



Sections 



Discovery of rare minerals needed for mobile phones hits Arctic's indigenous protectors

People

Will Sweden's green industrial revolution endanger one of Europe's last wildernesses where reindeer roam?



Naomi O'Leary

Sun Jan 22 2023 - 05:00



On the wall of Ingemar Blind's snowbound office, 200km north of the Arctic Circle, is pinned a map.

It shows his community's reindeer traditional herding lands, stretching in a long strip from the mountains of Norway in the high western north where the reindeer and their herders spend their summer, down to the shelter of the winter grazing forests of Sweden in the east.

The map is carefully annotated. The handmade map key reads "migration route", "narrow passage", "grazing paddock" and, importantly, "calving grounds", the southern slopes rich in lichen, moors and streams where female reindeer need undisturbed time to give birth to the herd's next generation.

Blind (63) is the chairman of the indigenous Sámi village of Girjas, and one of a few thousand people in Sweden who still live by traditional reindeer herding, a way of life that archeological records suggest goes back at least 1,000 years.

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The map on his office wall demonstrates the intimate reliance of his community on the land, one of Europe’s last remaining pockets of wilderness, which has been divided and encroached upon by a century of development, by climate change and perhaps now again by a push for a ‘green industrial revolution’ in Sweden’s high north.

Just a few kilometres away from this office, Sweden’s state-owned LKAB mining firm has announced the discovery of Europe’s largest known deposit of rare-earth minerals – materials needed for mobile phones, wind power turbines and electric cars.



LKAB mine in Kiruna. Photograph: Johannes Frandsen/Regeringskansliet/Swedish Precedency of the Council of Europe

“If we’re going to be able to make the green transition, all of these rare-earth elements are important. They’re important for the new technology paving the way

for the future of the European Union,” Sweden’s deputy prime minister and energy, business, and industry minister Ebba Busch told The Irish Times as she unveiled the discovery in a hard hat, half a kilometre below the surface within the Kiruna mine.

“This is the million-dollar question: is it possible to combine economic growth while at the same time reaching high-set climate goals?” she said. “And I say the answer is yes.”

In a statement issued after the discovery was announced, the Gabna Sámi community said the new mine would “split a traditional area for Sámi reindeer herding in Kiruna into two disconnected areas” and “cut off the last reindeer trail passing Kiruna”.

‘The water is getting warmer’

Winters were colder when he was young, Blind remembers. The Arctic has warmed at twice the rate of the rest of the world as the blanket of carbon created by the industrial age traps in heat across the planet. It is two degrees warmer on average here than it was before the industrial revolution got under way in earnest in England in the 1830s as coal and iron ore mining fuelled the start of mass production.

The warming has brought uncanny changes to the landscape.

“The water is getting warmer and you’re getting some kind of fish I’ve never seen before. It’s some kind of fish that likes warmer water. They’re coming higher and higher,” Blind says.



A Sámi flag at open air museum Nutti Sámi Siida, Sweden. Photograph: Naomi O'Leary

The great Torneträsk lake freezes about 40 days fewer than it did at the start of the 1990s. Each additional degree of warmth allows the air to carry 7 per cent more moisture, so the dry frozen winters are giving way to relentless snow.

The Sámi language famously has many words for the shimmering Arctic light and for different qualities of snow, capturing distinctions that for them can be a matter of life or death.

Last winter, Blind recalled coming across animal carcasses in the forest. “It is very disturbing,” he said. “It died a lot of moose. It died a lot of reindeer too. Nothing to eat.”

Mass deaths of grazing animals in the Arctic have been blamed on a kind of snow that Blind said was called “skilzi” or “skildji”. It is caused by the new phenomenon of rain falling on snow, something that should not happen during the Arctic winter. The surface of the snow then freezes, creating a hard ice plate.



Reindeer in the Sámi village of Girjas, Sweden. Photograph: Naomi O'Leary

Reindeer find food by nudging through snow to find the lichens preserved beneath: skilzi shuts their food behind an unbreakable pane of ice.

