Voices from the Gulag

The Oppression of the German Minority in the Soviet Union

Ulrich Merten

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AMERICAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY
OF GERMANS FROM RUSSIA

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"If we wash our hands of the conflict between the powerful and powerless we side with the powerful—we don't remain neutral."

Banksy, February 2015

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Please refer to http://www.voicesfromthegulag.com for all maps, illustrations and photographs mentioned in this book.

Foreword

For the past couple of years, I have shared with the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia (AHSGR) the wonderful privilege to work with Ulrich Merten as he pursued publication of his most recent book, *Voices from the Gulag*. I am convinced that his latest venture will make a lasting contribution to the expanding corpus of literature on the ethnic German experience in the former USSR.

Part of my deepening appreciation for what Merten is accomplishing arises from the fact that he is *not* a German from Russia. Through him, his labors, and his many personal associations, however, the Germans from Russia now can claim a staunch colleague, friend and supporter who offers them another avenue to share their compelling story with a broader international audience.

Merten's extensive foray into this Diaspora group's historical twists and turns began only several years ago when he published his well-received first book, *Forgotten Voices*, on the forced mass deportations and resettlements of Eastern Europe's ethnic German minorities at the end of the Second World War.[1] One part of that larger tragic postwar era of ethnic cleansing and collective guilt and vengeance included ethnic Germans evacuated from occupied Ukraine under the Nazis and later forcibly repatriated back to the Soviet Union to reside in exile in remote eastern territories. In both knowledge and spirit, then, Merten truly has come to share a special affinity with Russia's ethnic Germans. His ongoing efforts to educate the wider public—and not just Germans from Russia—about the true nature and full extent of the ethnic group's darkest time in Russia only underscore his bedrock commitment to preserving proper memory and understanding.

As such, Merten does not intend his extensive compilation to be original research, but rather he seeks to assemble, synthesize and disseminate in the English language a broad overview of key historical themes, primary documents, and scholarly examinations of the initial accomplishments and overriding tragedies of ethnic German colonization in Russia. His impressive collection saves the wider public much time

and energy in tracking down and prioritizing the substantial mountain of records already available in different languages.

The ethnic Germans in Russia have become a significant global Diaspora, now numbering in the millions who traverse six continents. Yet the general population today still knows little about this ethnic people's many accomplishments and setbacks over the past two and a half centuries. Merten views it as necessary that this compilation of materials of a primary and secondary nature draw wider attention to an almost forgotten chapter in the tumultuous twentieth century. It is intended to generate more exposure and create better understanding and sympathy for what had happened in Russia by reaching out to those multitudes outside of the ethnic German community and narrow academic circles. The purpose here is not to preach to an audience already generally familiar with this narrative, but to expand historical awareness and comprehension about the USSR's ethnic Germans beyond the old ethnic confines. His targeting of a general reading audience also allows the historical record to perpetuate itself in the public consciousness. The AHSGR has thus given him a vital platform with which to begin this monumental effort to reclaim and sustain the historical record for subsequent generations.

The festering historical problem of Soviet mass repression, or even outright genocide under Stalin, continues to challenge our most basic conceptions of human nature. How could such terrible things have become possible under the proud banner of equality and progress? The complexity of human nature lies at the heart of this matter.

The Lenin-Stalin regime cast its political nets far and wide for nearly four decades, the moral and cultural ramifications extending well beyond the Cold War. Many ethnic Germans fell under this wide sweep of the swelling ranks of Communism's victims. Notably during Stalin's time in power (1927-1953), not only real or perceived political opponents, but even Soviet citizens who had been either quiet bystanders or enthusiastic fellow travelers also often later found themselves caught in the ideological and political cross hairs, condemned now as enemies of the all-powerful state, and declared guilty on fabricated charges to face either exile in the Gulag or the executioner. At its worst, Stalinism functioned in a perverted sense as an equal opportunity oppressor, as yesterday's apparent stalwarts

of Soviet power could just as easily and quickly be counted among the regime's next quota of political victims.

