

Article

Soteriology of Suffering: Evangelical Christians in Russia and the Trauma of Political Repression

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Received: 26 September 2020; Accepted: 5 November 2020; Published: 9 November 2020



Abstract: This article, based on 60 in-depth interviews with the descendants of survivors of political repression, aims at finding out how making sense of a collective traumatogenic experience differs in the case of Evangelical (Baptist and Pentecostal) communities compared with the rest of the cohort. The authors conclude that, in the case of people without religious affiliation, an intergenerational memory transmission mechanism is absent; descendants up to the fifth generation envision the suffering of their ancestors as accidental and meaningless for the present and future. As a result, most descendants refuse to participate in the process of trauma creation. Alternatively, in the final master narrative of the Pentecostals and Baptists, the persecution was an inevitable result of faith. Evangelical descendants construct cultural trauma around a providential event needed to ensure individual salvation and to prevent secularization of the church; for them suffering remains meaningful for the present and future. This allows for the transformation of the stigma that was spoiling their collective identity into a badge of honor, into stigmata, revealing that these believers follow the way of Christ.

Keywords: cultural trauma; political repression; Evangelicals; Baptists; Pentecostals

1. Introduction

Individual and collective traumatizing experience became the calling card of Russian (Soviet) history in the 20th century. Unexpected destruction of the established life world and social order and recurrent state-induced oppression forced individuals and collectivities to look for ways of survival and self-preservation. In many aspects their success depended on the extent to which they were able to make sense of negative experiences. This production of meaning was directly linked to *Weltanschauung*; therefore, it is particularly important for us to find out how practicing members of religious groups cope with the traumatizing events of the past. Evangelical communities (Baptists and Pentecostals) in the USSR were seriously affected by state antireligious policies and had to work out specific social reactions and world outlook (on their history see: [Sawatsky 1981](#); [Nikolskaia 2009](#); [Glushaev 2013](#); [Beliakova and Kliueva 2019](#); etc.). At the moment, Baptist and Pentecostal communities are highly consolidated and generally have shared positions on the sensitive issues related to the

persecutions, notwithstanding personal psychological characteristics and biographic peculiarities of each believer. We focus not on survivors, but rather on the narratives of the second, third, and younger generations of believers; this approach allows for the formation of conclusions about the meaning of the traumatizing events for whole communities.

This article aims to find out how making sense of a collective traumatogenic experience differs in the case of membership in a religious group with clear boundaries if compared with the society at large. We theorize that specific attitudes of Evangelicals, shaped by their religious beliefs, are able to transform their memories into a coherent master narrative that makes the traumatizing past meaningful for the present and future of the communities. We suggest that our research adds more empirical data into building a grounded theory that would explain why some faith-based collectivities demonstrate extraordinary techniques of transforming the traumatizing events of the past into a source of spiritual strength and consolidation.

Our research is based on the constructivist concept of cultural trauma that emphasizes a gap between the traumatogenic situation of individual and collective suffering and the construction of trauma as a socially produced representation of this situation (Eyerman 2001; Sztompka 2004; Eyerman et al. 2011; Alexander 2012). Trauma, unlike suffering per se, should have meaning that does not remain in the past together with the traumatogenic event, but rather retains its importance for a given collectivity in the present, shaping, at the same time, its vision of the future (Alexander 2004; Smelser 2004). Constructivist approach presumes that making trauma out of a traumatogenic event requires a significant time distance, thus becoming a task for subsequent generations that never experienced the original event (Eyerman 2004, pp. 74–75).

