

Irina Talevska

A 'Microhistory' of Trauma and Collective Memory: Aleksandar Aleksiev and the Goli Otok Experience

This paper analyses the written testimony of the Macedonian writer Aleksandar Aleksiev, which recounts his internment on Goli Otok, the Yugoslav political labour camp established in the aftermath of the Tito-Stalin split. It focuses on Aleksiev's subjective experience of the mechanisms of political repression, and ideological re-education.

The conceptual framework is grounded in Theodor Adorno's notion of working through trauma and its subsequent elaboration by Dominick LaCapra, who distinguishes between acting out and working through trauma in both individual and collective contexts. Within this theoretical paradigm, Aleksiev's testimony is understood not merely as a personal reckoning with past violence, but as a site of collective working through of trauma in post-Yugoslav societies. His account represents the experiences of Goli Otok inmates and could thus become part of a more inclusive and critical public memory.

By bringing Aleksiev's narrative into a dialogue with trauma theory and historiography, this paper argues that literary and testimonial texts are crucial to the process of collectively working through trauma. They enable the articulation of suppressed experiences, foster empathetic identification, and open a discursive space for re-evaluating the legacy of state violence. Aleksiev's testimony, in this sense, becomes not only a record of individual suffering but also a medium through which society might begin to confront and integrate traumatic pasts into a shared historical consciousness.

1. Goli Otok: A Brief Historical Premise

Following World War II, Yugoslavia closely followed the Soviet model in most aspects of its social and political structure: education, culture, economy, and the justice system. However, tensions arose over Yugoslavia's tendency to strengthen its regional role. These tensions culminated in the 1948 Resolution

deliberated by the Cominform – an international organization of Communist parties (of Yugoslavia, USSR, France, Italy, Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Poland and Czechoslovakia) – which condemned Yugoslavia for deviating from the Marxist-Leninist line in its internal and external affairs, and for leading anti-Soviet politics, among other things. In doing so the Resolution aimed to put pressure on

Yugoslavia's leadership. Since the conflict was held outside public attention, the Resolution came as a surprise to many Yugoslav citizens. Economic and diplomatic isolation, and the threat of military intervention from the USSR, deteriorated the relations to a point of schism. In response to this, Yugoslavia began a campaign against perceived internal threats, targeting followers of Stalin but also those confused by the shifting political landscape or those who criticized the Yugoslav leadership; these groups were collectively labelled Cominformists. To isolate these individuals, the Yugoslav government established a system of prisons and camps, the most infamous being Goli Otok, which was opened in July 1949. Goli Otok was a barren island in the Adriatic Sea, chosen for its natural isolation and harsh conditions.

The exact number of people who passed through the Goli Otok labour camp system between 1949 and 1956 was a subject of speculation for decades. Estimates of those arrested and those who perished were often entangled in ideological disputes, particularly from the mid-1980s onward, when Goli Otok became a powerful symbol for discrediting the entire era of Yugoslav socialism. However, the

files published by the National Archives of Zagreb in recent years attest that the number of prisoners was around 16,000 (Vujic 2013).

During Yugoslavia's dispute with Stalin, 862 women were also arrested and interned in camps under charges like those faced by men. The women were strictly segregated from male prisoners. They were held in special prison sections during investigations, tried in separate proceedings, and later transferred to women-only camps.

For illustrative purposes, I would cite the example of Ženi Lebl, a Serbian journalist born to a Jewish family, who ended up on Goli Otok for the mere pleasure of telling a joke. Namely, a colleague once told her a joke about how Yugoslavia won an international flower competition because it had a 100-kilogram white violet, referencing the song entitled *Comrade Tito, Our White Violet, the Entire Youth Loves You*. Soon after she shared the joke around the office, Secret Service (UDBA, Directorate for State Security) agents arrived, accusing her of speaking against Tito and failing to report the 'enemy of the people' from whom she had learned the controversial joke (Lebl 1990: 61–69). In a similar vein, Dimče Najčeski, an anti-fascist,

who took part in Yugoslavia's National Liberation War, and former detainee of Goli Otok asserts

In the still ambiguous situation, the organs of persecution employed every means at their disposal – provocation, entrapment, deceit, and manipulation – to 'verify' the loyalty of party members, and others as well, to the official policy. The insufficiently qualified police apparatus did not hesitate to use any means to demonstrate its zeal and efficiency. Members of the party found themselves at risk of being accused even for any careless or vaguely expressed word, let alone for voicing doubt or mistrust toward the state leadership (Najceski 1999: 9-10).¹

2. Individual Trauma: The 'Microhistory' of Aleksandar Aleksiev

In calling the concentration camp 'nomos' of modernity, Agamben is arguing that it is not an aberration or an exceptional

space but rather a paradigmatic one – a structural feature of the political and legal order of modernity. The camp is where individuals are reduced to bare life, a life stripped of political, social, or legal significance. In this sense, Agamben's thesis challenges the view that the atrocities of concentration camps are historical anomalies. Instead, he argues that they are intrinsic to the structure of modern sovereignty and governance. According to the philosopher, the camp is the hidden truth of modernity: a space where the logic of inclusion and exclusion, central to the nation-state and modern law, is laid bare (Agamben 2005: 185-201). It could be argued that Goli Otok constituted a phenomenon inherent to the structures of postwar state sovereignty, with its 'shadow' persisting long after its formal dismantlement. Immediately after the break with Stalin, the Yugoslav authorities considered it a necessity, as it served as an expedient to maintain the unity of the party, which was regarded as vital and not subject to compromise (Calic 2024: 212) and thus became instrumental in shaping Yugoslav socialist ideology. For those who supported Stalin – writes Jelena Vujic – the years that followed were marked by suffering and personal tragedies.

