

# The German-Russian Genocide: Remembrance in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Baltic professor Adolf Perandi explains how genocide is carried out in the following manner: "Genocide does not necessarily constitute one act. The destruction of a nation cannot ordinarily be achieved through a single act, limited in time. It requires a combination of many acts carried out at different times with different means and for different reasons. Accordingly, many successive acts aimed at the destruction of a nation and interrupted at intervals can be classified as one continuous crime of genocide."

The genocide committed against the ethnic Germans of Russia comprised a series of mass murders and genocidal actions that unfolded in the 1910s, 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. In all, from 1915 to 1945, probably over one million Russian Germans perished from unnatural causes under three successive Russian governments—those of Tsar Nicholas II, Lenin, and Stalin—chiefly by means of mass executions, forced labor, deliberate starvation, and brutal deportations. When the figure of over one million victims within a span of only 30 years, 1915-1945, is viewed in light of the fact that during those same years, at its height, the group numbered only 1,621,000 (in 1918), one is not surprised to find that the collective conscience and consciousness of the group are

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<sup>1</sup> This text is largely based on: Samuel Sinner, *The Open Wound. The Genocide of Russian and Soviet German Ethnic Minorities, 1915-1945 and Beyond./ Der Genozid an Rußlanddeutschen, 1915-1945*. With forewords by Dr. Gerd Stricker (Zollikon, Switzerland) and Eric Schmaltz (Lincoln, Nebraska). A bilingual edition. (Fargo, North Dakota: North Dakota State University Libraries, 2000).

still suffering from the effects of psychological trauma. In countless poems, novels, works of art, and theater pieces being produced by Russian Germans in Russia and in Germany, one finds the common themes of deliberate starvation, the Gulag, deportation, torture, and genocide.

As a consequence of this genocide, the Russian Germans were unable to exceed their combined population level of 1918 (1,621,000) until about 1960 (1959 census - 1,619,655).

For three decades, countless Russian Germans suffered the brutal murder of family members, lost relatives, and friends through deportation and were forced to watch helplessly as their loved ones slowly starved to death, were beaten, tortured, harassed daily, driven to insanity and suicide. *Their genocide remains an open wound.*

In the decree of the RSFSR *On the Rehabilitation of Repressed Peoples* of 26 April 1991, the Russian government finally confessed that a campaign of "slander and genocide" had been committed against those nationalities which had been deported by Stalin during World War II. The Russian Germans were the largest of these deported groups.

## **Phase I**

### **Deportations and Massacres**

WWI exacerbated Russia's Germanophobia and Panslavic and Slavophile tendencies. Foreign Minister Zazonov called for a "final solution" to the ethnic German problem in Russia, noting that the time had come "...to deal with this long over-due problem, for the current war has created the conditions to make it possible to solve this problem once and for all." Russian General Polivanov wrote in a pamphlet that was distributed among Russian soldiers on order of Grand Duke Nicholas, the Tsar's uncle: "Russia's Germans must all be driven out, without respect of age, sex, any supposed usefulness, or their many years of residence in the empire."

In 1915 and 1916, the deportation of ethnic-German groups followed the issuance of property expropriation laws. In all, approximately 190,000 to 200,000 ethnic Germans were deported in 1915-1916. An overall mortality rate of one-third to one-half (63,000-100,000) would most likely agree with the actual number of losses, though the exact figure will never be known. R. J. Rummel, a political scientist at the University of Hawaii, argues that the casualties which resulted from the deportations of this ethnic group should, in accord with standard legal definitions, be classified as "murder."

From the Tsarist point of view, under the cloak of war, the time had come to deal with a long overdue ethnic "problem." The deportations of Russian Germans were in reality exterminatory measures hidden under the cloak of a supposed "war time emergency action."

The repression of the Russian Germans during World War I included pogroms in the major Russian cities which destroyed thousands of German homes and businesses, the

out-lawing of public speaking of German, the prohibition of German correspondence, and the suppression of German language newspapers.