The problem of collective memory transmission from survivors to their children and then to grandchildren has been recognized as important long ago; as Chris van der Merwe and Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela formulate, “the ‘language’ of trauma is etched in the memory of many victims of traumatic experience and passed on to the next generation and to the next” (van der Merwe and Gobodo-Madikizela 2007, p. 33). Transgenerational transmission has mostly been discussed in the framework of a psychoanalytical approach to collective traumas (see: Barocas 1973; Bergmann and Jucovy 1982; Sigal and Weinfeld 1989; Caruth 1991; Hass 1996; Felsen 1998; Grand 2000; Volkan 2001; Apprey 2003; Argenti and Schramm 2010; Schwab 2010; Fromm 2012; Bezo and Maggi 2015; O’Loughlin and Charles 2015; Salberg and Grand 2017; Nir 2018; etc.). At the same time, a comprehensive or even purely constructivist approach to transgenerational transmission of cultural traumas is gradually gaining recognition internationally (see: Antze and Lambek 1996; Danieli 1998; Cohen-Pfister and Wienroeder-Skinner 2006; Oushakine and Trubina 2009; Anikin 2014; Kwan 2015; Gobodo-Madikizela 2016; Lacapra 2016; Anikin and Golovashina 2017; Golovashina 2018; Markert 2019; Artiomenko 2020; etc.). Fewer publications are focused on religious communities dealing with transgenerationally transmitted memories of a traumatogenic situation (see: Ghadirian 1998; Sawatsky 2002; Ajatnoah-Gyadu 2004¹; Eriksson and Yeh 2012; Bryant-Davis and Wong 2013; Krahn 2013; Mercer 2015; Naseri 2015; Arel and Rambo 2016; Devgan 2018; Girma 2018; Ahammed 2019; Smith 2019; Jeater 2020; etc.); they show that faith is always an important factor in coping with the traumatizing past.

Approaching political repression in the Soviet Union as a series of traumatogenic events has become problematic for multiple reasons (see: Miskova 2019); it was definitely not a single outburst of violence against one group with visible borders, but rather a long process of oppressing very different groups using diverse methods—from full-scale terror to public ridicule. As a result of this oppression the environments of multiple individuals and collectivities suddenly shifted “in an unforeseen and unwelcome manner” (Alexander 2004, p. 2), thus signifying the traumatogenic nature of the events in question. There is already academic literature on state-induced repression in the Soviet Union

¹ Although this publication deals with “generational/ancestral curses” in Ghana, we see it as an analogy to transgenerational traumatogenic memories; parallels between the two are common.

understood in terms of social and cultural trauma, dedicated to survivors and the “second generation” (see: Adler 2005; Coleman and Podolskij 2007; Gheith and Jolluck 2011; Dobrenko and Shcherbenok 2011; Kelly 2011; Sarkisova and Shevchenko 2011; Wakamiya 2011; Adler 2013; Etkind 2013; Koldushko 2019; etc.), but most of it pays no specific attention to the experience of Evangelical communities.

2. Methodology

The research is based on a series of semistructured in-depth interviews with the descendants of survivors (or, sometimes, non-survivors) of political repression in the USSR. The interviews were conducted in accordance with a specially prepared guide that allowed changes to the order of questions, departures from the main topic, and adding, when necessary, asking situational clarifying questions. Interviews were conducted to find out how family memories of repression acquire new meanings for the next generations. We did not focus on a specific generation, location, or event; the only requirement was that the original situation should have happened in the Soviet Union. Interviews were collected on the territory of Russia in 2019. In total, we interviewed 60 people, men and women, aged 19 to 90 (data analysis was done without taking into consideration age and gender of the interviewees, because we did not find meaningful narrative differences that would depend on these variables)². In all cases the traumatizing situation took place no earlier than 40 years before the moment of interviewing. The research was of a qualitative nature and involved no quantitative methods of analysis. According to survey article by Gentles and collaborators, “the general aim of sampling in qualitative research is to acquire information that is useful for understanding the complexity, depth, variation, or context surrounding a phenomenon, rather than to represent populations as in quantitative research” (Gentles et al. 2015, p. 1782); subsequently, 12 interviews make a sufficient sample size for a homogenous community (Guest et al. 2006, p. 76), when more samples add little new information to the study. In the case of a heterogeneous cohort, the sufficient number of interviews is estimated at 30 to 60 (Morse 2000, p. 4).

