Entangled narratives of terror

Maly Trostenets and Blagovshchina forest in history and memory, 1937-2022

Bobeldijk, A.-L.C.

Publication date
2023

Conclusion

By returning to the basis of the memory–to its history–it has become clear that referring to the camp Maly Trostenets and the forest Blagovshchina as a single 'extermination camp' does not do justice to the events at these sites. This study has shown that by separating the history of these two sites into two parallel but entangled histories, the place and purpose of these sites within the history of the 'war of annihilation in the Soviet Union' and the history of the Holocaust becomes significantly clearer.

By taking this approach, several aspects of daily life in the camp have been unveiled that otherwise might have remained undiscovered. The purpose of the camp Maly Trostenets, which functioned as forced labour camp and depository for the possessions of murdered people, meant that the camp was closely connected with the murderous and genocidal policies of the Nazis in Belarus. When trains with deported Jews arrived in Minsk, the possessions of the murdered Jews were sent to the camp. When villages were raided, the cattle from burned villages were taken to Maly Trostenets as well. The fact that these materials were sent to Maly Trostenets resulted in a need for labourers in the camp. This had the sinister result that the lives of those who worked in the camp were extended as a result of the horrific events taking place elsewhere.

Every single survivor of Maly Trostenets confirmed that only prisoners who were able to perform labour were eligible to stay in the camp. However, contrary to most other camps, those who were selected as fit to work could also bring their families to the camp. As a result, families and relatives were able to stay together within the camp. This meant that within Maly Trostenets social structures remained intact, which possibly meant there was a higher chance of surviving together. In addition, seeing that the work in Maly Trostenets included the processing and storage of stolen goods, women were also regarded as fit to work during the selections upon arrival in Minsk. This feature of Maly Trostenets resulted in a demography that was different from those in other Nazi forced labour camps.

Although the camp was not a place where the Nazis implemented their more standard policy of 'destruction through labour', the living conditions, the camp command and the presence of random violence against the prisoners still ensured that the ability to work there did not necessarily mean survival. The letters from survivors that were sent to the World Jewish

Congress in particular have shown that the violence in the camp was structural, arbitrary and torturous. In particular elderly prisoners and women seem to have had a higher chance of becoming victims of all sorts of violence, including sexual violence. While some prisoners survived the camp, it seems that in most cases this was as a result of a fair share of luck. Although some minor additional privileges, like the ability to work outside the camp premises, provided certain prisoners with some extra opportunities to escape, it is impossible to speak of survival strategies in this context.

However, survival, often achieved as a result of being able to escape, did not mean that the history of Maly Trostenets was a closed chapter of survivors' lives. The entanglement with the Stalinist post war repressions and double victimization of survivors prolongated this miserable history. In a broader perspective it can be argued that the histories of Maly Trostenets and Blagovshchina forest are entangled with the history of the *pre-war* Stalinist repressions through a *shared site* of terror: Blagovshchina forest. The *post-war* Stalinist terror is entangled with the history of Maly Trostenets through their *shared victims*: both Soviet and Western and Central European survivors of the camp Maly Trostenets faced after their escape from the camp repressions by Soviet authorities. Some Soviet Jews were persecuted for having survived the Holocaust, which the Soviets believed could only indicate collaboration with the Nazis. Western and central European Jews were considered German enemy aliens ('*alien enemies'*) by Soviet authorities and faced sometimes, like Soviet Jews, imprisonment in the Gulag.

The entanglement of post-war society with the Nazi past also meant that finding any form of justice for what was done to survivors and other victims was difficult and nearly impossible. The complex relationship between history and the law shows that in particular from the 1960s onwards, there was little space for survivors to contribute to narrative of Maly Trostenets that was articulated in post-war trials. Nonetheless, the narratives that survivors provided during this period has provided some of the most important sources for purposes of this research.

By treating the history of Blagovshchina forest separately from that of the camp Maly Trostenets, the importance and peculiarity of the site within the history of the Holocaust has become clear. Blagovshchina forest is a site where concept of 'the Holocaust by bullets' as well as that of the symbolic meaning of 'Auschwitz' became entangled. The Jews who were deported from Germany, Austria and Theresienstadt in 1942, were murdered upon arrival in Minsk. It seems that they were all murdered on their day of arrival, in a systemic way, in a manner which corresponds with the current symbolic understanding of 'Auschwitz'. The people who were

murdered after their incarceration in Minsk, or simply after their arrest in the vicinity of Minsk, were murdered in what could be regarded as 'the Holocaust by bullets'. One should view Blagovshchina therefore within the larger picture of the wave of shootings and gassings of Jews in Eastern Europe in 1942, as well as the large deportation operations of Western European Jews to camps much further east.

In addition, it has become clear that the murder of deported Jews in Blagovshchina forest was carried out unlike the manner in which locally interned Jews were murdered. When comparing the murders that took place after the deportations with the so-called *Aktionen*, it seems that the former events took place in a more orderly and 'neat' manner when compared to the murder of the local Jews. There are three potential reasons for this difference.

First, the locally interned Jews possessed more knowledge of what they would be facing because the Holocaust in Minsk was taking place out in the open. Deported Jews, on the other hand, had experienced persecution and expulsion, but not yet on the scale or in the form of what had been happening in Eastern Europe. For example, Jews from Minsk were familiar with the function of a gasvan, while deported Jews had never before encountered such a 'device'. This could have the result that locally interned Jews were possibly more inclined to try to resist or fight during the process of the massacre because they knew what was about to happen to them.

Second, the fact that Belarusian Jews were imprisoned in familiar territory, spoke the local language and possibly had connections to the partisan units around the city, potentially resulted in a different attitude at the side of the perpetrators. An attempt to escape might have been a more logical action for local Jews, because they technically had a better chance at survival once they would manage to escape the massacre compared to Jews who had only just arrived in Minsk. Consequently, it is likely that this was known by the perpetrators, which meant that they would adopt a different attitude during the local *Aktionen.*

Third, and possibly the most importantly, the treatment of Soviet Jews was potentially more brutal because of racial ideology: according to the Nazi ideology, Soviet Jews had an even lower position within the hierarchal structures of the Nazis compared to German Jews. This view is supported by the fact that between November 1941 and July 1942 no German Jews who were interned locally were murdered during mass shootings. The behaviour of high-placed Nazis in Minsk confirmed this: Wilhelm Kube, who had no problem with the murder of Jews and actually initiated mass murders in the summer of 1942, seemed to have had some issues with the imprisonment of German Jews in the Minsk ghetto because they had fought in World War I and came from his so-called *Kulturkreis*.

A final important aspect of the history of Blagovshchina forest is that analysing the different uses of the forest as a killing site has made it clear that it was one of the rare places in Europe where *German* Jews were murdered *en masse* in the 'Holocaust by bullets'. Although during the first few months of the internment in the Minsk ghetto deported Jews were not murdered in mass killings, this changed with the massacre taking place between July 28 and July 30, 1942. Similar to Soviet Jews, the German Jews too were shot or gassed nearby their 'houses'–albeit that these were in the Minsk ghetto.

The separation of the histories of Maly Trostenets and Blagovshchina forest resulted in more details on their individual histories and their respective importance for the larger history of the Holocaust and the Second World War. However, the two separate but parallel histories also remained *entangled*, in a sinister and horrific way. The two sites were part of a perpetual cycle of violence in Minsk: the murder of Jews–either deported from western and central Europe or from the Minsk ghetto–and others in Blagovshchina forest generated work for the camp Maly Trostenets, which in turn resulted in survival for the camp's prisoners, if even for another day.