There are other factors at work too. The availability of pastures that are rich in lichen fell by 70 per cent in northern Sweden between 1953 and 2013, according to scientific study, as forests with the older trees that the lichens grow among were clear-felled for Sweden's hungry forestry industry.

Sweden is the world's second-largest exporter of paper, paper pulp and sawn timber, an industry that, like wood pellet fuel, is often promoted as climate-friendly because wood is biodegradable and trees are replanted. It nevertheless brings profound change to the landscape and severe consequences for biodiversity, because the replacement trees are short-lived and identical, creating vast tracts of tree farms with little wildlife.

"I think the biggest change was when the wood company – they cut all trees down," Blind said, referring to Sveaskog, the Swedish state forestry company. "When they cut all the trees, the wind came and packed the snow very hard, and the reindeer can't eat."

There are now deep fears among the Sámi over what the next wave of green development may bring.

‘Remember, always fight for the land’

Here in Kiruna, a mountain that is half-eaten by the mining of Europe’s biggest iron ore producer looms over a settlement that began in the 1890s. The story told on the LKAB website is that the location of the iron seam was revealed by a member of the Sámi, who sold the information in exchange for 100 Swedish riksdaler and a lifelong exemption from tax.

This part of Sweden is now at the cutting edge of efforts to create a new green industrial revolution. Kiruna is home to some of the world’s most advanced attempts to create steel from iron using hydrogen, something that removes the production of carbon from the process, offering the prospect of decarbonising an industry that accounts for about 7 per cent of the world’s emissions.



Open air museum Nutti Sámi Siida: One of a few thousand people in Sweden still live by traditional reindeer herding, a way of life that archeological records suggest goes back at least 1,000 years. Photograph: Naomi O'Leary

It's on advances such as this that European leaders have pinned their hopes of achieving the EU's climate goals of cutting greenhouse gas emissions 55 per cent by 2030 and ending the production of combustion engines by 2035, in a bid to avoid the catastrophic levels of climate change that greater warming would bring.

Visiting Kiruna, European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen praised its advances in clean tech and welcomed the rare-earth minerals discovery as "great news" that would help Europe reduce its dependency on such exports from China. The EU would soon introduce new legislation aimed to make it easier for green projects to get permits, she announced.

“I hear over and over again, in these renewable projects, always it’s the permitting question,” Dr von der Leyen said.

The chief executive of LKAB, Jan Mostrom, told The Irish Times that there was a need to ease “layer of layers of rules and regulations” that he said hampered the development of a business that is as green as a mine can be.

“It’s very complicated, and it’s very time consuming to pursue all these environmental permits,” he said.

He acknowledged that there were likely to be “different interests” with the Sámi. “I’m totally confident that we can coexist, but that means that we have to adjust,” he said.

The Sámi parliament, elected to represent the interests of the community, is a stakeholder in the permitting process. Stefan Mikaelsson, the vice-chairman of the parliament’s board, told journalists that preserving Europe’s remaining wildlife was vital for the continent along with cutting emissions, and that no one should pretend that preserving the Amazon rainforest alone would allow for unlimited development in Europe.

“We don’t want any more extraction of natural resources,” Mikaelsson said. “We have to change as a continent our habits and decisions.”

Speaking at his desk as snow gathered on the windowsill outside, Blind smiled with confidence.



Ingemar Blind, chairman of Girjas Sámi village, in his office. Photograph: Naomi O'Leary

“They take everything they can, but now it’s getting harder and harder for the Swedish government to take things. We were in the great court,” he recalled.

He was remembering the great legal victory of 2020, when Girjas village won against the state in the Swedish supreme court. The battle had begun in the early 2000s, when reindeer herders found that permits had been granted inconsiderately to hunters in their herding lands, leading to gunshots and disturbance that would scatter their reindeer during vital times of their life cycle.