¹ All translations from this text are my own, I.T.

For others, however, the Resolution brought the hope of a better life, as it enabled Yugoslavia's separation from the Soviet bloc, led to the liberalization of life within the country, and opened the door to Western culture in an irreversible way (Vujic 2013). However, there is also a more uncompromising perspective regarding the historical significance of Goli Otok. In the compilation of testimonies edited and annotated by Dimče Najčeski, an anonymous testimony, bearing the signature 'X.Y.Z.' employs markedly harsher language when reflecting on this chapter of history:

The only true historical significance of the greatest and most terrifying site of torture in Tito's Yugoslavia – Goli Otok – does not lie in the legend that it was there (and in other such 'Goli Otok' islands) that a 'break with Stalinism' was enacted, as the rulers and official propagandists of that former quasi-socialist state tirelessly repeated from 1949 until the demise of the second Yugoslavia. On Goli Otok, Tito and his clique brutally crushed the vital core of the Revolution – the very force capa-

ble of offering critique, and which possessed the courage to do so when the political and economic conditions were sufficiently ripe (Najčeski 1999: 17).

In the wake of Yugoslavia's expulsion from the Cominform there were citizens who never understood why they were interned in the Goli Otok prison camp, and the phrase 'I never understood why' was a sort of a trauma trope that permeated their whole life. In a similar vein, the writer Aleksandar Aleksiev – who at the time was a student – declared an 'enemy of the people,' found himself bewildered and unable to fully grasp the events unfolding around him. He was one of many who were – according to his account – falsely accused of being part of a student organization of Cominformists, and from November 13, 1949, to the end of August 1951, was interned on Goli Otok. The twenty-two-month agony spent in the inferno created by the Communist Yugoslav system was represented in his narrative testimony, a two-volume work: *Деветте круга на пеколот* [The Nine Circles of Hell, 1999], dedicated to his experience as an inmate on Goli Otok, and *Чардак ни на небо, ни на земја* [Neither on Heaven nor on

Earth, 2003], dedicated to his life in the aftermath of his liberation. In his accounts, Aleksiev testifies to the physical suffering, and the humiliation endured in the labour camp, which aimed for 're-education and attitude reform.' The postwar student generation was among the groups subjected to repression during the Cominform [*Inform-biro*] period. The energy and enthusiasm directed toward rebuilding a country devastated by war – particularly through its educational and cultural institutions – were overshadowed by the abrupt shift in political direction taken by the Yugoslav authorities. Aleksiev's testimony is also corroborated by Najčeski's writings on Goli Otok:

The optimism (of the students) was clouded by the political upheavals following the appearance of the IB Resolution [...]. Young people, who had come to study and build their life careers, full of enthusiasm and hope, suddenly found themselves behind bars, subjected to brutal humiliation, physical and psychological torture; they were sent to camps for political prisoners. Although they had virtually no political background, they were

required to revise their views and political beliefs. Everything that was happening to those young people was so senseless, so absurd. At the very first step into the world of adults, they collided with harsh reality (Najceski 2006: 47-48).

Like many written testimonies on the camps, Aleksiev's work is both a novel and a historical account. It weaves together history – but, viewed from a ground-level perspective, through the eyes of an individual who experienced and endured 'history' – also personal memory. Regarding the relationship between these two domains of experience, Dominick LaCapra emphasizes that history and memory, as modes of writing, should neither be conflated nor treated as entirely oppositional (LaCapra 2001: xx). In this relationship – neither in conflation nor in opposition – history and individual memory, in this specific case, are intertwined with trauma. This intersection of the three concepts – history, individual memory and trauma – in witness narratives establishes a dynamic relationship and, in my view, should be explored as a triad when dealing not only with personal, but with collective trauma

as well. As Cathy Caruth asserts 'through the notion of trauma [...] we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not' (Caruth 1996: 11). In line with this argument, LaCapra rightly observes that individual trauma is always inherently connected to the social and political conditions in which the subject is immersed and can only be understood and addressed in relation to them (LaCapra 2001: xi).

