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Double Persecution and Erased Memory: The Microhistorical Case of Lavrentiy Kalichava in the Stalinist USSR

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Abstract: *This article examines the life of Buchenwald survivor and Georgian Soviet soldier Lavrentiy Kalichava to study "double persecution" in the USSR following World War II. The study uses Kalichava's case to show how Soviet filtration camps criminalized surviving, labeling returning POWs as traitors instead than heroes. The article claims that Soviet authority institutionalized suspicion and repression of alternative war narratives using Halbwachs, Caruth, and Foucault theories of collective memory, trauma, and disciplinary power. Although filtering was debated as selective or blanket repression, Kalichava's experience shows postwar punishment and memory regulation's systematic character. The paper emphasizes how personal narratives, particularly those influenced by Nazi and Soviet violence, help explain repression, erasure, and the lasting effects of authoritarian governance, improving Soviet military justice and trauma studies historiography.*

Keywords: *Soviet prisoners of war, Stalinism, filtration camps, microhistory, Soviet Georgia, Buchenwald, repression, memory politics.*

1. INTRODUCTION

This article offers a micro historical case study of Lavrentiy Kalichava (1922–2008), a Soviet Georgian field physician who endured the atrocities of Nazi imprisonment at Buchenwald, only to encounter persecution upon his return to the USSR. This study utilizes archival materials, military documents, and familial oral histories to analyze how Kalichava's life exemplifies the broader dynamics of double persecution — the dual victimization of Soviet prisoners of war (POWs) who endured Nazi brutality and subsequently faced suspicion and repression from their own government. Kalichava's narrative is especially significant as it encompasses practically all terrible events of the Soviet experience: Stalinist purges, filtration camps, and the enduring silence of the postwar era. The primary research question directing this study is: To what extent does the personal history of Lavrentiy Kalichava illustrate the broader patterns of double persecution and the erasure of memory in the Soviet postwar military and political system? This inquiry resides at the convergence of trauma studies, memory politics, and the historical analysis of Soviet state brutality. This work draws upon the theoretical insights of Maurice Halbwachs (1992) regarding collective memory, Michel Foucault (1977) concerning disciplinary power and surveillance, and Cathy Caruth (1996) on the lasting psychological impacts of trauma.

2. METHODOLOGY

This article employs a micro historical approach, centering on the personal journey of Lavrentiy Kalichava to analyze wider state practices of postwar repression and memory politics in the Soviet Union. This study primarily relies on the oral testimony of Lavrentiy Kalichava (1922–2008), a Soviet Red Army field physician and my grandfather, who endured both the Nazi concentration camp at Buchenwald and the subsequent Soviet filtration system. These memories were personally conveyed to his son, Gocha Kalichava (1957–2021), author's father, over several decades and were preserved through written notes, recorded accounts, and oral narratives transmitted to the author. This personal testimony has been corroborated with official documents from the Central Archive of the Ministry of Defense of the Soviet Union and subsequently, the Russian Federation, encompassing military identification records, rehabilitation decrees, and judicial rulings. The author recognizes the possible ethical dilemmas arising from familial closeness to the topic. This dual methodology guarantees both academic rigor and awareness of the emotional and ethical aspects of recounting postwar persecution within one's own heritage.

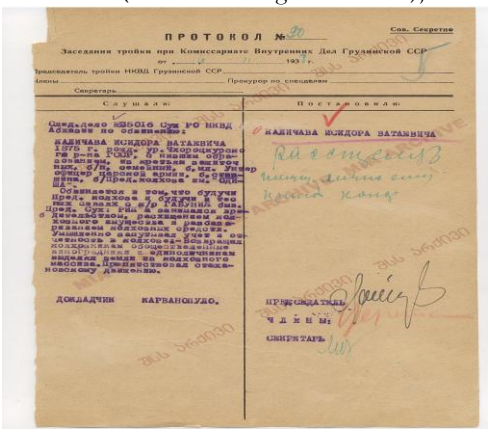
3. Origins and Early Military Service

Born on March 14, 1922, in the village of Tsebelda, in the Gulripshi district of Socialist Soviet republic of Abkhazia - treaty republic within the Georgian SSR. He was the youngest of five siblings in the family of Isidore Kalichava and Nana Kardava. Isidore (1884–1938) fell victim to Stalin's purges. On February 16, 1938, according to protocol № 90 of the NKVD Interior Committee of the Georgian SSR condemned