“Total chaos. There was a lot of people everywhere ... and dogs, hunting dogs. Then we decided to sue the state,” Blind recalled.

The ruling determined that it was the right of the Sámi administrative districts, and not the Swedish state, to decide whether others could hunt or fish in the lands they use.

“Here there have been Sámi people for thousands of years. You can’t even see that they have been here – they lived so carefully,” Blind said.

“My uncle once said: without land, no reindeer. Very simple. Remember, always fight for the land. It’s the land of each. It belongs to everybody. It’s forbidden to destroy it. Just use it, carefully. That’s the point.”

[\[Europe Letter: I was asked six times in Sweden about Ireland’s position on defence \]](#)



[Naomi O’Leary](#)

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Sweden

Climate change

IN THIS SECTION



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Race to preserve gulag memories of Moldova's contested Soviet past

Exhibition of items from KGB archives aims to challenge glorified version of Soviet history

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An exhibition shows artefacts of the era at Moldova's Museum of Victims of Political Repressions and Deportations. Photograph: Naomi O'Leary



Naomi O'Leary in Chisinau, Moldova

Sat Jun 17 2023 - 06:00



Marin Buga had just turned 11 on July 5th, 1949, when a round-up of families began in his village of Mereni in the Moldovan countryside. His name was not on the authorities's list – but his grandfather's was.

At the last minute, local enforcers added Buga's parents, along with their children who were aged 15 to six months, to the list to ensure their property was included in the public farm that was being created under Joseph Stalin's policy of forced collectivisation.

Three generations of his family were packed into wagons and transported more than 5,500 kilometres away to the labour camp of Sosnovka in Siberia, part of the vast gulag system used to repress all potential political opposition to the Soviet state.

“There were women, old men, children from all the villages,” Buga recalled of Operation South, the deportation of a 35,796 people, according to Moldovan estimates, to force through collectivisation.

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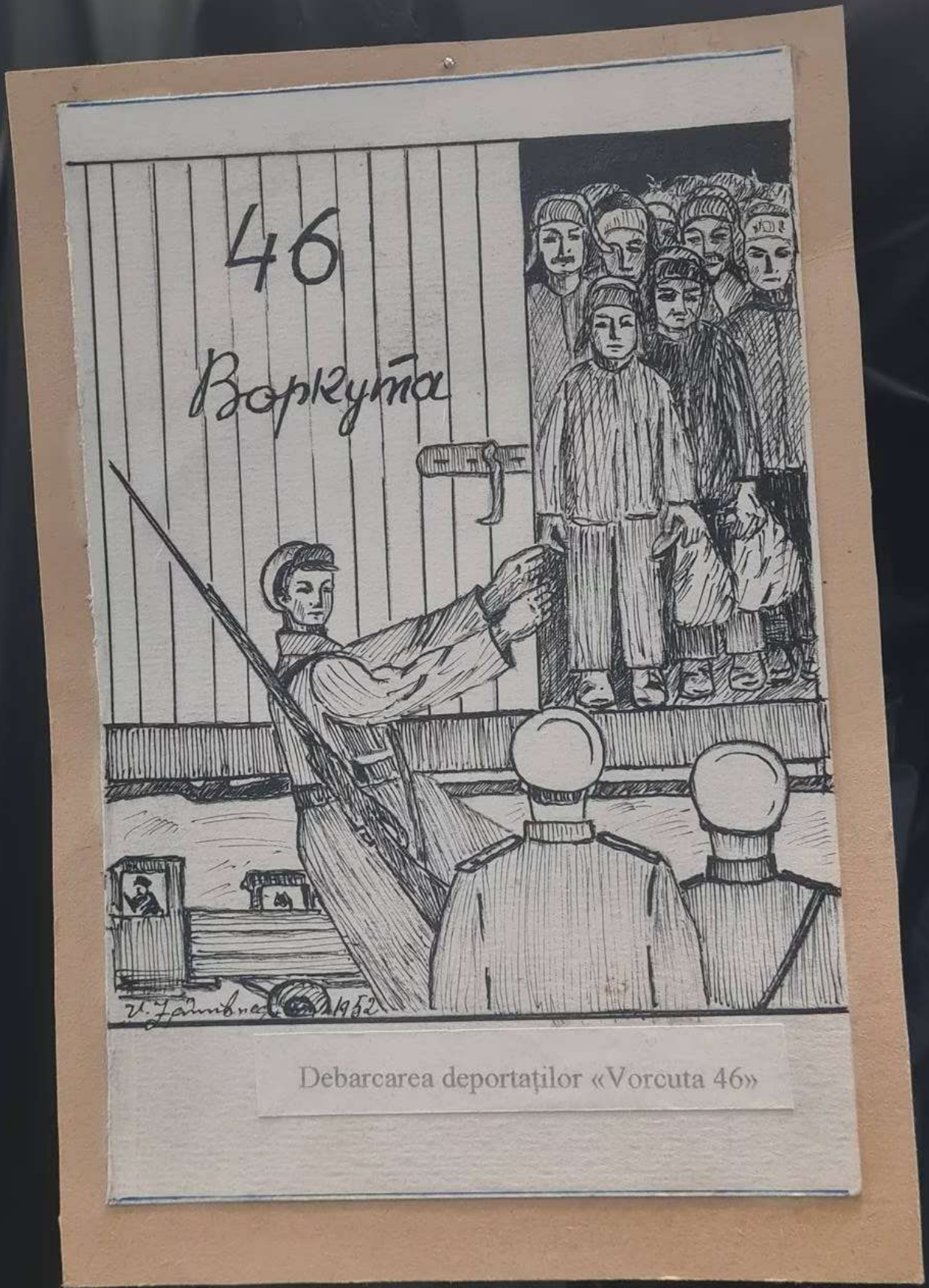