It is precisely this intersection of history, memory, and trauma that, in Aleksiev's case, may be most productively understood through the lens of 'microhistory.' Microhistory emerges in explicit contrast to grand, teleological historical narratives that privilege state actors, ideological coherence and institutional continuity, and shifts the analytical attention to a small scale: to individual lives, subjective experiences, and seemingly marginal events. Far from reducing historical significance, this change of scale allows for a more incisive examination of how power operates, how ideology is internalized and enforced, and how historical violence is experienced at a personal level. In this sense,

microhistory interrogates it from below, exposing its blind spots, silences, and moral contradictions.

Approached in this way, Aleksiev's witness narrative acquires analytical value, not despite its subjectivity, but precisely because of it. His personal account functions as a condensed site in which broader sociopolitical dynamics, including state repression, ideological discipline, mechanisms of surveillance, and the production of 'enemies of the people,' visibly affect a single life. Aleksiev's experience thus operates as a microhistorical prism through which the structural logic of the Goli Otok system can be grasped: how abstract political decisions translated into embodied suffering, moral disorientation, and long-term psychic injury. The convergence of history, memory, and trauma at the level of personal experience renders visible what grand narratives tend to obscure, namely, the human cost of political projects and the ethical consequences of state power.

The literary form is particularly suited to this microhistorical perspective. Literary witness narratives provide an interpretive space in which factual referentiality and subjective reflection coexist, allowing the past to

be explored not only as a sequence of events but as a personal, affective, and ethically charged experience. When literary expression is relieved of the constraints of a model of writing that presents itself as self-sufficient, it enables a deeper engagement with consciousness, moral ambiguity, and the temporality of trauma. In doing so, it illuminates the complexity of ethical questions related to existence, the socio-political systems in which individuals are embedded, and the contingencies that shape those systems.

This microhistorical and literary mode of reflection fosters critical engagement with structures of power and prompts a reassessment of individual agency and responsibility within one's immediate sphere of influence. By foregrounding the singular without losing sight of the systemic, it resists both abstraction and relativization. As such, microhistory emerges here not merely as a methodological choice, but as an ethical stance, one that insists that the meaning of history must be sought where it was lived, suffered, and remembered. This reflective practice remains one of the few meaningful tools available for imagining and improving the future of socio-political communities, particularly those still

struggling to confront unresolved traumatic pasts.

In this sense, the relationship between history, individual memory, and trauma can also be understood through what LaCapra describes as a *double bind*. Traumatic experience places the subject in a condition in which remembering is both ethically necessary and potentially re-traumatizing, while forgetting or silencing, though seemingly protective, risks denial and historical erasure. Witness narratives thus emerge from a structural tension: the witnesses are compelled to testify and yet remain marked by the impossibility to fully articulate the traumatic event. This tension gives rise to what LaCapra terms an *aporia* – a point of impasse where representation both becomes indispensable and reveals its own limits (LaCapra 2001). The aporetic dimension of trauma does not signal the failure of historical or literary discourse but rather marks the site where history must be rethought in relation to affect, loss, and ethical responsibility. Literary witness narratives are particularly suited to engaging this double bind and inhabiting the aporetic space it produces. Rather than resolving the tension between saying and not saying, literature can formally register hesitation,

fragmentation, and temporal disjunction, thereby acknowledging the limits of representation while still insisting on the necessity of testimony. In this way, the *aporia* becomes not an obstacle to understanding, but a critical mode through which the passage from personal to collective trauma can be ethically negotiated.

Equally important, literature has an inherently subversive quality, enabling it to challenge dominant paradigms and encourage transformative thought. The essential feature of witness narratives lies precisely in their performative aspect, through which meaning is shaped: ethical aspects of the event are revealed, emotional responses are elicited, and trauma is engaged beyond the mere statement of facts. Within the performative aspect of Aleksiev's 'microhistory,' I would explore one concept related to trauma, drawn from the field of psychoanalysis that Adorno, and later historian Dominick LaCapra builds on, namely, the concept of 'working through' trauma. Further down in this paper, I will focus on the (un)successful process of dealing with collective trauma.

I argue that Aleksiev's testimony narrative – whether on a conscious level or not – is undoubtedly part of the author's en-

gagement with the concept of working through trauma. Although we lack more detailed writings that would allow us to draw conclusions about the author's intention in writing his testimony, Aleksiev's work is in line with that of other authors who, in the late 1990s, published documents and testimonies related to the Goli Otok experience. Some of these authors sought to engage with this chapter of history, which had remained unspoken until the dismantling of Yugoslavia. They expressed an urgent need to tell their experiences, thereby contributing to a more truthful account of this grim period in Yugoslav history. However, Aleksiev is among the few former inmates who reworked their testimony into a literary form, shaping it through a narrative structure: he structures narrative time through the use of *analepsis* when reflecting on the postwar innovations of the new government, and constructs a plausible protagonist within the Goli Otok events – one free of ideological burden, portrayed instead as a student caught in the whirlwind of historical upheaval.

