

OUR MEMORY IS THE FUTURE: THE SOVIET EXPERIENCE AND REMEMBRANCE OF THE AUGUST 1941 DEPORTATION OF VOLGA GERMANS

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Greetings, Portland, fellow Germans from Russia, and various guests! Thank you very much for attending this special commemoration event for the Volga German diaspora community. I truly appreciate and am honored by this rare opportunity to speak before you on this significant day of remembrance.

Thanks to the many fine efforts of the Oregon Chapter of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia and the Center for Volga German Studies at Concordia University in Portland, we remember the sixty-seventh anniversary of Stalin's mass deportation of Volga Germans to Soviet Siberia and Central Asia in the late summer of 1941 during the darkest days of World War II.

Today, I wish to discuss the historical context and provide a brief overview of the Soviet deportation of the Volga Germans in 1941, as well as consider its historical consequences. In addition, I seek to offer some perspectives on the more important and broader issue of history and its relationship to memory and the future. So much could be said about the group's long history, many accomplishments and sufferings, but my primary focus today is on the deportation experience of the 1940s and its legacy.

First of all, we should consider the political status of the Volga Germans by the time of Stalin's mass deportation in 1941. A year after the Bolshevik Revolution, in October 1918, Vladimir Lenin's new Soviet government established the German Autonomous Workers' Commune. In 1922, non-German villages were included in this political arrangement. Between December 1923 and February 1924, during which time Lenin died, the Central Executive Committee in the Kremlin went one step further. It altered the Commune's status by establishing the Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR). In addition to incorporating the German nationality into the Soviet political system, the new Volga republic was intended to serve as an inspirational political model for Moscow's much-anticipated "international socialist revolution" in politically unstable Weimar Germany at the time. Soviet hopes to spread the revolution abroad in Germany soon faded, however, after the last unsuccessful Communist uprising in Bavaria was crushed in late 1923.

Various Soviet resolutions concerning the broader nationality question generally coincided with the Volga German republic's formation at this time. In 1923, the Soviet leadership was still trying to reconcile socialist goals with powerful national sentiments. Nationalism's apparent

strength posed obstacles to the USSR's desire for a strong central state and the primacy of class over national identity. Thus the Volga German ASSR was clearly a political outgrowth of mid-1920s Soviet nationalities policies.

The new Volga German republic encompassed an area only about the size of the small European country of Belgium. Reflecting the Volga Region's longstanding ethnic diversity, about two-thirds of the new republic's total population of 600,000 was of German nationality—or roughly 400,000 Volga Germans. In view of other nationalities living on its territory, the republic recognized three official languages—German, Ukrainian, and Russian. It represented the most compact ethnic German settlement in the young Soviet Union at the time. At the time of its founding, the vast majority of the USSR's approximately 1.3 million ethnic Germans lived outside of this ASSR, reflecting the whole ethnic group's wide geographical dispersal and historical differences.

Starting in 1921 and lasting for several years, the Soviet regime within this new and elaborate federative framework also drew up more than a dozen German “national districts” that were located in Volynia, Ukraine, the Crimea, the Caucasus, and Russian Siberia. In Ukraine, the Soviet regime founded thirteen national districts, seven of which were set aside for ethnic Germans. Until their abolition between 1935 and 1938, these national districts were supposed to provide various cultural, educational, and political concessions to the local Germans not living within the more compact settlements along the Volga. These districts held a status below that of an ASSR (Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic). Most ASSRs were established as integral territorial units within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) that had been created in October 1918—that is, as smaller territorial-political units without the right to secession. The Volga German ASSR, as a part of the RSFSR, thus stood immediately under the territorial status of an SSR (Soviet Socialist Republic). In theory, only the SSRs could declare independence from the All-Union SSR (USSR), but this secession movement did not materialize until the collapse of Communism in 1990 and 1991, most notably in the Baltic countries, Ukraine, and the various Central Asian states.

Once they assumed power, the Bolsheviks seized the opportunity to reverse in a rather short time the tsars' previous compulsory “Russification” policy, going so far as to encourage and facilitate the use of national languages through local administration, education, the press, the media, and other publications. Of course, with the advent of the Russian Civil War and War Communism (1918-1920), various political and civil rights fell by the wayside, creating early on some serious discrepancies between Soviet ideals and Soviet reality—a problem that was later only partly remedied during Lenin's short-lived New Economic Policy (NEP) between 1921 and 1928. Under Lenin, however, in both theory and practice the native-language policy, though predominantly socialist in content, appeared to be the greatest freedom granted to the Volga German ASSR and the various German national districts.

