (13) in the middle, and Latvians (12) on the right. /.../ A small squad of NKVD men were left to guard us. /.../ There was no barbed wire yet but there was a guard tower near the tent where an armed guard took up his post for the night. /.../ We started by cleaning up the surroundings near the tent. We built a latrine. A spring flowed near the tent from under a boulder. This became a place where we could wash ourselves properly. /.../ We fashioned a couple of tables with benches near the tent. We weren’t allowed to take walks farther into the woods. /.../ We were fed three times a day. The food was unsubstantial, containing little meat and few fats. Vegetable oil was added sparingly to the soups and porridges. /.../ Once a week we were allowed to go to the store, which was located in the recreational centre building and where one could buy a limited amount of candies, biscuits, canned vegetables, cigarettes and toilet paper. The store’s manager and sales clerk was /.../ also a prisoner. /.../ Some ten special-purpose timber buildings had to be built, /.../ an electric power station and pump house, warehouses, barracks for prisoners, etc. had to be built. The first to be erected was a sauna with a disinfection chamber. /.../ First, however, we had to set about acquiring the necessary timber. /.../ The mountaintops were already covered with snow by mid-

¹⁰ Leets, Georg: [Sixteen years in Siberia. June 1941 – September 1957], EKLA–11285–57496–24743



September. The weather turned cold at the beginning of October and Lake Lama was soon frozen. /.../ The sun disappeared in mid-October and the 2½ month polar night began. It started snowing at the beginning of November and the snow cover was soon up to one metre deep. There was not a single day of milder weather here. In October already, the thermometer consistently showed -20° and more. While working on building the electric power station, I hardly noticed that three of the fingers of my right hand became frostbitten, whereas a black abscess developed in the tissue of my middle finger right through to the bone. The medical attendant Zelesnyakov had a difficult time of it to prevent the development of gangrene using the primitive medicines that were at his disposal in the ambulance. A few days before the New Year, we finished building the office building, the electric power station and the pump station. On the last day of December, 1941, we got electric light in the tent as well as in the work area near the stacks of timber. /.../ We were not paid any wages in money. Whoever fulfilled his quota 100% and men whose workdays were not subject to quotas received so called bonus compensation of around twenty roubles per month at the discretion of the administration. The length of the workday was 10 hours. /.../ In mid-January, the sun came out from behind the mountains – the polar night had come to an end. We were completely isolated from the outside world. We couldn't read newspapers. We didn't know how the events of the war had proceeded. On rare occasions, one or another rumour reached us by way of the fishermen in the area when they came to Lama to acquire foodstuffs or for medical attention. By exchanging our personal effects with them (underwear, items of clothing, boots), we obtained fresh fish in return or sometimes a white rabbit or a bird (white grouse). Meetings with the fishermen took place in secret – association with them was officially prohibited. /.../”

Look at the photographs and recall the excerpts of the sources that you have read. Write a story based on true life on the topic Life in Siberia. Describe what living conditions were like in Siberia, what kinds of clothes were worn, what kind of food was eaten, what kind of work was done and how people spent their free time.

Living conditions in a GULAG prison camp in the city of Inta in the Komi ASSR in 1955–56 are depicted in photographs 1–4. Two Estonian women and one Lithuanian woman who had been sent into exile in the Balakhtinsky rajon in Krasnoyarsk krai are in photograph 5. A Siberian village named Bezyazykovo is in the background.





My current place of work – a saw frame. Greetings –
father. 19 June 1956

Photograph 1. Heinloo: Photographs from Siberia [E
EKLA-11206-53456-24683

Photograph 2. Heinloo: Photographs from Siberia [1955 – 1956], EKLA-1206-53456-24683



Photograph 3. Heinloo:
Photographs from Siberia [1955
– 1956], EKLA-11206-
53456-24683



Looking after the graves of our fellow countrymen. /.../
2 December 1956. In
Inta

Photograph 4. Heinloo: Photographs from Siberia [1955 – 1956], EKLA-11206-53456-24683



Token of remembrance from Siberia. Six of the best years of
my life in the company of an ox.
20 Sept. 1954

Photograph 5. Niinemets, Evi: [Photographs of threshing in Raadi Rural Municipality in Tartu County, of the commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the Estonian Swamp Cultivation Society and recollections of Siberia; 1933 –1954], EKLA-11292-59803-26416.