2.1. Working through Trauma

The notion of ‘working through’ trauma has been utilized in trauma studies, drawing on its psychoanalytic foundation, but attentive to its ethical, even political, dimension as well (Ganteau 2020: 131). Working through trauma – as elaborated by historian Dominick LaCapra – is a process of coming to terms with trauma by critically engaging with it and understanding it, enabling individuals or societies to acknowledge and integrate the past in their lives without being overwhelmed by it. Engaging in the process of working through trauma is an act of articulation. It allows one to distinguish between past and present, acknowledging that an event occurred in the past – whether personally or collectively – while remaining aware of the present and open to the future. This does not imply a rigid separation between past and present, but rather that working through trauma can help counteract the cycle of reenactment and compulsive repetition (LaCapra 2001: 22). Hence, it may counteract the process of acting out as a feeling of an ‘ethical’ imperative to be faithful to experienced trauma. What is central to this concept are its foundational elements: memory, heal-

ing, and ethics (Ganteau 2020: 132): narratives of experienced trauma are not only essential for an individual’s process of coming to terms with one’s past, but also crucial for fostering an empathetic dimension within the objective study of history, thereby underscoring the profound ethical implications of past events. And what’s important, moreover, is that this process necessarily relates the individual to the collective, the subject of trauma to society and the political processes that shape it. Adorno uses the term ‘working through’ (*Aufarbeitung*) to describe the effort of reclaiming memories through the process of working through them, which he claims involves an open-ended engagement with history and memory that avoids reification and that will prevent a society to ‘close the books on the past and, if possible, remove it from history’ (Adorno 2005: 90). The events that led Aleksiev to Goli Otok are represented with somewhat Kafkesque undertones. They began with him being unexpectedly accused by the president of the then Student’s Organization. I will cite the episode that Aleksiev invokes in his memory:

‘You have been branded
an “enemy of the people”,

an ingrate to the Party that gave you the opportunity to study while the working masses bled! And that, no less, with a scholarship of two thousand dinars...'. The hoarse voice of the student organization president echoed in my ears – a man concerned only with saving his own skin, indifferent to whether these grave accusations were true.

This – and far worse – was hurled at you in public, leaving you feeling like a dog with empty cans tied to its tail by malicious children, powerless to shake them off [...]

'No, these are lies – at worst, a misunderstanding. I will prove it,' I reassured myself, continuing the dialogue with the gnawing worm of doubt that had taken root inside me that day, growing larger and more terrifying [...]

Most of those expelled were accused of belonging to an underground, Cominform-linked student organization, whose supposed leaders were Goce Stefanovski and Dimče Najčeski, both fourth-year students. And so, a chance meeting with them in late

1948 was enough to have me branded an enemy of the people! (Aleksiev 2000: 11-13)

It is plausible that his correspondence with Dimče Najčeski was among the factors leading to his arrest and subsequent imprisonment on Goli Otok, as Najčeski himself maintains:

The period from 1949 to 1954 is rightly called the darkest era in the life of Tito's Yugoslavia. This period, in fact, was characterized by extremely harsh state terror directed against communist internationalists – those who were both great patriots and consistent supporters of proletarian internationalism, and steadfast opponents of the bearers of savagery – revived fascism. The massive state terror was evident in the fact that it was not only directed against the communist internationalists themselves, but also against their family members, close relatives, and even their personal friends (Najčeski 1999: 13).

The accusations raised against Aleksiev were followed by de-

tention within the facilities of the Department for State Security, where they questioned him and forced him to sign a document claiming allegiance to the Communist party of Yugoslavia, and his willingness to help carry out the Party's program. However, despite his willingness to cooperate, a process was already set in motion, which ultimately led Aleksiev to Goli Otok.

What is interesting in Aleksiev's case is that he completed the first volume in 1999 – almost fifty years after his release from Goli Otok and eight years after Macedonia's independence. Two reasons for this prolonged silence can be detected. A possible explanation for the long-lasting silence – that falls within the field of psychoanalysis – may lie in the hypothesis that camp survivors endure a prolonged process of mourning in which victims cannot detach themselves from trauma and stay bogged down in suffering. 'In victims themselves – LaCapra writes – trauma, instead of calling for processes of working-over and working through, may be valorised as a limit experience or as stigmata demanding endless melancholy or grieving, whose mitigation or rendering in narrative is perceived as objectionably consoling or even as sacrilegious' (LaCapra 2001: xv). We

might hypothesize that a prolonged process of mourning, which for the author evolved into long-term grief, accounts for the extended period between the traumatic event and its eventually being worked through in this witness narrative. Since, as Freud sustained, what cannot be identified as belonging to the past is repeated in the present (Ganteau 2020: 133), the urge to convey this traumatic memory could be read as a part of the process of grief giving way to the process of working through it. By framing his testimony in a narrative, he is already engaging in such a process. Within Aleksiev's strong desire to rebuild his life after the camp experience, there is tendency to attain to what the historian Saul Friedlander defines individual common memory, that 'restores the self to the normal pre and post-camp routines, but also offers detached portraits, from the vantage point of today, of what it must have been like then [...] Individual common memory, as well as collective memory, tends to restore or establish coherence, closure and possibly a redemptive stance, notwithstanding the resistance of deep memory at the individual level' (Friedlander 1992: 40-41). Especially in the second volume of the memoir –

besides Aleksiev's effort to restore his life and chart a path forward for himself – snippets of what Friedlander calls deep memory emerge unexpectedly, but mostly in the form of psychological scars, that translate themselves into a sensation of deteriorating selfhood:

Lord, will I ever find a strong enough and long enough pole to help me balance and safely cross the wire stretched over the abyss that once again gapes within me [...] Or, exhausted and desperate, will I finally sit among the beggars, lean against the railing of the Stone Bridge, and with an outstretched hand beg the passerby: 'People, have mercy, grant me a crumb of reason, since I have already lost my soul' (Aleksiev 2003: 58).