Yevgeny Prigozhin: 'He spun out of Putin's control'



The numbers of those affected have come to light only in recent years as KGB archives were opened and the figures are still contested. According to lists published by Moldova's National Archives Agency, a third of those deported were children.

“The youngest sister was six months old when we started and I don't know how God took care of her,” Buga told his interviewer. “There were many cases of death – small children – because they do not adapt to such conditions.”



Debarcarea deportaților «Vorkuta 46»

Drawing of a deportation train by Victor Zambrea, who was deported to the Tyumen region in 1949. Photograph: Naomi O'Leary

Buga's oral history was collected as part of efforts to preserve a historical record of the deportations and mass repressions that took place in Moldova during Soviet times.

Intellectuals, teachers and prominent community leaders were targeted in a bid to stamp out national movements and create political conformity within the Soviet Union, alongside language policies to favour the use of the Russian language and enforce the Cyrillic script.

Historian Ludmila Cojocaru is one of a team of people who spend their evenings and weekends in a race to collect the testimonies of survivors before they pass away.

[[*Ukraine war alters Russia's leverage over Moldova*](#)]

"Time is the most serious enemy for us," she told The Irish Times.

Dr Cojocaru has interviewed hundreds of people since the project began in 2014 and has overseen the compilation of their stories into "memory archives".

"I dreamed their stories for several years," she recalled. "Because, during the day, I was working with them. In the evening, I was working transcribing. Their voices were everywhere. During the nights, it continued, you know."

For a long time, the value of oral accounts was dismissed as a way of preserving history, particularly when it comes to people who were children at the time.