The topic of interviews was highly sensitive and concerned intimate details of familial life; that is why we used snowball sampling (also known as “chain referral”) to access the participants. Evangelicals were not targets of the research; they appeared in our focus thanks to another interlocutor. As a result, we were able to interview 12 members of consolidated Evangelical (Baptist and Pentecostal) communities, whose ancestors underwent the so-called “Khrushchev’s persecutions” in 1958–1964, although some were also affected by the antireligious campaigns of the 1930s, or occasionally repressed as late as the 1970s–1980s. In most cases we interviewed members of one family representing the second and third generations after the traumatogenic event. Baptist interviewees belong to a faith community known as an “independent brotherhood”³ and the Pentecostals to communities that renounce state registration of religious organizations.

Normally we did not ask the informants about their religion and considered them religiously non-affiliated; their ancestors were also repressed not on the basis of religion, with very few exceptions. The Evangelicals accentuated their religious affiliation voluntarily and without our questions, and we were able to identify them as a specific group within the cohort (at the same time, they were reluctant about providing any other demographical information, such as age). Although it was not our initial task, the authors envisioned this situation as a chance to find out what was specific about the Evangelical way of making sense of the political repression compared with the rest of the cohort.

To answer the research question we analyzed the interviews using the following markers: (1) speaking about the traumatogenic situation within the family or outside it; (2) emotional

² To maximize anonymity of the participants we do not disclose their places of living or ethnic origins, and use codes instead of names; each code includes religious affiliation (E—Evangelical; N—non-affiliated) and age (approximate age indicated by ~); in the case of several people of the same age they are differentiated by using additional numbers.

³ Independent Baptists in the early 1960s either left the All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians—Baptists created by the Soviet authorities in 1944 to unite Baptists and Pentecostals—or were never part of the agreement.

significance of the traumatizing experience for the interviewee; and (3) evaluation of the meaning of the traumatogenic situation for the present and future of the descendants. This analysis is illustrated below with the most telling and typical quotations. Occasionally we also used printed sources produced by Evangelicals and recurrently referred to by our interlocutors, such as memoirs of the survivors.

3. The Traumatic Narratives

In most families of the non-affiliated interviewees, speaking about the traumatizing experience of the past is sporadic. The elder family members never encouraged such talks, either because of safety concerns: “My grandma silently and very skillfully interrupted my grandpa, because, from her viewpoint, this talk was not for children, and dangerous in general” (N61), or unwillingness to come back to unpleasant memories: “Grandma did not really like recalling it, because she witnessed it when she was four or five years old” (N51-1); “This topic was raised not often—no one liked to recall it. Generally, I do not tell anyone about it” (N28). The descendants grew up convinced that this experience was something not to be discussed publicly, outside the family circle, or even in the presence of family members: “It was just information not for spreading” (N51-1); “We never discussed it with friends; also, we tried not to talk about such bad things with the family” (N59); “It was never broadly discussed; it was inside the family” (N45). Only in rare cases did the non-affiliated interviewees know details about the lives of their ancestors, but it was, as well as in the cases researched by Duprat-Kushtanina (2013, p. 236), information not so much about the original traumatogenic situation, but rather about some additional circumstances making this situation important for the present (a romantic affair, etc.). Sometimes the original situation was utilized by parents to give a lesson to children; for example, imprisonment for an anecdote, or for an innocent remark appeared as “just” when victims were misbehaving: “I was telling about it to my children, when they were wee, to teach them how to joke correctly” (N55).

Evangelical families continuously come back to the past and willingly talk about it, envisioning the traumatizing situations not as unexplainable tears that fracture otherwise normal life, but more as something they always expected as Christians living in a “godless” state: “We did not call it persecution—it was normal life for us [. . .] I understood that it was actually the life of a faithful person. It would be different if unexpected, but we were always in waiting” (E~65); “I had a feeling that it was natural, that it was our way as Christians, that it should be like this, that it would be because we were Christians [. . .] I never had that feeling that I was oppressed” (E~68). Sometimes the interviewees even referred to family memories as “good” and “joyful”: “Just sort of joyful, because my parents were like this, that they were not the children of the age [. . .] It is a very pleasant feeling” (E~50-1). Speaking about his father, who was arrested immediately after a night shift, an Evangelical recounted his father’s view of the situation: “They wanted to punish me and put me in a cell, he [the father] said, and I had some rest, I did not even wake up to eat; it had been such a heavy week with night shifts” (E~68).