In addition to the Tsarist property expropriation and deportations, following the Bolshevik Revolution of October 25, 1917, the ethnic Germans of the former Tsarist empire were immediately confronted by an organized campaign of terror. With the October Revolution, there emerged what Vahakn Dadrian writing on the Turkish genocide of the Armenians has called "a subculture of massacre." The eruption of massacres manifested itself in a combination of small and large scale killing operations involving, among other cruelties, the mass rape of the elderly, women, and children, mass drownings, prolonged torture sessions, mutilations, mass shootings of hundreds, even thousands in a single action, the holocaust of entire villages—including the burning of all inhabitants and building structures, and the complete robbery of entire villages in the name of "requisition" and extermination of the quote, unquote, "German kulaks, big farmers and counter-revolutionaries."

It is impossible to determine the exact number of Russian Germans who were murdered through executions during the years of the Great Massacres. But we can safely conclude that from 1918-1921, and then to a lesser extent 1922-1925—which is the second phase of the genocide we will discuss next—probably about 360,000 to 365,000 Russian Germans were exterminated through organized starvation and massacres, that is 300,000 starvation deaths + 60,000-65,000 shootings. This statistic approaches one-third of the entire group's 1926 population level.

## Phase II

### Enforced Starvation

The draught Russia experienced in 1921, as well as the devastation caused by the so-called Russian civil war, certainly contributed to the starvation crisis of the early 1920s. But these were neither the direct nor main causes of the mass starvation which lasted from 1920 to 1925 among the ethnic Germans in Russia. Mass starvation began only after grain reserves were mercilessly requisitioned by order of the Lenin government.

The Russian-German population attempted to save itself from certain death from starvation by resisting the Bolshevik grain requisition policy. The government initially denied the existence of mass starvation. Mention of famine conditions was forbidden in the press, and talk of starvation was punishable by death. In July 1921, the Russian government finally broke its silence, admitting that international press reports of mass starvation were indeed true. It reluctantly allowed international aid into the country. The change in policy of 1921 was not motivated by charity or concern for the victims. As Josef Stalin wrote in a brief from October 19, 1921, granting the American Relief Association permission to carry out relief operations in Russia: "The issue is not charity but trade."

The peasant uprisings of the early 1920s were cruelly eradicated, after which special military tribunals were established to punish not only individuals, but also to execute hundreds *en masse*, including children and the elderly of both sexes. After the end of the uprisings, Lenin ordered in 1921 the most brutal and devastating grain

requisitions yet to be carried out in the Volga-German settlement area. Conditions grew so critical that Russian reports referred to cannibalism and consumption of even more shocking resources not fit to be mentioned in civilized company.

The latest Russian-language studies of the starvation crisis among the Russian Germans, conclude that approximately 300,000 ethnic Germans needlessly died of starvation in the early 1920s. Along with the 60,000-65,000 shootings of 1918-1921, this statistic of 360,000 approaches one-third of the entire group's 1926 population level.

### Phase III

#### Collectivization, Deportations, Executions

During Stalin's first Five Year Plan (1928-1932), a plan for forced agricultural collectivization, or de-privatization of farming, the ethnic Germans were stripped of life's necessities. The higher than average death rate among the Russian Germans, in which this policy of requisition played a central role, began in 1930 as collectivization intensified.

There was a mixed harvest in 1932 and 1933, but there was no need for mass starvation in the Soviet Union. At the very least, Stalin could have requested help from the international community. Instead, he denied there was any starvation and refused all help offered. Indeed, mass starvation was precisely what he wanted. It was the best tool

to exterminate the so-called kulaks and other “enemies of the people,” in other words, “private farmers.” One Russian German wrote in 1932:

If a solution cannot be found in the coming winter, then 50 percent of the population will starve to death... [O]ur government is conjuring up an artificial famine...

Entire villages nearly died out, and show trials were held against mothers who had eaten their infants in desperation. Between 1930 and the beginning of 1937, the Russian Germans lost approximately 300,000 to 350,000 members, one-fourth of their entire group—one out of every four was therefore exterminated through deliberate starvation, deportation, or shooting. Khrushchev admitted that the collectivization famine was an act of "murder" on the part of the government. In 1990, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine confessed that the famine had been deliberately created by the Soviet leadership.

