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Soviet Germans and Soviets Living in Germany during the Second World War

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In a speech on February 9th, 1946, Stalin spoke to a group of Soviet citizens about the extraordinary success of his policies towards minority nationalities during the Second World War: “The Soviet state system has proved to be a model multinational state, [it] is a system of state organization in which the national problem and the problem of the collaboration of nations have found a better solution than in any other multinational state,” Stalin said, after implementing the largest policy of human deportations in the world.¹ The forced displacement of Soviet Germans (SG) would be part of a larger change in the treatment of ethnic minorities in the USSR during the Second World War. Across the front line, Nazi Germany was also changing its policies regarding Soviets who lived in their territory. The treatment of these unique populations raises important questions of identity and politics: In the Soviet Union, how did the view of ethnic Germans change with the onset of the Second World War? In Germany, how did Soviet citizens fit into the Nazi racial hierarchy? How was the treatment of these populations linked to their historical presence in both places?

During the years of the Second World War, the civilian populations of Germany and the USSR dealt with severe changes to their daily lives. As the conflict engaged entire populations,

¹ Joseph Stalin, perf., *Speech to a Meeting of Voters of the Stalin Electoral District, Moscow*, recorded February 9, 1946, <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1943-2/deportation-of-minorities/1943-deportation-of-minorities-audio/>, (Accessed February 16th, 2019).

non-combatants were involved in a variety of roles for Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, both voluntarily and forcibly. Russian Germans, an ethnic minority residing in the Eastern region of the USSR, had had an inconspicuous presence in Russia since the 18th century.² During World War II, however, suspicion of their support for the Nazis led to their deportation to various parts of the Soviet Union. After the Nazi invasion of the USSR in 1941, many more Soviet citizens fell under the authority of the Nazis. Treatment of these Soviets depended on what they had to offer for the German war effort, but Nazi racial ideology led to little consideration for Soviet lives that were not aiding the Germans.

Russian/Soviet German Treatment

In Russia, the ethnic German minority enjoyed more freedom and opportunity than the vast majority of Russians. Approximately 25,000 Germans came to Russia as a result of Katherine the Great's 1763 Manifesto, which promised a plethora of social, religious, and economic benefits to foreigners who agreed to reside in the Russia and support the country's economic development.³ Until 1861, the Germans were a small group of free people in a nation of serfs. While many lived "the most modest of lives" as small-scale farmers, the provisions granted to the Germans under the Manifesto created many successful farmers and factory

² Note that in this paper, both 'Russian Germans' and 'Soviet Germans' (abbreviated SG) will refer to the same population of ethnic Germans who lived in Russia. The former will be used for the pre-1917 period, and the latter for the post-1917 period. In cases where ethnic Germans in Russia are referred to across both time periods, they will be called "Russian/Soviet Germans," for purposes of clarity.

³ Rogovin Frankel, *The Soviet Germans: Past and Present*, (London: Hurst, 1986), 2-3; Catherine II, *Manifesto of 1763*, Translated Copy, From Norka, Colony History Collection, <https://www.norkarussia.info/catherines-manifesto-1763.html>, (Accessed February 16th, 2019)

³ Pinkus, Fleischhauer, *The Soviet Germans*, 4-5.

owners.⁵ The German settlers had almost a century to establish themselves as private landowners before the majority of Russian citizens had this opportunity with the abolishment of serfdom.

Just like the Tsarist government before them, the Soviet authorities did not interfere in the areas of SG identity that were not in disagreement with any of their ideological goals. The authorities gave SGs the freedom to express themselves, insofar as they did not venture into political dissent. Record keeping in the Volga region was recorded in both German and Russian. Birth certificates, for example, could be filled out in German and had German subheadings for every section.⁶ The revolution in 1917 did not result in a change in treatment of SGs inasmuch as *all* groups of people in the new Soviet society were now treated differently and judged by their class and religiosity. The famines of 1921-22 and 1933-4 as a result of collectivization efforts led to the deaths of many SGs, particularly in the Volga region.⁷ Yet, while the loss of life is tragic, what is significant about the events that transpired in the early years after the revolution is that the settler nationalities were not singled out for special treatment. With the prospect of war, however, racially based persecution would emerge in the 1930s.