Evangelical believers preserve and constantly update their collective reminiscence about the persecutions not just in families, but also within communities. They did so in the Soviet period as well: “People were coming to our home, to see Dad. Those brothers, they were talking about chains, persecutions, about various things. We listened to them with admiration, holding our breath” (E~55). Some Evangelicals even managed to support clandestine printing shops, where they published memoirs about persecutions, such as *Joy of a Lost Life*, often mentioned by our interlocutors.

Many of the non-affiliated descendants, in the absence of family memories, rely on external sources such as school lessons, TV shows, or archives: “We do not much ask grandmas and grandpas; we learn everything at school” (N19-1); “I was the first in the family to think about it [. . .]; I even went to the *oblast* archive to learn the real truth about it” (N19-4). As a result, their narrations, like those collected by Duprat-Kushtanina, often rest on pure facts and are deprived of the emotions (Duprat-Kushtanina 2013, p. 228). Some interlocutors demonstrate striking indifference to atrocities as if their familial past were an illustration in a history textbook: “I sort of don’t really like digging into it.

What happened, happened" (N46); "Of course, it is like the books" (N43); "Everyone is alive and healthy; they came back as adults [. . .], and everything is, generally speaking, fine [. . .] It is like watching a film [. . .]; it didn't happen to me; it was long ago. May be I should be ashamed of admitting this, but I was never much into that; it did not interest me" (N19-1); "He was repressed [. . .] it is probably not very good, but I see nothing bad about it" (N19-2). Evangelicals, especially the youngest generation, sometimes demonstrate similar attitudes, but generally they do not rely on external sources, including archives: "I believe much more the things told by my grandma and father, and even more so by my uncle" (E~65); "It is interesting for children and grandchildren; they ask, 'Daddy, and what about this, and how did you live there, and what did you do in that time?'" (E~49).

Emotionally estranged, non-affiliated descendants envision the traumatizing situation as something that took place long ago, meaningless for their present and future (especially, although not specifically, the youngest generation): "The Great Patriotic war was also a century ago; many things were a century ago" (N18); "Each generation is interested in this less and less; it becomes of lesser meaning [. . .] No one recalls it any more" (N19-1); "The past is the past. Many years passed after all this" (N21); "I would not like to stir the past" (N51-1); "All this passed; why scratch this wound" (N56). Non-retrieved memory about the traumatizing events gradually evaporates from the family narratives: "Of course, I would like to learn about it, but there is no one to learn from, no relatives" (N64); "My mom is no more, grandpa is long since gone. There is no one left to ask" (N51-2).

Non-affiliated descendants imagine their ancestors' suffering as arbitrary, anonymous, and deprived of any meaning: "He was not the only one like this; many people suffered in that time without fault [. . .] such were the times, and we cannot correct it" (N82); "In that time other people suffered, more than one hundred thousand" (N59); "Every person had something like this in life. I think most families in Russia were somehow repressed" (N19-3); "I regret so much about my relatives, but I do not separate them from the history of the whole nation" (N43). Ancestors are represented as victims of state machinery, where no one bears responsibility for their fate: "I think [the perpetrators] did not want to do it; but such were the times, and something forced them to do it" (N64); "The chair of the collective farm would shrug and say: 'Such were the times. If not me—than someone else.' That's all" (N51-1). "Such was the time; there was an order and people went . . . and expropriated, so to speak, everything in favor of the Soviet government. They did their job . . ." (N61); "It was a war. No one is to blame" (N~20); "[The perpetrators] did not want to do it [. . .]; they had no other choice. It was war time [. . .] that's how the regime was" (N20).