The complexities in post-traumatic processes consist in this constant agonism between the tendency for coherence and closure, and, on the other hand, working through the trauma as an open self-reflective process that, according to LaCapra, never fully reaches closure and it is deceptive to see it as consolation and a cure (LaCapra 2001: xxiii).

And the constant reference to Goli Otok in the second volume of the novel attests to such agonism. In Aleksiev's case, working through trauma is also an 'articulatory practice' (LaCapra 2001: 22). Even nearly fifty years after the trauma occurred, Aleksiev articulates narration that is remarkably coherent and attentive to detail – whether regarding his detention and questioning by the Secret Service agents, the sequence of traumatic events on Goli Otok, or the emotional distress triggered by these experiences. He demonstrates an awareness that the trauma lies in the past, recalling it through memory while simultaneously situating himself in the present. From this present standpoint, Aleksiev's account illuminates how power operated within the framework of the 'state of exception' that was ideologically burdened. He testified to how the trauma was inflicted on the individual by state power structures – an individual trapped in the whirlwind of political events, too complex to fully comprehend as they unfolded – but also to the ways in which the individual responded to these power dynamics. Reading Aleksiev's account provides a clear view of the mimicry mechanism employed by the State – to insinuate itself into the fabric of socie-

ty – in order to identify the so-called ‘enemies of the state:’ during the Cominform period, everyone could have been a potential collaborator to the Secret Services, and in that sense, every single citizen was a potential enemy.

Well, from the very first day of work, I realized that silence on Goli Otok was more valuable than dry gold! One of the conditions to survive. Don’t ask questions, don’t answer questions. Even if someone mentioned heavy rain, even that would be twisted into something like: ‘They treat us like cattle, forcing us to work in this rain!’ For such, and similar ramblings, I had a prepared response: ‘My overcoat doesn’t leak. And even if it did, I enjoy working in such weather! It’s both cool and refreshing!’

Meanwhile, I made sure not to let it slip that my overcoat was English. And indeed, it was English. And if by any chance I mentioned that it was English, who knows what kind of story some unfortunate soul would weave. At best, that I was agitating for capitalism, just be-

cause I praised my English overcoat, that socialist countries are incapable of producing quality goods, that socialism was losing the battle against capitalism. God forbid! (Aleksiev 2000: 108-09).

Despite the severity of his experience, on a subjective level, Aleksiev has managed to work through his past: although the memory of the terror and violence he endured persisted, he distanced himself from the trauma and actively engaged in the healing process, not only by writing about his experiences, but also by building a successful professional career – despite being under constant scrutiny by the Yugoslav state apparatus during the later period of Yugoslavia – and in the independent Republic of Macedonia that followed. However, relying solely on the concepts of acting out and working through the trauma in Aleksiev’s case could lead to overinterpretation. Although the Goli Otok period officially ended in 1956, its political repercussions were felt strongly for decades afterward. Considering the broader political context, Aleksiev’s prolonged silence was due to the Yugoslav Secret Services forbidding former inmates from speaking about their expe-

riences at Goli Otok: they remained objects of scrutiny, even long after their release (Calic 2024: 215). One should not neglect the fact that Goli Otok prison was active until 1988, long after the decommissioning of the labour camp system and reimprisonment was a very viable option for former inmates. As the former inmate Najčeski maintains:

Those released from Goli Otok continued to live in a state of unfreedom. They remained under constant surveillance by the UDBA. They faced significant difficulties in securing even the most basic forms of employment and were continually subjected to harassment and provocation by 'loyal' party members – supporters of the USSR – as well as by the 'newly minted' communists (in reality, sycophants and unscrupulous careerists). The old, anathematized communists, even after regaining their so-called 'freedom,' remained targets of mistreatment and social ostracism by the officials of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY) and other socio-political organizations (Najčeski 1999: 16).

Only after Macedonia's independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, and with the emergence of lustration as a public discourse, prior to its institutionalization as a legal mechanism, did Aleksiev feel free to write his testimony. Whether in Aleksiev's case or of the other few authors who wrote about Goli Otok, alongside their intuitive process of working through their trauma, they struggled to bring this issue to the public forefront and ignite a debate that would initiate the collective process of addressing this trauma. Their articulatory practice means engaging with history, testimony, and narrative in a way that allows for ethical and responsible engagement with the past rather than an uncritical or purely emotional response. These testimonial forms of storytelling are also significant in social and political contexts where there is a reluctance to confront the past critically, as it remains a challenging and arduous endeavour.