Today, the general public often forgets—or simply is unaware—that many ordinary Soviet citizens, including a number of ethnic Germans, were at times complicit with the Lenin-Stalin regime. It held true that this ethnic group like other categories of people in Soviet society could be callously targeted for class (economic), religious, and national reasons during the Lenin-Stalin period from 1917 to 1953, though individual members held their own rationales for cooperating with Communist officials. Personal motivations varied, whether the result of state threats, intimidation, and blackmail, or even originating out of personal vendettas as well as blatant opportunism and prospects for career promotion. Stalinism indeed encouraged a pervasive political atmosphere of paranoia and struggle for self-preservation that motivated neighbors, friends, and colleagues to turn on one another. On this matter of Soviet-era complicity among ethnic Germans, Timothy J. Kloberdanz and Rosalinda Kloberdanz have rightly noted

> ...how fellow villagers often spied and informed on one another. Party officials always were willing to grant special favors to those who crossed over to the Communist side and then informed on so-called "enemies of the people." Neighbors turned on each other; brothers betrayed brothers; and even small children informed on parents who prayed in secret or who dared to whisper criticism of Stalin or other Soviet officials.[2]

Quite robust is the naked will to survive, at times forcing human loyalty and compassion to extreme breaking points. In the most terrible moments, Stalinism could bring out either the very best or very worst in humanity.

In addition, Merten's compilation is significant in addressing continuing stereotypes about ethnic Germans in today's general literature and media outlets, as well as in some of academia's ivory towers. Germans coming from various social milieus have long been cast historically as "perpetrators," but seldom as legitimate victims in other instances.[3] Merten emphasizes the multifaceted features of group identity that scholarship

and popular culture have sometimes either overlooked or exaggerated. A
too often mainstream culture still portrays Germans worldwide in bro
brush strokes and wooden generalizations, in an oversimplified or skew
manner as a result of the two terrible world wars, especially in wake o
the nihilistic and racist debacle of Nazism which tainted nearly everythi
within its aggressive reach, not least of all the ethnic German communiti
in the East. Partly because of the Soviet Union's considerable sacrifice
made against Nazi Germany between 1941 and 1945, certain Weste
intellectual and political circles have sometimes also tended to downpla
Communism's crimes against humanity worldwide over the past centur
An estimated total of ninety to one hundred million people have needless
died under various Communist regimes since 1917, with about twenty t
thirty million in the USSR alone.[4] Of those were nearly one million ethni
Germans who unnecessarily perished in Russia between approximatel
1915 and 1950.

Still making it sometimes difficult for scholars to establish a mor
balanced view of this group's history is the fact that two powerfu
rival ideologies, the Black Swastika and the Red Star, in the early 1940
simultaneously claimed the Soviet Union's ethnic Germans as their own
Admittedly, the Nazi label should never have been applied to the Volg
Germans in the first place, as the group was never physically able to
support Hitler's invasion, even if they had wanted to do so. The Volg
Germans were simply located too far beyond the reach of the advancing
German armies, and Stalin's order in late August 1941 to deport them
eastward en masse helped ensure that the separation was permanent. The
Volga Germans' guilt by association with the hated "fascists," nonetheless,
persisted over the decades.

Much as during the early years of Soviet power under Lenin and Stalin,
ethnic German motivations under Nazi rule in occupied Soviet Ukraine
ran the spectrum. Traditional anti-Semitism was sometimes magnified
by the newfound desire after the summer of 1941 to exact revenge
against Jews who supposedly had been leading the Communist regime.
Add to this volatile political mixture the peer pressure of local neighbors
and armed local defense units, the greed to collect Jewish clothing and
property in a time of material want, the belief after the recent trauma of

Stalinism that human life had simply lost its value and meaning, or some
combination of the above. By contrast, extraordinary cases also arose
where individual Germans sought to protect their Jewish neighbors from
the SS-led execution squads.

Nazism's world view, however, could at times obscure distinctions
between ethnic Germans and other groups in the occupied Soviet
territories during the war. For example, some ethnic Germans in Ukraine
died at the hands of Nazi execution squads for questionable political
affiliations and marriage to Jews. One recorded incident in Soviet Ukraine
perhaps best encapsulated the region's profound geopolitical ironies. In
early August 1941, the SS shot an ethnic German collective (*kolkhoz*)
chairman in the village of Kandel (Ribalskoye today) along the Dniester
River, though this rather unlucky Communist had returned home only
three months earlier after surviving a six-year sentence in a Soviet labor
camp.[5] These dual competing claims over national identity and affiliation
later bled over into the ethnic group's precarious political and cultural
status in the USSR during the Cold War's tense East-West ideological
division from 1945 to 1990.