Alternatively, Pentecostals and Baptists demonstrate highly individualized and emotional attitudes to the events of the past: "And Dad told me: 'Probably, I was not wise enough to bring up all my 10 children, six sons and four daughters, on my own; [. . .] So the investigator and prosecutor did it in my name [. . .], [because] when I was standing unable to say anything, able just to remain faithful to God, my children saw it and it ignited their wish to be like their father . . . '" (E~42). Although the state machinery remains anonymous to them ("I understand that it was, generally speaking, such a state policy" (E~60); "The party and the party people [. . .], they have to do the will of those above them" (E~65); "They did what they were told to do" (E~49)), its hostility to Evangelical Christians is fully intelligible and even logical.

Evangelical interlocutors are far from understanding their relatives as arbitrary victims; for them, the persecution was an inevitable result of faith: "My soul is happy for my parents, that they happened to be part of that minority [. . .] glasses were being put on them, and they were taking them off [. . .]; they have preserved their sight" (E~50-1); "From the beginning I knew about the authorities, that the police always persecute; they try to disperse divine worships, where believers get together" (E~65). Persecution was something they expected based on the Biblical text: "Apostles—well, they never concealed it—used to say to the newly converted Christians the news that they would have to suffer a lot" (E~65). One interviewee recalls that even being at primary school during the persecutions, he was

fully aware of differences between himself and the others: “They put a little star on me; I did not want it; but they put it on [. . .] then I decided firmly: ‘Enough; I will take it off . . . ’” (E~50-2).⁴

Evangelicals do not leave the fact of suffering in the past; for them it remains meaningful for the present and future, and they see no watershed between themselves and the older generation: “We were happy about being persecuted, because [. . .] our parents had prepared us that Christ was persecuted and you would be persecuted. [. . . We] saw that God evidently exists and that we were on the right path” (E~42); “I was proud of . . . [being acquainted] with such faithful believers, so spiritually strong that they withstood it. Of course, I also tried it on. Would I withstand those repressions, those difficulties?” (E16); “Of course, we tried it on: And me, could I? You know, I was once sort of really scared and upset. And I should say, thanks to God this fear was overcome. Once I listened to a sermon. One brother was preaching and he said: ‘In the Acts of the Apostles it was written that apostles were taken and beaten up, and they rejoiced at this, that they in the name of God had this honor . . . ’ [. . .] And, in fact, later I understood that one should have the honor, and that I was not strong enough to have the honor of this suffering” (E~65).

Evaluating their familial histories, the non-affiliated mostly used words like “resentment,” “bitterness,” “hurt,” “wound,” and similar. The Russian word they used, *obida*, also has an undertone of not understanding why terrible things happened to good people: “It hurts that the state has done this with my family” (N28); “I was strongly possessed by feelings of injustice” (N22); “No specific feelings, just grievance because of my relatives” (N45); “It hurts and offends me that my great-grandparents were treated this way” (N19-3); “Young people still feel this pain” (N60). The interviewees, especially the seniors, got distressed; they started weeping; sometimes their speech became indiscreet.

Evangelicals demonstrated no resentment or bitterness: “There have been no wounds,” an interviewee emphasized (E~50-1). Some interlocutors openly stated that they understood state-induced repression as “suffering for God” (E~55), as a spiritual exercise of soteriological significance. Persecution becomes not a punishment, but a grace that prevents believers from stepping off the true path: “We learn from Him. He said, ‘If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also’ [John 15:20]. [. . .] It means, this is our way” (E~50-2). Evangelicals understand the traumatizing event as a chance to follow the example of Christ: “‘And he was numbered with the transgressors’ [Isaiah 53: 12]; I mean, at school we were on the same level as bullies. They were not in *Pioneers*⁵ because of their behavior, while we, for our faith. We went to the army and did not touch weapons; both of us went to construction regiments. And we were in jails together, us and them. We were on the same level, always; it has been that way since the time of Christ” (E~50-1).