Ludmila Cojocaru spends her evenings and weekends in a race to collect the testimonies of survivors before they pass away. Photograph: Naomi O'Leary

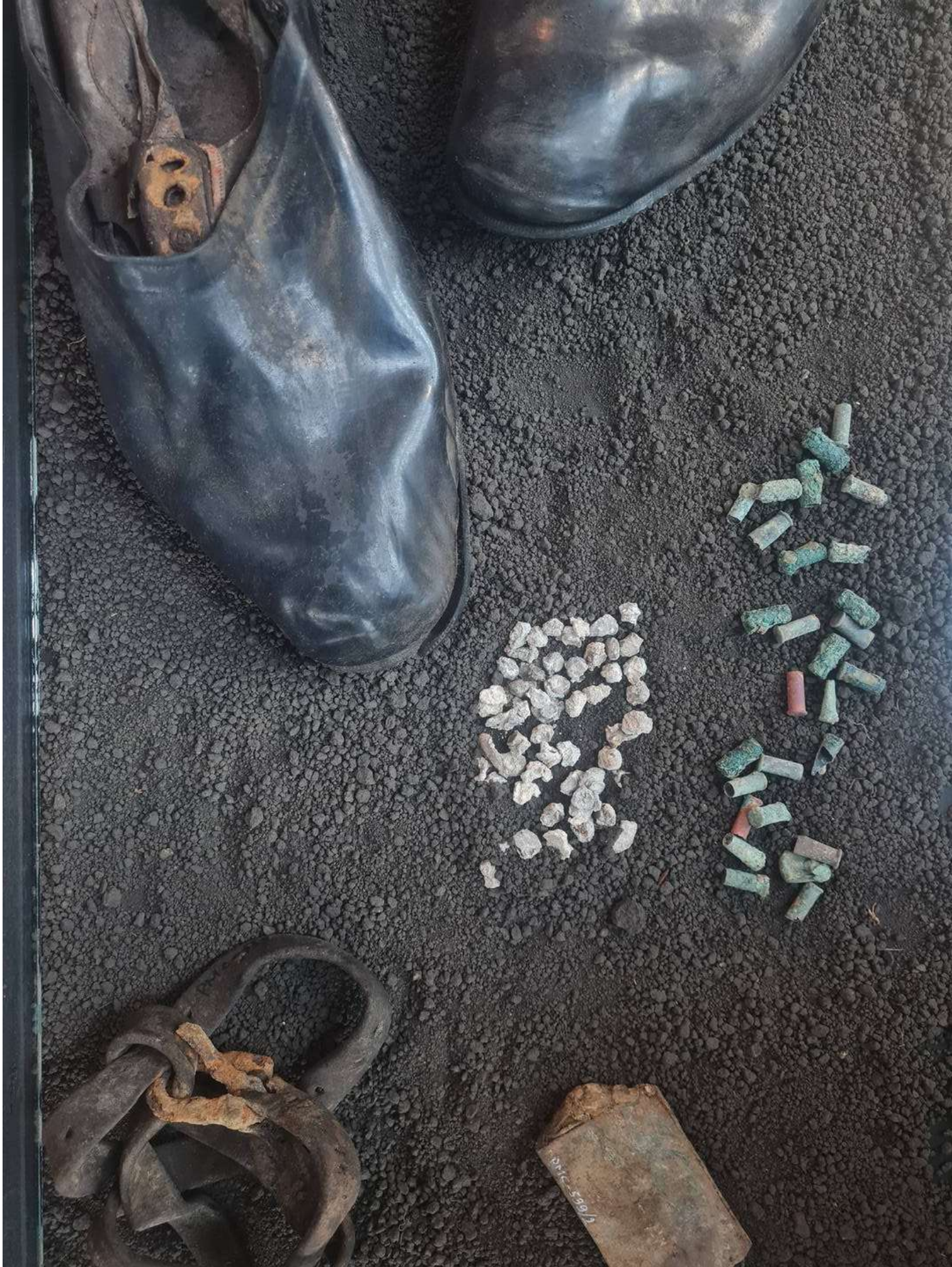
Dr Cojocaru has found the contrary, however, that memories formed in traumatic circumstances proved to be extraordinarily precise.

“Their memory is so vivid. The details they are offering to us are like a picture,” she said. “The print of their mother’s dress when she was beaten by the soldiers, the flowers from the garden – so many details.”