Despite claiming in 1939 that Tsar Nicholas's plans to deport ethnic Germans from the Volga region during the First World War were "barbaric," similar plans were implemented by the Politburo years prior to WWII.⁸ In 1935, "unreliable elements" consisting of Latvians, Poles, Estonians, Finns, and Germans were exiled to Kazakhstan and Siberia in an attempt to "strengthen" the Soviet Union's western border.⁹ While these were partial deportations that did

⁵ Pinkus, Fleischhauer, *The Soviet Germans*, 4-5.

⁶ "Birth Certificate of George Meier," Stack Exchange, accessed February 16th, 2019, <https://history.stackexchange.com/questions/10478/was-german-ever-an-official-language-in-the-ussr/11134>.

⁷ Pinkus, Fleischhauer, *The Soviet Germans*, 53, 44.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹ Terry Martin, "Stalinist Forced Relocation Policies: Patterns, Causes, Consequences," in *Demography and National Security*, edited by Myron Weiner and Sharon Stanton Russell, 305-35. (New York, NY: Bergahn Books, 2001), 321.

not transplant entire ethnic communities, they reflected a hypocrisy in Soviet ideology. With these actions, the revolutionary claims of complete equality amongst the nationalities of the Soviet Union proved hollow 18 years into the regime. SGs –among many other minorities– did not have any nationalistic or independence movements in any of their communities across the USSR, but were still characterized as “unreliable” and forced to restart their lives in a new location.

The treatment of the SGs shifted significantly with the onset of WWII. When Hitler invaded the USSR on June 22nd, 1941, the SG population was quickly utilized as propaganda to foster support for the war effort against the “German menace.” Like all Soviet republics, the Volga Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) quickly created a defense army of over 13,000 citizens. However, it also showed allegiance by holding pro-Soviet rallies and creating a “defense foundation” to which SG sent donations.¹⁰ Nevertheless, a report by the military leadership sent to Stalin detailed two instances of betrayal by the SGs, after which Stalin ordered the deportation of all SGs residing in the west.

According to the report, SGs greeted Nazis with food, proclaiming the Nazis to be liberators. On another occasion, gunfire emanating from a SG village hit Soviet regiments as they passed by. After reading this report, Stalin ordered the forced displacement of the entire German population residing near the West.¹¹ In the span of 17 days in 1941, there were to be no SGs in the western Russian region.¹² Of course, it is impossible to verify the validity of the report sent to Stalin, nor is it known how much the described events influenced his decision to deport the SGs. However, according to historian Pavel Polian, the use of the SGs as a

¹⁰ Pavel, Polian, *Against their Will: the History and Geography of Forced Migrations in the USSR*, (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2004), 126-127.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹² *Ibid.*, 134.

propaganda tool paired with Stalin's desire for harvest collection were the true reasons they were not deported earlier.¹³ This implies that the wholesale deportation was most probably a preventative measure instead of a retaliatory one; if their truly was a resistance movement, collection of the harvest would not be prioritized over deportation.

The deportation of the SGs can be characterized as “prophylactic” in the sense that the displacement was instituted not to punish individuals (or groups) for crimes that had already been committed, but was instead instituted to deport people “who would presumably commit an offense if given the opportunity.”¹⁴ In typical Soviet fashion, justification for the forced displacement in public declarations was either heavily exaggerated or entirely fabricated. According to the Decree of the Presidium of the USSR, “On the Resettlement of Germans Residing in the Volga Region,” military authorities had “reliable facts” that led them to conclude that “tens of thousands of diversionists and spies, who, at a signal given from Germany, must commit sabotage in the districts which are populated by the Germans in the Volga Region.”¹⁵ In order to “prevent acts of sabotage and bloodshed,” the SGs would be deported to the “arable land” of eastern Russia, as well as Kazakhstan.¹⁶ In the years since, no evidence of widespread collaboration directly with the German government has been found. As per the decree, the deportation from the Volga area was completed on schedule, and was followed by several other decrees initiating the deportations of SGs from other regions, such as Crimea. Later deportations would bring the total amount of displaced Germans to 905,000.¹⁷

¹³ Ibid., 127.

¹⁴ Martin, “Stalinist Forced Relocation Policies,” 307.

¹⁵ Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet, “On the Resettlement of Germans Residing in the Volga Region,” Translated Copy, from NDSU Heritage Collection, https://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/research/scholarly/non_peer/decree2.html (Accessed February 16th, 2019)

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Polian, *Against Their Will*, 128-134.

