

Repressed peoples in the Soviet Union

Grégory DUFAUD

ABSTRACT

In the Soviet Union during the Second World War, non-Russian minorities from the Volga, Caucasus, and Crimea were collectively deported using the same modus operandi: roundup, transfer in cattle cars, relegation to inhospitable areas, and economic exploitation of exiles. These large-scale successive deportations, with over two million people affected, were an unprecedented undertaking on the European scale in both the management of populations as well as industrial and agricultural production. While their genealogy goes back to the campaign against the Don Cossacks during the Russian Civil War (1918-1921), the 1930s were a key moment, with episodes of repression that reflected the suspicion that still ran high among the country's leadership toward a number of non-Russian minorities, who were perceived as potential enemies within.



Monument in memory of the deportation of the Crimean Tatars, in Eupatoria (Crimea), photography by Georgij Dolgopskij. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#)

In the Soviet Union during the Second World War, the Stalinist direction deported entire peoples to Siberia, Kazakhstan, and Central Asia, where they were subjected to “special colony” status, a “quasi-prison-camp” system that stripped individuals of their rights and assigned them to places of residence. It reflected its suspicion of non-Russian minorities as enemies within. While the scale of these deportations was unprecedented, they were nevertheless not the first of their kind in the USSR, as Soviet authorities regularly used mass displacement to

shape the social body. Historians have for a long time traced the genealogy of “national” deportations to the campaign against the “kulaks” (peasants considered to be rich) as a class between 1930 and 1933, which led to the relegation of hundreds of thousands of people to inhospitable areas of the country. Yet this type of operation had been implemented as early as the Russian Civil War (1918-1921) by the Bolsheviks, who used techniques that had already been deployed by tsarist authorities during the First World War, for instance with the deportation of Germans.

Repression and deportation of national minorities after the October Revolution

The civil war sparked suspicion toward non-Russian minorities, which was reinitiated during the 1930s by the specter of international conflict. Confronted by their hostility in the wake of the revolution, Bolsheviks used violence and proceeded with the first population displacements, in particular with the Don Cossacks, who under the Ancien Régime had formed militarized communities in the tsar’s service. Stripped of their status by the October Revolution, many of them joined the ranks of the counter-revolutionaries. In 1919, in view of eliminating a population deemed per se resistant to communism, the Red Army acted with great brutality toward this population. Since the Cossacks resisted, another policy was tested in the fall of 1920, when Cossack villages in the North Caucasus were emptied of their inhabitants, who were displaced to neighboring areas; towns were destroyed, or had their toponyms changed.

During the 1920s, the Bolsheviks refused to pursue this path further. The ethnicity of non-Russian minorities was given increased status, as they were granted lands and posts/positions?, and their languages and cultures received support. For authorities, such intervention helped to defuse nationalism and construct a unitary state. Minorities belonging to diasporas nevertheless remained the object of close surveillance, such as Ukrainian Poles, who were suspected of spying for Poland. During the 1930s, three factors combined to make the nation a more operative category with regard to repression: analysis of revived nationalism in the country, the decline of class as an instrument/tool? for social modeling, and the exacerbation of international tensions.

The Stalin regime’s fear of a conflict with Germany or Japan prompted it to enact measures against non-Russian minorities. In the spring of 1934, thousands of families of German, Polish, Latvian, Finnish, and Estonian background were displaced in order to secure Western borders. However, the great social purge launched to eliminate enemies within the regime also took the form of “national operations”, which set their sights on a dozen targets between July 1937 and November 1938, claiming 300,000 victims. It was in this context that the first deportation of an entire population took place: the Koreans of the Vladivostok area, who were accused of being in the employ of Japan. Between October and November 1937, nearly 175,000 people were displaced to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in cattle cars; infrastructure was lacking to welcome them upon their arrival. Within a few months 40,000 of them had died, especially children and the elderly.

The mass deportations of the Second World War

During the Second World War, mass displacement was used on three occasions. These successive deportations were an unprecedented undertaking on the European scale in both population management and economic exploitation. The *modus operandi* was the same as for the Koreans: roundup, transfer by rail, relegation to inhospitable areas, and economic exploitation of exiles. A few weeks after the Wehrmacht invasion in August 1941, the authorities targeted Germans in order to prevent any collusion with the enemy. The operation affected nearly one million people, and lasted a number of months due to the war and their geographic dispersion. State security forces proceeded region by region, with households whose head was German being the only ones to be deported. Recourse to this criterion reflected changes in individual identification methods, as nationality was defined by line of descent from April 1938 onward (and no longer according to the principle of self-declaration).

While the Soviet Union fought against the invader, Stalin’s regime ordered the exile of the minorities of the

Caucasus and Crimea, who were accused of collaboration. The operations took place in two waves striking the Karachay, Kalmyks, Chechens, Ingush, Balkars and Crimean Tatars from November 1943 to July 1944, and later the Bulgarians, Greeks, and Armenians of the Crimea, in addition to the Meskhetian Turks of Georgia, from July to November 1944. While the operations of the second wave resembled a kind of ethnic cleansing of border areas, those of the first wave sought to prevent any threat that could hinder the Bolshevik project. In all 1.1 million people were relegated to Siberia, Kazakhstan, and Central Asia. In Crimea and the Caucasus, banishments were followed by territorial and administrative recompositions, with the Crimean Autonomous Republic, for instance, being demoted to an autonomous region on June 30, 1945.

In areas of relegation, exiles were given the status of "special colonists," which was defined in August 1945, and also included the contingents of earlier deportations (kulaks, Koreans, and Germans). They were stripped of rights, and served as exploitable labor for industry and agriculture. Moreover, upon their arrival they were confronted by rejection on the part of inhabitants, with the discredit hanging over them being expressed in terms of both property (status) and relations (ostracism). During the second half of the 1940s, when the material situation of exiles improved, authorities adopted a very harsh policy toward them, decreeing in 1948 that the deportations were in perpetuity in order to prevent any return to Crimea or the Caucasus, where there were plans to settle Slavic populations.

After the death of Stalin in March 1953, there was a period of reform to the political and social system. One of the most spectacular aspects of this change was the liberation of millions of prisoners from camps; it was also pursued by the softening of the special colony system beginning in 1954. For the peoples deported during the war, these measures were the first step toward the restitution of their former territory, which took place for most of them in January 1957, but not for Crimean Tatars and Meshketian Turks, who were kept in place for economic reasons.

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