him to death under the notorious article concerning "Kulakism," based on accusations levied by a prior troika (Protocol № 90 of the Meeting at the Commissariat of Internal Affairs of the Georgian SSR 1938). He faced allegations of exploiting his authority as the leader of a communal farm, with accusations including mishandling and embezzlement of farm funds, as well as sabotage and theft of public property - actions considered egregious violations of Stalinist collectivization policies. He was executed some weeks later, in February 1938. Ironically, on December 25, 1959, the Presidium of the Supreme Court of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia acknowledged Isidore Kalichava as a victim of political repression and fully rehabilitated him due to the lack of any criminal misconduct ("Case № 2/478 / Decision of the Sokhumi District and City Court Regarding the Application of Lavrentiy Kalichava" 2001).

For decades, the veracity of Isidore's fate was obscured from his family. It was not until the 1970s that his five sons, together with their descendants, including my father, Gocha Kalichava, discovered the specifics through Soviet archive data, having long assumed he had been deported to Siberia. Following his graduation from Sokhumi[1] Medical College in 1940, Lavrentiy was conscripted into the military on September 4, 1941. Initially assigned to the 143rd Rifle Regiment at Sokhumi, he quickly received a promotion and, as a field surgeon, was designated on September 15 to the 224th Rifle Division of the 3rd Artillery Regiment. His dedication was sealed on November 5, 1941, when he took the solemn military oath (Military ID № 213645, Lavrentiy Kalichava, 1967). The initial experiences of political repression - commencing with his father's execution and the prolonged concealment of the truth foreshadowed the mechanisms of suspicion, retribution, and protracted rehabilitation that Lavrentiy would thereafter face.

Fig. 1. The family photo of Isidore Kalichava. 1936. **Seated from left to right:** Vata Kalichava (father of Isidore Kalichava), Isidore Kalichava, and Nana Kardava (Isidore's wife). **Standing behind them are their sons:** Bagrat Kalichava, Domenti Kalichava (killed in action in 1942 during World War II), Lavrentiy Kalichava (the author's grandfather), Kukuri Kalichava, and Leontiy Kalichava.



ПРОТОКОЛ №

Заседания тройки при Комиссариате Внутренних Дел Грузинской ССР

КАЛИЧАВА ИСИДОРА ВАТАНОВИЧА

ДОКЛАДЧИК КАРВАНСУДО.

ПРЕДСЕДАТЕЛЬ

ЧЛЕНЫ:

СЕКРЕТАРЬ

Fig. 2. Protocol № 90 of the Meeting at the Commissariat of Internal Affairs of the Georgian SSR (February 16, 1938). The original NKVD document records sentencing Isidore Kalichava to death under charges of "Kulak activity." Accused of exploiting his position as the head of a collective farm, he was condemned for embezzlement, sabotage, and the illicit redistribution of collectivized land and vineyards—

[1] This article employs the Georgian transcription "Sokhumi" instead of the more prevalent Russian-based "Sukhumi." This decision demonstrates the author's deliberate adherence to the Georgian-language nomenclature, as Sokhumi is the historically recognized and officially utilized name in Georgian literature, scholarship and official papers. It also indicates an attempt to marginalize Soviet-era Russified toponymy within the framework of postcolonial studies and regional memory politics

acts interpreted as a direct challenge to Stalinist collectivization policy. His execution followed within weeks.

Fig. 3. Military ID of Lavrentiy Kalichava - issued on July 31, 1967.

4. The Kerch Landing Operation: Battlefield Trauma and Survival

The Nazi military operation Barbarossa, started on June 22, 1941. By September 26, 1941, German troops of South progressed towards the Perekop Isthmus, the entrance to Crimea (Erickson [1975] 1983, 412–415). The Soviet 51st Army, including Lavrentiy Kalichava, was tasked with safeguarding this vital line. German advances on October 20 resulted in the capture of Kerch on November 16 (Mel'tyukhov 2000, 187–188).