Evangelical writers compare persecutions to a melting oven, where gold (i.e., faith) gets purified and becomes more precious (see: Vins 2003, p. 218): “When there are persecutions, the Church gets purified; it can see God brightly lit. It is very precious for us” (E~55). Poetry of evangelicals is often dedicated to the idea of ordeal leading to salvation. Some believers agreed to go into exile voluntarily, following their relatives, “to learn lessons” (E~55). Persecutions also help the community of the faithful to avoid the spoiling influences of the outside: “When the Church is persecuted, it lives. After the end of persecution, God’s people merge with the world [. . .]; therefore for us these conditions are natural” (E~65); “To be loved by God, the world should hate us; to be accepted in the Heaven, we inevitably become exiles here” (Vins 2003, p. 196). Inspired by memories, contemporary believers suggest that they too may face persecution in the future; thus, the suffering of the past remains meaningful and should not be forgotten: “We had some short rest and now all this is beginning again” (E~68); “If, let’s

⁴ Schoolchildren from ages seven to nine in the Soviet Union were united into a movement of Little Octobrists, “grandchildren of Lenin”; they wore a red star with a portrait of Lenin as a child. Membership in the movement was not appropriate for kids from religious families, because the movement presupposed having no religious “superstitions.”

⁵ Schoolchildren from ages 10 to 14 were members of the Organization of the Young Pioneers; it resembled the Boy Scouts, but was based on Communist ideology.

say, this time returns and there will be persecutions again, there will be no place for us to go. And if we again trust in God as well as our grandfathers, we will stand" (E~24).

Suffering in the eyes of Evangelicals is neither arbitrary nor meaningless; it is providential: "If God allows and we deserve it, we see it as an honor. God allows this because He has some plans regarding it. And when the Church enters this period, it means that God has some intentions to make the Church better; for real heroes of faith to emerge, for people to see Him in better light. Generally, God has allowed this in history for people to see God better. And now people see God" (E~55); "In the time of persecutions one becomes spiritually more keen; one begins to pray more, and to fast; they sort of strengthen faith. And, to put it rightly, if no one touches us, we become weak in faith. [. . .] Vice versa, persecutions make faith stronger. We get closer to God" (E~57).

4. Discussion and Analysis

Literature dedicated to transgenerational transmission of traumatizing memories about the political oppression in the Soviet Union (Baker and Gippenreiter 1998; Duprat-Kushtanina 2013; Shemanova 2016; Omelchenko and Andreyeva 2017; Epple 2020) mostly confirms our generalizations regarding people without clear religious affiliation. An intergenerational memory transmission mechanism is, in fact, absent; this results in multiple blank spaces or spots where certain events, people, or periods have been completely erased from the stories passed down to the youngest generations (Duprat-Kushtanina 2013, p. 226; see also: Wertsch 2008; Logunova 2009; Murav 2011; Krasnoborov 2017; etc.). Researchers conclude that each person or family survived traumatogenic events individually, and not as a collective or generational trauma (see for example: Khazanov 2008; Koldushko 2019). Suffering was mostly perceived as meaningless; sometimes victims and their descendants tried to ascribe meaning to it, imagining that it was, for some reason, needful for the state or the Communist party (Adler 2013, pp. 211–238; see also: Skultans 1998; Dobson 2010; Etkind 2013; Ulturgasheva 2015; Kravchenko 2015; etc.). These explanations are still echoed in the narratives of non-affiliated descendants: "there were some processes that probably had to happen in the country; and victims were probably, justified" (N19-5). As a result, most descendants refuse to participate in the process of trauma creation, "leaving others to suffer alone" (Alexander 2004, p. 1).

Narrating the traumatizing event is currently understood as the central element in making this experience meaningful, i.e., in constructing a cultural trauma out of much individual suffering (Bokore 2013; Gobodo-Madikizela 2015, 2016; Clark 2018; Tadjoo 2019; etc.). "Narrative is about making sense of our lives, integrating the past with the present with a view to how we intend to live our lives in the future," Hunt and McHale correctly suggest (Hunt and McHale 2007, p. 43). According to Sztompka, collective trauma is constructed when "people start to talk about it, exchange observations and experiences, gossip and rumors, formulate diagnoses and myths, identify causes or villains, look for conspiracies, decide to do something about it, envisage coping methods [. . .]. The whole 'meaning industry' full of rich narratives focuses on giving sense to the common and shared occurrences" (Sztompka 2004, p. 160). This exchange of narratives is exactly what is lacking in the contemporary way of speaking about political repression in Russia, and some authors even suggest developing non-narrative memory practices to break this vicious circle (Gheith 2007).