In their new locations, the Germans were grouped into labor “armies” meant to support the war effort. The laborers received labor camp food rations and followed work schedules comparable to those sentenced to the Gulags. Those who were too young, old, or ill for hard work were left with little food on collective farms.¹⁸ The penalty for attempting to escape one’s designated place of labor was 20 years in prison.¹⁹ Hence, by ridding the front of potential collaborators while simultaneously providing a forced labor resource for the war effort, the tactic of deportation served as a panacea for the Soviet authority.

In some instances, however, SGs experienced even harsher persecution as a result of their ethnicity. In her memoir, Ella Schneider Hilton recounts how her father was taken by the Soviet secret police force (*Narodnyy Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del*, or NKVD) along with other SG men soon after Hitler invaded the Soviet Union, before anyone in their predominantly SG village even knew about Operation Barbarossa. After the men were shot in the town square, the SG women began “searching for their fathers, husbands, and sons. [Hilton’s mother] had turned over one bullet-riddled body after another, into the hundreds. All were cold and stiff.”²⁰ It appears that this tragic event occurred as an act of anger and retaliation by a local NKVD force and was not part of a systemic policy instituted by the national government, but it nonetheless remains a part of the SG experience of Hilton’s village, and possibly of others like it.

These drastic variations in treatment can be explained if they are considered in the context of the USSR being a socialist country in a state of war. The quick enactment of policies against the kulak class in the years after the October Revolution, as well as collectivization initiatives and five year industrialization plans all had the characteristic of being rapid solutions

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 138.

²⁰ Ella E. Schneider Hilton, *Displaced Person: A Girl's Life in Russia, Germany, and America*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), Accessed December 16, 2017, ProQuest Ebook Central, 28.

to systemic “problems.” In the context of nationality policy during WWII, whether it was the decision to remove entire SG communities by Stalin, or the decision to execute the SG men in one village by the local NKVD, the treatment of the SGs bore the sign of a typical Soviet response to suspicion—swift eradication of a perceived source of trouble. Similar deportations of other ethnic minorities on grounds of suspicion support this characterization.

While the authorities framed the deportations as a preventative measure meant to stop the “tens of thousands” of collaborationists amongst the German populace, those who had close ties to the minority but were not a part of it did not receive any punishment. In the NKVD instruction for resettling the Volga Germans, German wives married to non-Germans were not deported. Likewise, the Russian wives of German husbands did not have to leave their homes, but could “choose to follow [their] husband voluntarily.”²¹ Thus, the incriminating factor of the ethnic Germans was two-fold. First, it was race-based. Even if Russian women lived alongside SGs, they were not subject to deportation simply because they were not ethnically of German descent. Second, the displacement policy implied that the likelihood of being a “diversionist” depended on gender. German women married to Russian men were exempt, thereby suggesting that they were less likely than their male counterparts to engage in anti-regime activity because of their marriage to Russian men. However, given that the majority of SG settlements were isolated, the number of instances in which the gender based policy led to exemptions must have been minuscule.

As a result of their ethnicity, the onset of wartime worsened conditions for virtually all SGs. Besides the gender regulations for the SG deportations, however, the only other exception to the policy involved SG soldiers already enlisted in the army at the time Stalin decided to

²¹ People’s Commissar for the Interior of the USSR, “For Conducting the Resettlement of Germans Residing in the Volga German ASSR and in the Saratov and Stalingrad Oblasts,” in Polian, *Against Their Will*, 129-130.

proceed with the forced displacement. While their families were being sent to Siberia and Kazakhstan, the troop—already integrated into regiments and stationed at the Eastern front—were exempt from relocation. Nine SG troops were even awarded the Hero of the Soviet Union medal, the highest honor bestowed on soldiers.²²

Thus, the overarching policy against the SG population in the wartime period involved extensive deportation and hard labor, paired with episodic accounts of executions and exemptions. Fueled by racial discrimination, the policies would alter the lives of the SGs in the post-war period, as they would be bound to designated zones for decades before incrementally regaining their rights as citizens of the USSR. The ethnological nature at the root of the decisions made by the Soviet leadership reflects the stark disparity between the heavily lauded socialist values of equality and the actual treatment of ethnic minorities.