Aleksiev's personal suffering on Goli Otok, while deeply individual, cannot be separated from the collective trauma endured by thousands of Yugoslav citizens branded as 'enemies of the people.' His testimony functions not only as a record of personal anguish but as a medium

through which the shared experiences of silenced inmates are preserved. In articulating his memory, Aleksiev performs what Adorno describes as the ethical obligation to confront the past: he refuses to allow the trauma to be reified, and instead renders it in narrative form that demands reflection and moral engagement. As such, his narrative exemplifies LaCapra's notion of *working through* trauma, whereby individual memory becomes inseparable from the social and political conditions in which it was formed. By structuring his recollections and making them coherent, Aleksiev transforms private suffering into a collective testimony, enabling a broader societal apprehension of the mechanisms of repression, humiliation, and fear that characterized the Cominform period. In this way, individual trauma is simultaneously a lens for understanding and articulating collective trauma, highlighting the ethical and historical imperative to reckon with the past not only as a personal experience but as a shared wound requiring acknowledgment and integration into collective memory. This intertwining of personal and collective trauma not only illustrates the long-lasting impact of Goli Otok on individual lives but also underscores the persistent

challenge for post-Yugoslav societies: without acknowledging and integrating these experiences, both private and shared, the legacy of repression continues to shape social and political realities long after the formal end of the camp system and its consequences.

3. Working through Collective Trauma: Is a 'Decent Society' Possible?

The consequences of Yugoslavia's split from the Cominform bloc were felt throughout the entire Federation, and especially in Macedonia, which was already burdened by an underdeveloped economy. The ambitious plans for large-scale infrastructure and industrial development – initially laid out as part of the first five-year plan – were ultimately undermined and fell apart. This collapse was largely because the planning had been heavily modelled on, and overly dependent upon, the structure and logic of the Soviet economic system. As a result, when broader political and economic conditions shifted – or when the inherent flaws of that system became apparent – the very foundation of the project was destabilized (Veljanovski in Najčeski 2006: 67). Moreover, the break had significant conse-

quences for the political status of Macedonia. On a personal level, it affected interpersonal relationships, and, perhaps most critically, it threatened the political unity within the Macedonian federal state.

With the dissolution of Yugoslavia, Macedonian society embarked on a path toward consolidating democratic institutions grounded in the rule of law and the development of a civil society. Among the processes encompassed by the broader framework of transitional justice – a process through which society was meant to confront and work through the darker periods of its past – the newly established political elite sought to confront the dark legacies of the previous regime, marked by significant violations of human rights. One of the components of this transitional justice agenda was the lustration process, which aimed to verify historical records and disqualify individuals from holding public office if they were found to have collaborated with the former secret services and contributed to the persecution or suffering of their fellow citizens during that period. Although the lustration process is generally considered to have unfolded between 1991 and 2015, Macedonia did not adopt a lustration law immediately after

independence in 1991. At that stage, lustration existed only as an idea, while a formal legal framework was introduced much later. During the first phase of this period (1991–2008), Macedonian authorities were unable to implement lustration, largely due to the generally positive public memory of the Yugoslav period, but also because a significant portion of the political elite leading the process of independence had previously held positions within the former system. This continuity was reinforced by the fact that the newly established Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), which played a predominant role during the transition, was widely regarded as the successor to the Communist Party. Even the right-wing VMRO DPMNE that won the elections in 1998 did not go through the lustration process. The same occurred when the government was formed again by SDSM in 2002.

This lack of capacity and/or the unwillingness to work through the past had its negative effects when the second phase of the lustration process (2008–2015) was followed by a number of controversies. The primary impetus for a comprehensive lustration act emerged in 2006, coinciding with the political transi-

tion from the former socialist government to the conservative party VMRO-DPMNE. The initiative of the Liberal party resulted in the introduction of a legislative proposal that was unanimously adopted in January 2008. This led to the establishment of the Commission for Verification of Facts in the subsequent year. The Commission was mandated to investigate individuals holding, or aspiring to hold, high public office, with the aim of identifying any affiliations with the former intelligence services. However, following the adoption of the legislation, public discourse primarily centred on the potential accountability of the elite and beneficiaries of privileges under the former Yugoslav regime. In contrast, issues concerning the victims of the regime – particularly the plight of Goli Otok detainees – were largely marginalized and never given prominence in the national conversation. In addition, in 2010 and again in 2012, the Constitutional Court ruled parts of the law unconstitutional – particularly criticizing the overly broad scope and the unequal treatment of citizens. As a result, certain provisions were repealed. Despite these rulings, the government introduced a second Lustration Law in mid-2012, this time without opposi-

tion support and in defiance of the Court's prior decisions, reintroducing previously struck-down provisions, thus raising serious legal and democratic concerns. These actions of the political elite created an atmosphere of distrust and paved the way for political retribution and the silencing of vocal opponents of the ruling party. Over time, lustration came to be widely perceived as a highly politicized process, increasingly used by dominant political figures as a tool to create political polarization and marginalize their opponents – including individuals who had themselves been victims of the Yugoslav regime. It proved to be a powerful instrument in the hands of the ruling elite – one that ultimately served to consolidate their power while sidelining political adversaries (Krtolica 2013). Following the ruling of the Constitutional Court that the lustration laws were unconstitutional, and under pressure from Brussels – since the laws contradicted the recommendations outlined in the European Council Resolution – lustration was eventually abolished in 2015.