She spoke at an exhibition showing artefacts of the era at Moldova’s Museum of Victims of Political Repressions and Deportations, located in the basement of the national history museum in the centre of the capital, Chisinau. On a sunny Saturday morning this month, a steady stream of local visitors trooped in and out.

One cabinet shows lists of requisitioned property from the period of collectivisation. “Chairs: two,” one reads. “Cows: two. Fabric loom. Rake.”

Another shows seized subversive material found in the KGB archives such as a protest banner scrawled on cotton and a picture of the Romanian king and queen cut from a magazine.



Spectacles, wallets and other items from from a mass execution site from the 1937-38 Great Terror in Tiraspol.
Photograph: Naomi O'Leary

The grimmest exhibit displays items found in a mass grave from the Great Terror of 1937-38, a campaign by Stalin to solidify power that led to the arrest of an estimated 6,947 people in Moldovan areas, of whom 4,886 were sentenced to be shot.

The items look like crime scene evidence: bullet casings, hand-bindings, false teeth. A multitude of cups and spoons, which people would usually take with them to prison, suggest that the victims were caught off guard.

The grave was excavated near Tiraspol, a region that was part of the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic between 1924 and 1940 before being folded into larger Soviet Moldova. Today, it is controlled by breakaway pro-Russian separatists as the self-declared republic of Transnistria. Co-operation between historians across the divide allowed for the exhibit to go on show.

Papers found inside wallets in the grave allowed some bodies to be identified and returned to their families. Dr Cojocaru travelled into Transnistria to interview the sole surviving member of one family, who held a burial ceremony for the remains under Orthodox rites.

“She was very touched that someone was still interested in what happened, asking her what she can remember,” Dr Cojocaru recalled.

The name of the exhibition is “Soviet Moldova: Between Myths and the Gulag” and is designed to juxtapose Soviet propaganda images with family photographs of those deported and arrest and execution warrants, with the aim of questioning the Soviet narratives that retain a powerful sway in the region.

Dr Cojocaru points to a photograph of people lined up in rows in a workplace.

“This is a happy life. But go in behind the propaganda picture. I can tell you this,” she points to a man in the back row. “He was killed a few months after the picture was made.”

The interpretation of history remains highly politically contentious in Moldova. An initial outpouring of commemoration of those who suffered during Soviet repressions after it won independence from the Soviet Union in 1991 receded when communist governments came to power in the 2000s.



A Soviet depiction of childhood, displayed as an intended contrast to the experiences of children in the gulags

Unlike in Transnistria, which is sometimes described as an open-air Soviet museum and where tourists can enjoy Soviet nostalgia tours and visit the Back in the USSR canteen, many public monuments to Soviet history in Moldova have been removed. Chisinau's Lenin Avenue was renamed after the medieval king Stephen the Great.

A version of the past, anchored in remembering the Soviet Union's appalling losses in the second World War as it beat back the Nazi army, has a powerful appeal and is a core part of the identity of a minority in many former Soviet states, however.

This history remains politically potent and played a role in Moscow's justification for its invasion of neighbouring Ukraine, which was built upon nostalgia for Soviet resistance against Nazi Germany and the idea that Russians would once again have to take up the mantle to "liberate" Ukraine.

Following Moldova's independence, a vast monument to communist leaders featuring statues of Lenin and Karl Marx was relocated from outside government buildings and now stands in a car park on the outskirts of Chisinau.

On a visit this summer, bemused Polish tourists debated whether such statues should be preserved as part of history or destroyed.

“For me, he is a murderer,” Martyna Sekula (28), a doctor from Warsaw, said of Lenin. She had just returned from a trip into Transnistria that she described as a kooky flashback to her parent’s time.

Soviet nostalgia, she said, is “an illusion that most old people have about their younger lives”.

[*‘It’s very important for us that Ukraine wins. If Ukraine loses, Moldova will be next’*]

“They were beautiful, not fat, and they had all their lives in front of them so, now, they remember it as a better time,” she said.