Soviets in Nazi-occupied Territory

On the Eastern front, Hitler's armies conquered a vast span of territory in a matter of weeks, placing millions of Soviet citizens under the jurisdiction of the Nazis. Official policy towards the noncombatants was—much like Stalin's policies in regard to SGs—race-based. However, the endpoint for Nazi racial law was not forced displacement and hard labor, but death. Originally, Jewish Soviet citizens were executed by the SS-*Einsatzgruppen* (SS-Taskforces) that followed behind the Wehrmacht.²³ In Belarus alone, 208,089 Jews were killed during the

²² Ibid., 125.

²³ Jorg Baberowski and Anselm Doering-Manteuffel, "The Quest for Order and the Pursuit of Terror" in *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared*, ed. by Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick, (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 221.

Holocaust.²⁴ Non-Jews were also targeted for execution, but in most of these cases the excuse presented by the Nazi authorities regarded suspicion of partisan activity, as opposed to race.

The vast majority of those killed, however were certainly not involved in partisan activities. Entire villages were wiped out, with no regard to innocent civilians. In the village of Borki in Belarus, for example, the German Police Battalion shot the entire population: 203 men, 372 women, and 130 children. They would go on to do the same in other nearby Belarusian villages, before moving on to the execution of Jews in labor camps.²⁵ While partisan movements existed throughout Eastern Europe, the indiscriminate murders of entire villages exemplify the belief among the perpetrators that the lives of Soviet citizens were worthless. The murders of millions of Jewish civilians in extermination camps attests to this as well, but beyond the camps and the *Einsatzgruppen* initiatives, treatment of Soviet citizens varied broadly, dependent mostly on ethnicity and support for the Nazi war effort.

German soldiers were instructed not to have “close contact” with the civilian populations of the USSR “because of the risks of espionage and partisan activity,” but the situations created by the war inevitably caused such contact to occur.²⁶ In the National-Socialist racial hierarchy, “Ukrainians and Poles stood above Russians, while Latvians and Estonians stood above Ukrainians and Poles.”²⁷ Wehrmacht regiments in Eastern Russia, however, used whatever help they could get. Gunter K. Koschorrek, a Wehrmacht soldier, wrote in his memoir about the warm relationship his section had with Katya, a young Soviet woman who was their “landlady” on the Eastern front: “There is even a little flirting between us soldiers and Katya, and she is greatly

²⁴ Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2012), 241.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 240-241.

²⁶ Günter K. Koschorrek, *Blood Red Snow: the Memoirs of a German soldier on the Eastern Front*, (Minneapolis, MN: Motorbooks, 2005), 156.

²⁷ Baberowski and Manteuffel, “The Quest for Order and the Pursuit of Terror,” 221.

amused when we pronounce Russian words incorrectly. [...] To show our appreciation we give [Katya] lots of pieces of chocolate from our army rations. She once asked us for a pair of socks for her mother, and immediately received several pairs.”²⁸

As evidenced by Koschorrek’s account, despite official policy dictating otherwise, many Soviet civilians formed mutually beneficial relationships with the Nazis. Even as Katya’s own brothers were fighting on the side of the Soviet Union, she and her mother worked for the German troops out of necessity.²⁹ At least in this case, the proximity to the soldiers led to seemingly genuine respect on both sides. But beyond the systemic policies against Jews and partisans, it is difficult to ascertain a trend in the treatment of civilians by the troops. Occasional accounts of mercy even to Russian soldiers suggests that any particular treatment was not representative of every interaction.³⁰ Koschorrek’s other experiences with Soviet civilians appear to also bear the mark of mutual beneficence; Russians who worked in the kitchens would sell homemade liquor to the troops, while others would serve as translators.³¹ ³² Koschorrek also describes accusations of sexual abuse by a Nazi officer that prompted an investigation into his assault of two Russian women. Fearing the repercussions of the investigation, the soldier fled.³³ This account implies that consequences existed for mistreating Soviet civilians, and at least on some occasions there were formal investigations.

Yet, other accounts of wartime interaction between German soldiers and the Soviet civilian populace paint a different picture. Swiss nurses, who volunteered to provide

²⁸ Koschorrek, *Blood Red Snow*, 155-156.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 171.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 143. On one occasion, Koschorrek’s unit shot down a Soviet pilot who had flown low because he thought they were Russian soldiers. Feeling sorry for his mistake, he was offered a cigarette to smoke and treated by the German medics.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 165.

³² *Ibid.*, 189.