On December 7, the Soviet High Command launched a landing operation to reclaim Kerch. The 44th Army attacked Feodosia as the 51st Army progressed towards Kerch (Mel'tyukhov 2000, 189). By late December, more than 40,000 Soviet soldiers were deployed at this location. As of January 4, Luftwaffe assaults resulted in significant casualties of the red army (Erickson [1975] 1983, 419–421). Lavrentiy Kalichava distinctly remembered the assault amidst gunfire, the tumult on the rugged shoreline, and the fortune that preserved his life. "I believe I was fortunate..." "I did not receive any bullets," he would subsequently recount. He also noted the lack of air support and significant casualties resulting from German aerial dominance (Kalichava 2007).

On May 8, 1942, at 04:15, the German counteroffensive commenced with an intense aerial bombardment. General Vladimir Lvov, the commander of the 51st Army, was killed at the onset of the bombardment (Mel'tyukhov 2000, 191). The Wehrmacht surrounded the Soviets at the Kerch Strait. Lavrentiy and his friends were soon compelled to surrender. He recounted the hunger, thirst, and subsequent capture by the German forces on May 15, 1942. The Kerch operation signified Lavrentiy's shift from soldier to suspect. His survival elicited mistrust from Soviet authorities rather than honor. His physical anguish was exacerbated by the imminent stigma of being branded a traitor - an experience representative of the extensive postwar persecution confronting returning POWs.

5. Captivity at Buchenwald: Survival, Labor, and Dehumanization

Lavrentiy Kalichava, who suffered nearly three harrowing years at the notorious Buchenwald concentration camp from May 1942 to early April 1945. Lavrentiy obtained a vital reprieve with a simple wristband embellished with a red cross. This emblem would have averted his prompt execution by signifying that he was not involved in the deaths of a considerable number of German soldiers. To eradicate any possible leadership capable of organizing resistance within the camps, the German soldiers methodically executed top military officials within the initial days of captivity. The German forces utilized a significant contingent of Soviet prisoners of war as coerced laborers, allocating them to diverse arduous tasks (Merridale 2005, 134). Lavrentiy Kalichava was among those coerced into labor under severe conditions, aiding in the construction and maintenance of German military installations and other essential infrastructure. The system of coerced labor was ruthless. The Germans enforced harsh penalties on convicts deemed to have demonstrated "insufficient diligence." The punishment was severe, encompassing harsh beatings to execution, with no opportunity for clemency (Hayes 2001, 185–187). Lavrentiy recounted that he was forced to sleep outdoors, irrespective of the weather. Food was limited. In extreme conditions, prisoners resorted to consuming grass and rodents (Kalichava 2007). The arduous labor and unbearable living conditions that Lavrentiy Kalichava depicted were compounded by the horrific executions conducted by the German officers. A particularly terrifying method involved compelling convicts to stand in a line while a bullet was fired through the forehead of every second prisoner. Lavrentiy's survival of three horrific "raids" exemplifies his resilience and sheer fortune. He often attributed his survival not merely to luck, but also to his physical resilience and steadfast work ethic (Kalichava 2007). The Allied forces liberated the Buchenwald concentration camp on April 15, 1945,

thus concluding the unimaginable suffering experienced by its prisoners. Lavrentiy Kalichava recounted that the days subsequent to liberation were marked by an intense quest for independence. The former hostages, albeit weakened, were driven by optimism and utilized whatever available means of transportation to begin their arduous journey home (Kalichava 2007).