“You can remember without the monuments of the murderers,” she added. Under the bust of Marx, someone had left flowers.

Outside government buildings, where the communist monument once stood, is a stone with a plaque that reads: “In this place will be built a monument in memory of the victims of Soviet occupation and the totalitarian communist regime.”

But the promise remains hotly contested and plans for the memorial have not progressed. The pro-Russian opposition leader Igor Dodon once vowed to turn the stone into gravel and use it to pave the roads of Chisinau.

6



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Maria Oca, deported with her five children in 1949 from the Moldovan village of Slobozia-Hodorogea to the Altai region of Siberia. Photograph: Naomi O'Leary

The Buga family were allowed to leave the gulag in 1956 after the death of Stalin allowed the repressive system to ease. In a sense, however, they never came home.

On returning to their village, they found their home had been made into a chicken farm. In the 1990s, the family was “rehabilitated”, a partial form of pardoning that removed some of the stigma of being a deportee. But, they never got back the farm.

In the 1980s, Buga journeyed back to visit the Siberian encampment where he had spent much of his childhood. He wanted to visit his grandfather’s grave, which he had dug himself as a young teenager, building a fire so he could cut through the frozen earth with an axe.

He found people from the labour camp still living there, including a Moldovan-Ukrainian couple he had known.

“They wept for the longing to come home,” he recalled. When he asked them why they stayed, they told him they couldn’t leave the graves of their two sons.

Part of Dr Cojocaru’s aim in documenting the stories was to prevent a repeat of the atrocities of the past, and she is horrified by the return of violence to the region, particularly the deportations of Ukrainian children. “Perhaps our voice was not loud enough.”

Moldova Russia Ukraine Crisis

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Europe

Belgium promises to increase deportations as asylum seeker homelessness hits crisis point

Up to 3,000 people who claimed asylum have been sleeping rough due to a lack of beds

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An asylum seeker walks past tents where mostly Afghan men have been sleeping for weeks in Brussels. Photograph: Naomi O'Leary



Naomi O'Leary in Brussels

Fri Mar 10 2023 - 16:51



His hands stuffed into his armpits against the cold, Ali lists the names of the countries he travelled through on his journey into the heart of Europe.

“Iran, Turkey, Bulgaria, Serbia, Croatia, Herzegovina, Slovenia, Italia, France, Belgique,” he recites, through a black scarf that muffles his face below his intense green eyes.

This epic journey began six months ago in Afghanistan. “Big problem with Taliban,” the 25 year- old explains. “I am Afghan soldier. Afghan commando.”

Ali says he has been sleeping rough for three months since he lodged an asylum application here in Belgium, which has struggled to provide the accommodation it is obliged to under international law as a 42 per cent post-Covid surge in applications last year collided with a reduced number of beds and an overwhelmed bureaucracy.

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‘We were covered in debris’: Moroccan earthquake survivors left sleeping outside





Palestinian and Syrian men outside the tent they share in Brussels. Photograph: Naomi O'Leary

Mostly, those seeking refuge have fled Afghanistan, Syria, Palestinian territories, the former Belgian colony of Burundi or the closed dictatorship of Eritrea - the most common countries of origin for refugee applicants here.

The young man spoke among a huddle of people waiting outside the Little Castle, a canal-side former barracks in imposing brick that serves as the main reception centre for asylum seekers in the Belgian capital, in a scene overhung with the heavy smell of damp.

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[Boats, tents, park benches: how EU countries are accommodating Ukrainian refugees]

Slumped figures laid out in sleeping bags and makeshift tent encampments became a common sight along this canal in recent months, as asylum seekers without accommodation clustered at a place where they hoped they could receive help.

Despite a series of court rulings that found the Belgian state in breach of its obligations, the number of homeless asylum seekers reached between 2,000 and 3,000 last week, according to a spokesman from Belgium's asylum agency, Fedasil.

"It's not a situation we would wish for, and we are doing our best to increase the accommodation," said spokesman Benoit Mansy.