³³ *Ibid.*, 168.

humanitarian aid during WWII, wrote at length about their experiences traveling with members of the Wehrmacht and the SS. The historian Peter Fritzsche describes what he found in their diaries: “Dead bodies were a daily sight in Smolensk as elsewhere in German-occupied Russia; men, women, and children were shot simply for violating harsh curfew regimes.”³⁴

When considered collectively, these accounts reveal the complexity of the Soviet civilian experience under Nazi occupation. The many factors that determined the treatment of the Soviet noncombatants led to a broad range of experiences. While guidelines on treatment of civilians existed, the racial hatred that was a key aspect of German fascism actively encouraged violation of these norms. In other cases, the natural interaction amongst troops and Soviet noncombatants led to the development of friendship, as evidenced by the relationship between Katya and the troops who lived in her home. However, it is clear that during WWII, Soviet citizens could expect death much more often than they could expect decent treatment by German authorities.

Soviet Germans and Soviets in Germany in the Postwar Period

After Stalin’s death, the Soviet Union would attempt to reverse the consequences of Stalin’s policies towards minority ethnicities. For the SGs, this would come in the form of legislation incrementally restoring their rights. While the majority of SGs who wanted to flee the Soviet Union would only get a chance after 1991, many of those who had the opportunity to leave in the brief period of disorganization immediately following the end of the war took it. However, the SG experience in the Soviet Union under policies of isolation led to uncertainty about where to immigrate. Ella Schneider wrote about how different she felt compared to

³⁴Peter Fritzsche, "On Violence and Ideology: German Voices, Smolensk, 1941," *Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh*, 2017.

Germans that actually lived in Germany. Her mother had forged papers so that Allied troops would allow them to stay in Germany and not have to repatriate to the Soviet Union. While at a refugee shelter, Schneider remarked: “We were surrounded by Real Germans.”³⁵ The distinction that Schneider and her family drew between themselves and German natives was undoubtedly formed as a result of their experience in the USSR. Despite maintaining their German identity, life in the Soviet Union created differences that were noticeable. The SGs deported to Siberia and Central Asia experienced a lack of resolve greater than Schneider, as their actions in the post war period indicate.

During the Thaw, Khrushchev included the deportation of ethnic minorities in his list of inhumane policies perpetrated by Stalin. Unlike other forcibly displaced minorities, however, the deported Korean and SG populations did not express a desire to return to their prewar locations.³⁶ Terry Martin attributes this acquiescence from Germans and Koreans to “the institutionalization of the principle that diaspora nationalities lack the same status as indigenous nationalities.”³⁷ Since the Volga region was not the original home for SGs, the sentiment among the populace and the international community implied that geographic rehabilitation was not a necessity. Those who desired to leave their settlements in Siberia and Central Asia were more intent on going to West Germany, which had offered a right of return.³⁸ Indeed, disinterest in moving to a different part of the same repressive country after spending the wartime years attempting to settle in a new area is an understandable dynamic that was pervasive throughout the SG settlements.

³⁵ Schneider, *Displaced Person*, 92.

³⁶ Terry Martin, *Stalinist Forced Relocation Policies*, 330-331.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 331.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

In 1964, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet issued a decree titled “Regarding the Introduction of a Change in the Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of August 28, 1941 relating to Transfer of Germans Residing in the Volga Regions.”³⁹ As the name implies, the infamous 1941 decree was not repealed, but only altered to state that the “mistaken and unfounded accusations” that led to the deportation of the SGs “were the result of arbitrary action in the conditions of Stalin’s cult of personality,” noting that “the decisive majority of the German population together with the Soviet people contributed in fact by its toil to the victory of the Soviet Union over Nazi Germany.”⁴⁰ This reversal served as an important affirmation of SG mistreatment during the war, and the certainty with which they were acquitted — and even thanked for their effort during the war — displayed a change in perspective from the Soviet government. With the creation of East Germany and relative global stability, SGs were no longer seen as “suspicious peoples.” Therefore, restoring their public image posed no threat to the regime and simultaneously helped the USSR’s reputation.

Restrictions on SG places of residence persisted until a Soviet Presidium decree in 1972 allowed them to freely pursue applications to relocate outside their special settlement zones. As a result, many SGs moved to the Baltic republics.⁴¹ Finally, in 1991, following the collapse of the USSR and the reunification of Germany, a “mass migration” of SGs back to Germany commenced, drastically shrinking the number of SGs in Central Asia and Russia.⁴² SGs in the 1990s were decisive in going to Germany, as the new generation—which hadn’t directly experience Stalinist repression—expressed a willingness to start anew.