This troubling episode in Macedonian society – which, at least nominally, aspires to establish governance grounded in respect for human rights and freedom of

expression – was, ironically, carried out by a political party that itself condemned and rejected the Yugoslav socialist regime. It serves as a symptom of a deeper societal malaise: a persistent attachment to unresolved trauma and an enduring inability to adequately work through the past. The detrimental effects of a society's unwillingness to develop the maturity required to move beyond its tendency to obscure or disregard past issues – rather than confront and resolve them transparently – are evident not only in the forgetting and consequent loss of developmental continuity, but also in the creation of fertile ground for the manipulation of unresolved collective trauma. Since this has never been fully acknowledged, it has never been genuinely worked through at the societal level. In the final volume, published in 2006, of the three-volume work *Голооточки сведоштва* [Testimonies from Goli Otok, 1999, 2002, 2006], edited and annotated by Dimče Najčeski, the author/editor argues:

Macedonian historical science is still gathering strength to undertake serious research into this period of Macedonian history. The few monographs

on prominent individuals who suffered during the era of Goli Otok and the few academic gatherings on certain figures are not so much a confirmation of unpreparedness as they are a lack of courage to objectively speak about these historical events. Time writes its own history, older and more recent events come to light, new facts are revealed, but there is no one to record and explain them (Najčeski 2006: 6).

Nearly two decades later, the situation remains largely unchanged: a public, state-of-the-art debate among historians – conducted objectively and free from ideological bias – has yet to take place. Consequently, the issues surrounding the Cominform period and Goli Otok have remained largely marginalized. This marginalization has led not only to the erasure of these events from the memory of younger generations, but – more alarmingly – to their instrumentalization as a tool of political revanchism by the ruling elite in the country's recent past. Furthermore, the reluctance to bring the history of Goli Otok to the forefront is evident within the education system itself. In

secondary school history textbooks, the topic is only marginally addressed under the broader theme 'The Cominform and its consequences for relations among the Balkan states,' which appears in the curriculum for the third year of general secondary education (Bureau for the Development of Education 2005). In the fourth-year syllabus, students are merely tasked with explaining the goals behind the formation of the Cominform and its consequences, yet the term 'Goli Otok' is not mentioned at all. Given this minimal and superficial treatment – this topic, for example, is largely absent from literature curricula – it is evident that an interdisciplinary approach to the topic – which I argue is essential for any meaningful societal process of 'working through' trauma – remains more an aspiration than a reality. One potential point of departure for such a process could be Aleksiev's *Nine Circles of Hell*, which offers a powerful narrative capable of initiating a collective confrontation with the trauma of Goli Otok. As Adorno asserts, 'A working through of the past understood as enlightenment is essentially such a turn toward the subject, the reinforcement of a person's self-consciousness and hence also of his self' (Adorno 2005: 102). In

my view, this assertion applies not only to the individual, but also to the collective dimension of 'working through,' which requires conscious engagement with the past as a prerequisite for historical and moral understanding, a process that should be carried out primarily through the educational system.

Philosopher Avishai Margalit contends that the way societies engage with their past – particularly traumatic and morally charged events – is integral to the ethical fabric of those societies. For Margalit, collective memory transcends the mere preservation of historical facts; it is deeply implicated in shaping the moral identity and cohesion of a community. At the very beginning of his work *The Decent Society* he provides a clear definition of the concept: 'A decent society is one whose institutions do not humiliate people. I distinguish between a decent society and a civilized one. A civilized society is one whose members do not humiliate one another, while a decent society is one in which the institutions do not humiliate people' (Margalit 1996: 1). Recent historical events in Macedonia have demonstrated that institutions are not only capable of humiliating individuals but are structurally oriented towards production of humiliation

as a mode of governance. Not only were the calls for the rehabilitation of former Goli Otok inmates ignored, but an additional layer of irony emerged: the process of lustration – intended as a democratic safeguard – was instead weaponized to silence political opponents by falsely labelling them as collaborators with the former Yugoslav regime (Musai 2016).