"Military buildings, old people's homes... we work to find these buildings. But it's complicated because we can't find the budget, the staff," said Mansy. "Teachers, nurses, social workers... they have so many needs,

it takes time.”



A local family walks by a tent with a sign reading 'no one is illegal'. Photograph: Naomi O'Leary

Women and children are prioritised, meaning that those who remain homeless for longest are lone men.

But at crunch points over the winter, families and even unaccompanied minors were sleeping rough too, according to Ana Relinque Lopez, a migration adviser at the Croix-Rouge de Belgique, which provides healthcare to the homeless asylum seekers and operates some accommodation centres.

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“I think it was November last year it arrived to the point where even minors and families were in the streets,” she said.

Host families have taken in Ukrainians, who do not need to go through the asylum claim procedure because the EU granted them automatic rights to live and work in the bloc in the weeks after Russia’s invasion.

But Ukrainians too have been affected by the lack of emergency accommodation, and have been found sleeping rough around Brussels-South railway station, which serves as their main arrival point after long

journeys by train from the east.

[Fortress Europe: Varadkar talks tough on immigration in step with mood in Brussels]

“They were arriving in the Gare de Midi... We tried to collaborate with other organisations that have centres for homeless people, to try to find a solution,” Relinque Lopez said. But beds could not always be found.

As the temperature in Brussels plunged well below freezing over the winter, with pounding rain and bouts of hail and sleet, the health of those seeking refuge deteriorated.

The Red Cross reported cases of tuberculosis and diphtheria among the homeless asylum seekers, while a serious problem of scabies spread among hundreds of people who occupied a disused building together for several weeks. Mental health breakdowns are also a challenge.

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Student Tjara Visser co-ordinates aid for homeless people at the encampment outside the Little Castle in Brussels. Photograph: Naomi O'Leary

“The conditions are horrible and not liveable. I slept out here last night, and I woke up every two hours from the cold,” said Tjara Visser (21), a local student who has been working in shifts as a volunteer to assist homeless asylum seekers along the canal.

She spoke as she distributed winter boots to two men who were wearing sneakers too small for them, with their socked heels emerging from the shoes’ worn-down backs.

“We have people from Yemen, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Gambia, Congo... There’s a few people that have been on the street for six months now,” Visser said.

Shortly after she spoke, police moved in to break up the tent encampment, which had taken over the pavements of the busy city street and was developing a semi-permanent air, with sinks and portaloos set up by donors.

At its peak, the encampment became a ragtag community of several hundred people, living four to a tent in the long rows of makeshift shelters. Many of them had previously been evicted from the squatted building where the scabies broke out.



Sections

THE IRISH TIMES

17°

Hi Naomi

Belgian police move in to break up the tent encampment in Brussels. Photograph: Eddie Dierckx/Alamy via Getty

After the tents were broken up, Belgium’s state secretary for asylum and migration, Nicole de Moor, announced that all those sleeping there had been transferred to reception centres.

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But she acknowledged the risk, as NGOs fear, that they will simply be replaced by new arrivals who are forced to sleep rough.

“The reception crisis is not over,” de Moor warned. “Reforms are needed for a structural solution.”

On Thursday, Belgian prime minister Alexander De Croo announced that a major part of the solution would be an increase in deportations.

A large number of those who lodge asylum claims in Belgium have already been registered in another EU country that they passed through on their journey. Under EU law, they should be transferred back to the country of their initial claim.

But resentment among border states such as Greece and Italy about having to shoulder the greatest burden for geographic reasons means inter-EU co-operation has broken down, a major point of contention as EU home affairs ministers met for talks in Brussels this week.

Following a meeting of the Belgian cabinet, De Croo promised to increase the forced deportation of failed asylum seekers to their countries of origin, as well as to apply the EU's Dublin regulation more strictly. This means more transfers of people back to the EU countries where they first arrived.

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“We are going to focus more on outflow and more deportations,” De Croo said.

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