#### Phase 4

##### 1940s Deportations and *Trudarmiya*

In 1941, all Russian Germans were deported *en masse* to Siberia and other points east by order of Stalin. During World War II, Stalin used the pretext of war to seal the fate of those problematic ethnic groups which had been the object of Soviet anti-nationalities policies since the early 1930s. The deportations were the unavoidable

outcome of the 1930s Soviet anti-nationalities policies and would have occurred even had Hitler never invaded the USSR.

As with the World War I deportations, so for Stalin in 1941 the time had come to deal with a long overdue nationalities "problem" under the cloak of war. As in World War I, the 1941 deportations were in reality genocidal measures hidden under the cloak of a supposed "war time emergency action" described as a "temporary resettlement" operation.

After arriving at their areas of exile, many of the deportees were soon "drafted" into the *trudarmiya* (Labor Army). "Enlisted" were able-bodied men 15-55 years of age and women 16-45. All others lived in what came to be designated Special Settlements. After 1945, the *trudarmiya* was officially abolished, and the former areas of the *trudarmiya* were then also designated Special Settlements. Until 1956, those living in these zones were required to report regularly to a local Soviet official, and leaving these special zones without permission was punishable by up to 20 years of hard labor.

According to several internationally respected scholars, between 300,000 and 500,000 Russian Germans perished in the 1940s through needless starvation and forced labor in the *trudarmiya*, representing anywhere from one-fourth to one-third of the entire group.

## **Conclusion**

The Russian Germans have never received financial compensation for the loss of



their property, or for the psychological, spiritual, and emotional damages caused by the murder of their relatives. Neither their land, autonomous republic, independent rayons, nor villages have been returned to them. Their traditional ways of life, language, and culture in Russia and other CIS countries are all swiftly heading towards extinction.

As for the approximately two million Russian Germans from the Soviet Union who in the years 1987 to the present succeeded in emigrating to Germany, their relocation is understandable in the light of their twentieth-century experience under Russian authorities.

The ethnic Germans of the former Russian and Soviet empires now live scattered across the globe in the CIS, the Americas, and Germany. The great cultural treasures of this ethnic group being produced in Russia and Germany should enjoy a more general dissemination among America's Russian Germans. I mention the music of Alfred Schnittke, one of the world's most often performed neo-classical composers, born 1934 in Engels in the former region of the Volga-German republic as the son of a Jewish father and a Volga-German Catholic mother. Schnittke died in Germany in 1998, shortly after completing his ninth Symphony. He was buried in honor in Moscow. You can purchase his music at any Borders or Barnes & Nobles bookstore. One also thinks of artists such as Nikolaus Rode, Isolde Hartwan, and countless other "post-Soviet" Russian-German painters.

Both the sufferings and achievements of the Russian Germans are reflected in the group's poetry, genealogical and historical research, art, music, and so on, at an international level. The American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, located in

Lincoln, Nebraska in the center of America, holds the nation's premier collection of Russian-German archival materials. But the ethnic group must not rest content with this. Russian-German archives and centers of study should and must be established also on, or near, our two coasts. An east coast and west coast Russian-German archives are a vital necessity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Such a project would represent not a competitive, but a fruitful cooperative endeavor. A national network of Russian-German archives and centers of study would facilitate nation-wide access to primary materials, including the group's cultural heritage as manifested in music, art, and folklore.

Finally, such a national network would encourage more local contributions to the group, in the forms of donated time, primary genealogical and historical materials, and educational outreach both within and outside the group. At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is of the utmost importance for the group to seize the historic opportunity to build a national network of Russian-German archives and centers of culture and study in order to make possible the fuller documentation of the genocide committed against Russian Germans in 20<sup>th</sup>-century Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union. It is our duty to ensure that the sufferings and triumphs of our people are never forgotten. May we never lose sight of the tragedy and strength of the victims and survivors of the genocide committed against our people, the Russian Germans, *die Russlanddeutschen*.

Thank you.

Samuel Sinner

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Portland, Oregon