A decent society, in Margalit's view, is not one that is flawless, but one that demonstrates a sustained commitment to confronting its historical injustices, acknowledging past wrongs, and ensuring that the remembrance of these events does not become a vehicle for perpetuating hatred, exclusion, or oppression. Such a commitment presupposes a process akin to the process of working through: an ongoing, critical engagement with the past that resists both repression and the false consolation of moral closure. Rather than seeking to resolve historical trauma definitively, a decent society must remain willing to inhabit the unresolved tensions and ethical discomforts that accompany an honest confrontation with injustice. Margalit also warns against the dangers inherent in selective memory, whereby dominant groups manipulate collective narratives by omitting

or distorting aspects of the past that threaten prevailing power structures or national myths. This form of mnemonic control forecloses working through by transforming trauma into an instrument of ideological stabilization, thereby inflicting moral injury on marginalized groups and eroding the trust necessary for a functioning, pluralistic society. The suppression or denial of traumatic histories – particularly those involving systemic violence or exclusion – produces an aporetic condition in which the past remains simultaneously present and unacknowledged, generating unresolved ethical claims that continue to disrupt the social fabric.

Furthermore, Margalit emphasizes the decisive impact of collective memory on intergroup relations. In contexts marked by historical trauma, whether colonialism, occupation, genocide, or other forms of collective suffering, the way societies remember and narrate these experiences plays a critical role in either fostering dialogue and healing or reinforcing cycles of resentment and division. A refusal to engage with the aporia of traumatic history, to acknowledge both the necessity of remembrance and its inherent limits, risks allowing historical grievances to be instrumentalized in

the service of ongoing injustice. For Margalit, therefore, the ethical obligation of a decent society lies not only in what it remembers, but in *how* it remembers: through practices that sustain critical reflection, preserve the dignity of victims, and keep open the difficult but necessary work of ethical and political responsibility.

Can Macedonian society evolve into a decent society, in the sense proposed by Avishai Margalit? Unless we engage in meaningfully working through our past simultaneously within the educational system and the political sphere, we risk preserving a mentality that obfuscates and suppresses past traumas, along with their causes and consequences. Such avoidance fosters a culture resistant to confronting historical contingencies and, in doing so, perpetuates patterns that render society continually vulnerable to repeating them. As Adorno asserts: 'The past will have been worked through only when the causes of what happened then have been eliminated. Only because the causes continue to exist does the captivating spell of the past remain to this day unbroken' (Adorno 2005: 103). This, in turn, explains the vicious circle in which our society remains trapped.

The ethical significance of acknowledging both individual and collective trauma becomes evident when considering the foundations of a decent society. Societal institutions cannot claim moral legitimacy if they fail to recognize past injustices and the suffering they inflicted on both individuals and communities without instrumentalising it. Aleksiev's testimony exemplifies how personal narratives can illuminate broader patterns of oppression, providing a necessary foundation for public reflection and moral reckoning. Only when societies engage with history – through education, public discourse, and institutional accountability, can they begin to fulfil the ethical imperative of creating a society in which humiliation, exclusion, and the manipulation of collective trauma are actively resisted.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Aleksandar Aleksiev's testimonial narrative constitutes more than an account of individual suffering: it functions as a critical site where personal trauma, collective memory, and societal ethics intersect. Situated within a microhistorical framework and read through Adorno's notion of

‘working through’, as further elaborated by Dominick LaCapra and informed by Cathy Caruth’s understanding of trauma as a challenge to historical reference, the analysis has shown how individual testimony can mediate – under conditions of tension rather than resolution – between lived experience and collective historical understanding. In LaCapra’s terms, such mediation unfolds within a ‘double bind’: testimony is ethically imperative in order to resist denial and erasure yet remains constrained by the limits of representation and the risk of retraumatization.

Unlike many traumatic narratives that foreground fragmentation or unresolved aporia, Aleksiev’s account is characterized by coherence, temporal awareness, and reflective distance. This coherence does not signal the absence of trauma, but rather a sustained process of working through that acknowledges suffering without remaining captive to it. At the same time, the narrative does not eliminate aporia; instead, it negotiates moments of opacity and ethical tension without collapsing into silence or premature closure. In this sense, Aleksiev’s testimony exemplifies narration as an articulatory practice that inhabits the double bind of

traumatic memory while preserving its ethical weight and rendering it intelligible within a broader historical framework.

At the same time, individual working through cannot be disentangled from collective responsibility. Trauma produced by systemic political repression – such as that embodied by Goli Otok – extends beyond individual lives, shaping collective memory, institutional practices, and political culture. The marginalization of victims’ experiences and the politicization of lustration in post-socialist Macedonia reveal a persistent failure to work through this legacy at the societal level, leaving the past suspended in an unresolved aporia and vulnerable to instrumentalization.

It is here that Avishai Margalit’s concept of a ‘decent society’ becomes particularly salient. Defined not by moral perfection but by institutions that refuse to humiliate, a decent society requires an honest and inclusive engagement with historical injustice. Aleksiev’s testimony offers a point of departure from this impasse. Seen as a microhistory, his account does not resolve the aporia of trauma but renders it ethically productive, challenging society to confront repression, recognize the dignity of victims, and resist the repeti-

tion of exclusion and violence. Ultimately, the path toward a decent society necessarily passes through memory, testimony, and critical self-reflection – processes in which literary witness narratives play an indispensable role.

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