Finally, Merten considers several other general misconceptions about
the ethnic Germans in Russia. This Diaspora community is extensive,
with subgroups existing within this greater global human dispersion of
the past two hundred years. This far-flung community today does not
represent a small enclave or miniscule population in the former USSR
or, for that matter, in other parts of the world. They in fact had once
constituted one of the largest national minority groups in both Imperial
Russia and the Soviet Union, not to mention their infamous distinction as
the largest of the deported Soviet peoples under Stalin. Moreover, they
had performed as a significant and productive labor pool for much of
their history, going back to the tsars' invitations for them to colonize and
develop the Volga and Black Sea Regions, and then into the Siberian and
Central Asian expanses. Even into the late Soviet period, Moscow and
Central Asia's regional centers appreciated the value of this vast labor
force of dislocated but prized citizen-workers. The series of migrations
of Tsarist Russia's and the USSR's ethnic Germans before, during and
after Communism, as part of a global German Diaspora, has also today

given rise to huge immigrant populations in North and South Americ as well as sizeable émigré communities in united Germany. The la Russian dissident novelist Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who himself survive the Gulag, once cited the traditional Russian saying: "A German is like willow tree—stick it anywhere and it will take." He respected the Germa work ethic and knack for survival that became legendary and nearl proved to be an overly positive stereotype.

Will we take care to hear the ghostly voices from the Gulag? At th heart of Merten's book lies our need—our duty perhaps—to remember the past. He realizes that it is impossible now to carry out justice against Soviet Communism's crimes, but we are at least obligated to condemn the perpetrators, never forget the victims and survivors, and always seek to learn from history. On this note, Solzhenitsyn wrote many years ago in his famous work *The Gulag Archipelago*: "It is clear enough that those men who turned the handle of the meat grinder...are no longer young. They have lived the best years of their lives prosperously, well-nourished and comfortable, so that it is too late for any kind of equal retribution.... When we neither punish nor reproach evildoers, we are not simply protecting their trivial old age, we are thereby ripping the foundations of justice from beneath new generations."[6]

It is now imperative to let the historical record speak for itself, as *Voices from the Gulag* strives to do. Therein we discover the real tragedy—that a people invited to the East later became targets of their host country. Noted scholar Dietmar Neutatz has concluded his lengthy historical investigations into the group with a similar question of "What could have been?" had the disastrous chain reaction of the First World War never taken place. Where would Russia, or its ethnic Germans, be today if fate had turned out otherwise?[7]

Dr. Eric J. Schmaltz
Northwestern Oklahoma State University
Alva, Oklahoma, March 2015

Notes

1. Ulrich Merten, *Forgotten Voices: The Expulsion of the Germans from Eastern Europe after World War II* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2012).
2. Timothy J. Kloberdanz and Rosalinda (Appelhans) Kloberdanz, "Why We Are the Way We Are: Things Our German-Russian Grandparents Never Told Us," Journal of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia 37:5 (Winter 2014), p. 5.
3. For example, see a scholarly critique of the "victimization syndrome" leveled against some of the current literature treating the legitimate sufferings and losses of the early USSR's ethnic Germans: Patrick James Kinville, "Interwar Soviet Nationalities Policy: The Case of the Volga Germans," Master's Thesis, Central European University - Nationalism Studies Program, Budapest, Hungary, 2013.
4. Stéphane Courtois, ed., et al., *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Mark Kramer (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1999 [1997]).
5. Anton Bosch and Michael Wanner, "Excerpt from Odessa Book of Mourning: Stalin's State Terror against the Germans in Odessa and Nikolajew Districts of Ukraine, 1928-1953 (Part I)," trans. Merv Weiss, Heritage Review 37:3 (Sept. 2007), pp. 21, 46.
6. Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, abridged edition by Edward E. Ericson, Jr. (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), pp. 80-81.
7. Dietmar Neutatz, *The "German Question" in the Black Sea Region and in Volhynia: Politics, Economics, and Everyday Life amid the Tension Generated by Nationalism and Modernization (1856-1914)*, trans. LaVern J. Rippley and Richard Benert, ed. Jerome Siebert (Lincoln, NE: American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, 2013), p. 430.

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