Alternatively, the Evangelical believers manage to work out and to pass along across generations their own model of coping with traumatizing situations from the past. In the final master narrative, suffering is meaningful both for individual believers and for collectivities: It provides for spiritual improvement and protects from the destructive influences of the secular world. No one in this narrative suffers alone or is repressed on arbitrary grounds; everything is part of God's plan: "He has allowed Nazism, Communism, etc. to exist; we would cross all this out; we would prevent doing all this. But there is some great providence [here]" (E~50-1). Moreover, suffering in the past remains meaningful for the present and future, and becomes an inseparable, constitutive part of the group's identity: "Tragedy consolidates people" (E16). Now the traumatizing event cannot simply be erased from memory and history because it is located beyond time and space.

The Evangelical approach to cultural trauma cannot be explained simply due to the fact that their traumatizing experiences are relatively fresh and that most of descendants (although not all of them) know the traumatized generation personally (i.e., they are their children and grandchildren). The second generation after the Gulag also personally knew the survivors—their parents and grandparents; nevertheless, this generation made a collective choice in favor of not transmitting the memory about the traumatizing event across generations: “Although [their parents] were repressed, it seems that they [the grandparents] do not remember it” (N19-4). The older generation that “had total control of the family memory which was transmitted or not transmitted to the younger generations” (Duprat-Kushtanina 2013, pp. 234–35) was responsible for the disruption of memory, although their reasons (protecting the younger generation from unpleasant experiences) were understandable. In Evangelical families the generation of children made a choice in favor of transmission, providing their descendants not only with a continuous family history without blank spots, but also with a master narrative to make sense of what happened.

5. Conclusions

Although the word “trauma” has many negative connotations, we see a process of constructing a cultural trauma in a positive light because it helps individuals and communities to create master narratives about the traumatogenic event and to integrate it into the past, present, and future of a collectivity. This cultural trauma is made of multiple personal, familial, and collective memories organized into a coherent narrative, because “memory is useless without meaning” (Hunt and McHale 2007, p. 55). Interviewees without religious affiliation are not able to fulfill this task; instead of providing meaning for the negative experience, they use formulaic explanations loaned from the current social discourse about political repression. We conclude that most descendants still possess scattered memories that present the suffering of their ancestors as arbitrary, meaningless, and accidental, as something to be left behind as soon as possible. However, it was clear from our interviews and from the other available research work that the memories of the traumatizing situations continue to bother the descendants up to the fifth generation (great-great-grandchildren of the victims), although it remains unclear how this fact may impact society at large. Most descendants feel the negative consequences of the traumatizing events, such as resentment and bitterness, but never achieve the positive results of cultural trauma—reconciliation and forgiveness.

The Evangelical approach to traumatizing events is completely different. It is not a psychoanalytical denial (although it may resemble it), but rather a construction of cultural trauma by making a traumatogenic event meaningful for collective identity in the past, present, and future. The suffering of ancestors is not seen as arbitrary and unexplainable; it is an expected and a logical consequence of being Christian in an atheist state. Moreover, the Evangelicals create individual, familial, and group memories of persecutions into a master narrative that makes the trauma a providential event needed to ensure individual salvation and to prevent secularization of the church. This allows, if not the curing of the trauma, the ability to cope with it, transforming the stigma that was spoiling their collective identity (see: Goffman 1963) into a badge of honor, into stigmata, revealing that these believers follow the way of Christ. The final image of suffering for faith cannot, of course, be used to describe the historical reality of traumatogenic events, but makes them meaningful and becomes the basis for withstanding similar ordeals in the present and future.

Author Contributions: A.M.: Data curation, Investigation, Project administration, Writing; S.R.: Data curation, Investigation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing; R.B.: Conceptualization, Investigation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: The research for this article was funded by the Russian Foundation for Basic Research, grant 19-511-60005, “Legacies of dehumanization: a transnational perspective.”

Acknowledgments: The authors would like to thank the students of the Financial University under the Government of the Russian Federation who assisted in collecting interviews.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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