³⁹ Pinkus, Fleischhauer, *The Soviet Germans*, 110.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 110-111.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 111-112.

⁴² Polian, *Against Their Will*, 316.

Aware of the persecution that would befall them if they were to return to their home country, the majority of Soviets in Germany after 1945 opposed repatriation to the USSR. While the political dissident class of refugees had no desire to return to the Soviet Union, the deportee group consisted of some socialists who had ended up on German territory not of their own volition.⁴³ Yet, this subsection of civilians also feared returning as they knew that the Soviet authorities did not care who worked for the enemy voluntarily and who was forced into it; on many occasions all were seen as traitors.⁴⁴ In 1944, the head of the NKVD Laverentii Beria wrote to Stalin that those who were deported to Germany as a source of labor must have “let themselves be deported.”⁴⁵ Thus, displacement camps (DP) created by the Allies in West Germany were quickly filled by Soviet refugees who “represented a broad spectrum of political opinion, united only around the narrow issue of opposition to Stalinism.”⁴⁶ Ella Schneider, who resided in a DP camp filled with many Soviets, remarked that “women made plans to kill themselves and their families rather than go back to the Communists.”⁴⁷

Since many of the inhabitants of DP camps were considered victims of Hitler’s regime, the Allies ensured that conditions inside the camps were agreeable. In 1945, those living in the camps even received higher food rations than German citizens.⁴⁸ Since “enemy concepts did not just suddenly cease to exist in the minds of people after the military defeat of Nazi Germany,” Allies grouped camps by nationality and separated them from German society.⁴⁹ While some German officials expressed hostility towards the refugees, Allied supervision ensured that life in

⁴³ Anna Marta Holian, *Between National Socialism and Soviet Communism: Displaced Persons in Postwar Germany* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 109.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Polian, *Against Their Will*, 178.

⁴⁶ Holian, *Between National Socialism*, 108.

⁴⁷ Schneider, *Displaced Person*, 118.

⁴⁸ Jan-Hinnerk Antons, "Displaced Persons in Postwar Germany: Parallel Societies in a Hostile Environment," *Journal of Contemporary History* 49, no. 1 (2014): doi:10.1177/0022009413505659, 95.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 103.

DP camps was stable and productive. When the German government took over jurisdiction of the camps in 1950, approximately 90% of Soviets had left to other countries, allowing for a relatively smooth transition out of the DP camp system for the remaining Soviets.⁵⁰ The postwar era saw the population experience the most freedom and opportunity to develop their own society. While German hostility still existed, official policies towards Soviets were favorable and ultimately gave those that remained in Germany equal legal status.⁵¹

Conclusion

Involving millions of people, the policies instituted by the USSR and Germany towards foreign civilians led to an incredibly broad range of experiences. These experiences need to be studied alongside one another so that both sides can be better understood. Historians have long compared the Soviet and Nazi regimes for their totalitarian nature, but studying ethnic minorities during the Second World War would not be complete without an understanding of the situations these groups found themselves in as a result of their identity. Of course, some exceptions to cruel treatment naturally resulted from the amiable encounters between Wehrmacht troops and civilians, but the war time period was mostly damaging and deadly for the Soviets who lived under Nazi occupation. It was only under oversight from the Allies that negative racial attitudes were suppressed and Soviets living in DP camps could lead lives without major persecution.

For the Soviet Union, the policies of collectivization and kulak eradication laid the framework for the massive campaigns of deportation. Years later, the complete reversal of opinion on the treatment of SGs by Nikita Khrushchev very publicly illuminated the mistakes of

⁵⁰ Ibid., 93.

⁵¹ Ibid., 108.

Soviet leadership during the war. Perhaps more importantly, the fact that this information went public 23 years after the deportation orders affirmed the lack of accountability inherent in the Soviet system of governance. Some historians have argued that maybe the most important long term result of Stalin's deportation was perceptual: With the highly publicized plight of ethnic minorities during the Gorbachev era, it contributed to the idea that the USSR was an empire, and based on historical precedent, empires were supposed to collapse.⁵²

About the author

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⁵² Martin, *Stalinist Forced Relocation Policies*, 332-333.

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