6. From Liberation to Suspicion: The Soviet Filtration System

Nevertheless, the ordeal for Soviet prisoners of war, including Lavrentiy, was far from over. At that time, he was not aware of the fact that individuals who endured Nazi custody and returned to Soviet territory faced a further grim ordeal - the notorious "filtration" process. Upon entering the USSR, they underwent meticulous examination by Soviet officials. They viewed returning captives with skepticism and often perceived them as possible traitors, rather than as heroes who had suffered unthinkable adversities (Applebaum 2007, 413–415; Polian 2003, 200–202). The Soviet Union's high command operated NKVD special centers, commonly known as POW filtration camps. Upon their return to Soviet soil, these camps served as the conduit for many hundred thousand Red Army men who had endured captivity under German forces. The main objective of these camps was not to rehabilitate or honor the soldiers, but to inflict intense psychological distress and conduct interrogations. The Soviet authorities sought to "break" each returning prisoner by demanding detailed reports of their survival during imprisonment. The Soviet system viewed surviving in the hands of adversaries as a possible sign of complicity or treachery, which constituted the fundamental presumption of guilt (Polian 2003, 207–209). In his seminal work, The Gulag Archipelago, the famous Soviet dissident and 1970 Nobel Prize laureate in literature, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, elucidated the catastrophic consequences of the Kerch Landing Operation. Solzhenitsyn explicitly criticized the Soviet Union, particularly highlighting Joseph Stalin's strategic errors in military operations. This strategic error was underscored by the significant differential in losses - the Soviet forces incurred devastating casualties, while the Germans suffered only around 4,000 manpower losses during the operation. Nonetheless, the Soviet authorities enforced a stringent policy against its own soldiers, instead of ascribing the failure to insufficient preparation and leadership (Solzhenitsyn [1973] 2003, 565-588). The system designated every returning prisoner of war as a "traitor," so seeking to transfer the accountability for the high command's disastrous judgments onto those who had suffered captivity. Lavrentiy Kalichava, designated to the Kaliningrad filtration camp and assigned by his unit number 032085, was among those who endured this horrific operation. He underwent 10 arduous months at that place from May 9, 1945, to March 14, 1946 (Archival record №114548, 1999). Lavrentiy recounted the excruciating torture techniques utilized by NKVD officers. The interrogations were predominantly carried out during the night hours. A dazzling light would suddenly rouse captives slumbering on frigid cell floors, hindering their ability to fully open their eyes. This confusion was promptly succeeded by a cold-water shower, inducing a shock. The subsequent interrogations were relentless, featuring the same inquiries posed repeatedly: "What is your name?"; "When were you apprehended?"; "What information did you disclose?"; "Why did you survive?" (Kalichava, 2007). The exercises, designed to erode the captives' morale and willpower, often prolonged into the night. Nonetheless, the Germans could not extract important information from him because of his limited access to strategic planning. The Soviet filtering apparatus, however, overlooked these distinctions, treating all returnees with equal suspicion and brutality (Applebaum 2007, 419–421). On March 14, 1946, on his 24th birthday, Lavrentiy Kalichava was finally released from the Kaliningrad filtration camp. He was officially demobilized on March 27, 1946; however, the release exacted a considerable toll. Lavrentiy was officially deprived of his military rank, a clear and intentional pronouncement by Soviet officials that labeled him a "Traitor of the Motherland." An armband emblazoned with the symbol of betrayal was conferred upon him as an extra emblem of dishonor. This conspicuous and humiliating sign set him apart from others, supporting the regime's merciless strategy of punishing people who had suffered captivity under enemy forces and clouded every facet of his return journey from Kaliningrad to Sokhumi. Boarding train number 97052 at Rozhkovo railway station (Archival record № 142160, 1999), he commenced his extended journey south, a path that would eventually lead him home, though not with the warm welcome he had anticipated. The overcrowded train lacked space for a former prisoner of war, leaving Lavrentiy with no other choice than to climb up the train's roof (Kalichava 2007). Thus, the second phase of Lavrentiy Kalichava's persecution - his treatment by the Soviet regime - mirrors broader trends that have garnered heightened scrutiny in trauma studies and the historiography of postwar repression. According to Cathy Caruth such repression generates "unclaimed experiences," wherein trauma is simultaneously experienced and denied (Caruth 1996, 3-8). Lavrentiy's arrival at the filtration camp signified not merely a physical confinement but also an epistemological one, wherein memory, suffering, and truth were redefined and regulated.

7. Rehabilitation and Erased Memory: Postwar Silence and Stigma

Lavrentiy's military status was formally reinstated on November 14, 1953. He was reestablished as a junior lieutenant in the medical corps, a modest but meaningful acknowledgment of his duty and resilience. However, it was not until July 31, 1967, that he was finally granted a military ID, a procedural formality that affirmed his full rehabilitation within the Soviet system ("Military ID № 213645, Lavrentiy Kalichava" 1967).

In subsequent years, Lavrentiy Kalichava received multiple medals of honor recognizing his status as a battle veteran. He was acknowledged for his achievements on every anniversary of the "Great Patriotic War," although no medal could alleviate the deep psychological wounds created by his combat experiences. Lavrentiy constantly faced the fear of being branded a traitor again, despite his official rehabilitation. He systematically obliterated all correspondence, images, and records linking him to his wartime history, tormented by the prospect of capture and subsequent execution. His later years were marked by his unwillingness to talk about his wartime memories, his imprisonment, and the challenging filtration process. Lavrentiy opted for silence to shield his family from the anguish of his gloomy recollections. Maurice Halbwachs's notion of collective memory appears to be relevant in this context. Halbwachs contends that memory is socially produced via collective frameworks that validate whether memories are recalled or suppressed (Halbwachs 1992, 38–40). Within the Soviet framework, returning POWs such as Kalichava were systematically marginalized from heroic wartime narratives, resulting in their exclusion from official memory and the consequent denial of symbolic rehabilitation. Their survival was not celebrated but rather pathologized.

Cathy Caruth's trauma theory elucidates the enduring psychological ramifications of this exclusion. Caruth asserts that trauma transcends mere violent events; it manifests as the deferred and unprocessed resurgence of those experiences, expressed through silence, fear, or repetition (Caruth 1996, 4–7). Kalichava's enduring hesitance to address his wartime history - his obliteration of documentation and apprehension of repeated persecution - can be interpreted as an expression of this traumatic latency. His trauma encompassed not only the brutality of Nazi imprisonment but also the epistemological violence of governmental erasure and distrust.

Ultimately, Michel Foucault's theory of disciplinary authority posits that contemporary authority functions not alone via legislation but also through institutions that standardize conduct, classify deviance, and generate obedient individuals (Foucault [1977] 1995, 177–184). Soviet filtration camps, characterized by rigorous monitoring, interrogation, and emblematic indicators such as armbands of shame, operated distinctly as disciplinary environments. They rendered surviving illegal, transformed social reintegration into a means of control, and imprinted guilt upon the bodies and identities of former prisoners of war. Kalichava's narrative is not merely an individual tragedy, but also an examination of how governmental structures handle memory, trauma, and deviance. The Soviet filtration system has been extensively debated in historiography, particularly over its role as a mechanism of blanket repression or selective punishment. Foundational texts by Pavel Polian and Anne Applebaum depict the postwar Soviet regime as profoundly distrustful of its returning soldiers, highlighting the state's dependence on punitive filtration methods that labeled survivors of Nazi captivity as probable collaborators rather than heroes (Polian 2003, 238–240; Applebaum 2007, 579–582). Nanci Adler and Mark Edele contend that social reintegration remained unattainable even post-formal rehabilitation, with the enduring stigma faced by former prisoners illustrating a regime reluctant to completely absolve survival (Adler 2002, 65–68; Edele 2008, 144–149). Lavrentiy Kalichava's case exemplifies blanket repression, as his treatment closely corresponds with the interpretations of Polian and Adler. His personal experience thus substantiates the assertion that Soviet filtration policy actively criminalized surviving and employed bureaucratic procedures to alter wartime memory. Despite the fact that this case study focuses on Lavrentiy Kalichava, its importance is amplified when considered within the wider framework of postwar Soviet repression. Kalichava's experience parallels that of several hundred Red Army soldiers from Ukraine, the Baltic republics, and Central Asia who, after enduring Nazi captivity and demonstrating loyalty, faced filtration, demotion, and social shame upon their return.

8. CONCLUSION

Lavrentiy Kalichava died on January 17, 2008, at the age of 86. His personal experience provides a compelling perspective for analyzing the overarching dynamics of postwar Soviet repression, memory politics, and survival. His journey - from Red Army conscript to Buchenwald inmate, from NKVD scrutiny to formal rehabilitation - illuminates the systemic cruelty inherent in the Soviet filtration system. Instead

of commemorating survivors of Nazi imprisonment, the administration implemented disciplinary measures that redefined loyalty and criminalized resilience, thereby distorting wartime memory and inflicting enduring psychological trauma.

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