By the mid- to late 1930s, however, the new Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin pushed for a renewed “Russification” effort, not least of all in education, across the USSR. German-language instruction and media were abolished in all the German national districts by 1938, leaving untouched only the Volga German republic.¹ The Soviet government formally liquidated the Volga German ASSR on September 7, 1941, and removed any remaining political and cultural

concessions for the ethnic group. In the years to come, for many ethnic activists this republic came to symbolize ethnic German autonomy in Russia and the “destiny” of a unique and separate people.²

As for the Volga German deportation of August 1941, we must remember that the Soviet Union’s ethnic Germans represented one of thirteen nationality groups deported en masse under Stalin between 1938 and 1951, as my good colleague J. Otto Pohl has noted.³ Thus this terrible episode along the Volga, as tremendous an event as it was, constituted actually one part of a much larger demographic disaster that plagued Central and Eastern Europe at the time, especially under the Nazis and Soviet Communists. It is also easy to forget that this episode did NOT go completely unnoticed in the West at the time. From Moscow, the Associated Press via *The New York Times*, for example, reported on the Soviet deportation of Volga Germans and the liquidation of their republic in its Monday, September 8, 1941, issue.⁴

Growing anti-German sentiment in Russia had its roots in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and it compelled many of our ancestors to immigrate to America. The Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, however, sealed the ethnic group’s fate in Eastern Europe, as ethnic Germans became closely associated with the fascists, feared now as “fifth columns” and internal threats during wartime.

Here follows a deportation and exile timeline for ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union between 1941 and 1955:

- **August 3, 1941** – As the Nazis continued their rapid advance into the Soviet Union, the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) Chief Lavrenty Beria ordered the resettlement of about 1,200 German families from the Karelo-Finnish Union Republic.
- **August 15, 1941** - Again, in response to the continuing Nazi offensive, more than 53,000 Germans in Crimea were forcibly resettled to Ordzhonikidze Krai and Rostov Oblast.
- **August 24, 1941** - Soviet leaders Zhdanov, Molotov and Malenkov delivered a letter to Stalin with their decision to relocate 88,700 ethnic Finns and 6,700 ethnic Germans from the city and province of Leningrad.
- **August 26, 1941** - The Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Council of People’s Commissars (SNK) decided to deport the Volga Germans en masse.
- **August 28, 1941** - The Presidium of the Supreme Soviet issued Ukaz (Decree) No. 21-160, ordering the deportation of the Volga Germans to special settlements in Kazakhstan and Siberia; this is the infamous decree with which many of us are most familiar.
- **August 31, 1941** - The Politburo of the All-Union Communist Party ordered that all able-bodied ethnic German men in Ukraine were to be sent to labor camps in the Ural Mountains; the NKVD (People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs or security services) rounded up and interned 18,600 men between the ages of 16 and 60.
- **September 3-20, 1941** - NKVD records revealed that between roughly 365,000 to 371,000 Germans were removed from the Volga German ASSR, along with more than 46,000 from Saratov Oblast and more than 26,000 from Stalingrad Oblast, for a total of approximately 438,000 to 444,000.
- **September 6, 1941** - The top-secret Resolution No. 636ss of the State Defense

Committee (GKO) under Stalin ordered the removal of Germans from Moscow and Rostov Oblasts.

- **September 7, 1941** - The Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR formally dissolved the Volga German ASSR.
- **September 8, 1941** - The Supreme High Command General Headquarters (the Soviet military) issued Prikaz (Order) No. 35105, which removed all ethnic Germans from the Red Army and Soviet military academies, transferring them to labor battalions.
- **September 10-15, 1941** - The NKVD records revealed that about 7,000 Germans from Moscow Oblast were relocated.
- **September 15-18, 1941** - NKVD records showed that more than 38,000 Germans from Rostov Oblast were deported.
- **September 21, 1941** - Resolution No. 698ss of the State Defense Committee (GKO) ordered the deportation of Germans from Krasnodar Krai, Ordzhonikidze Krai, Tula Oblast, the Karabardino-Balkar ASSR, and the North Ossetian ASSR.
- **September 22, 1941** - Resolution No. 702ss of the GKO ordered the deportation of Germans from Zaporozhia, Stalin and Voroshilov Oblasts in Ukraine.
- **September 25-October 10, 1941** - The NKVD records showed that more than 76,000 Germans from Ukraine and more than 125,000 from the North Caucasus were relocated.
- **October 8, 1941** - Resolution No. 743ss of the GKO called for the deportation of Germans from Voronezh Oblast (in southwestern Russia, near Ukraine).
- **October 8, 1941** - Resolution No. 744ss of the GKO called for the deportation of Germans from the Transcaucasian republics.
- **October 15, 1941** - NKVD Chief Beria issued Prikaz (Order) No. 1507 calling for the resettlement of Germans from the province of Gorki.
- **October 15-30, 1941** - The NKVD records noted that more than 5,100 Germans from Voronezh Oblast and more than 46,000 Germans from Transcaucasian republics were deported.
- **October 22, 1941** - Resolution No. 827ss of the GKO ordered the deportation of Germans from Daghestan and the Chechen-Ingush ASSR.
- **October 25-30, 1941** - NKVD records showed that about 7,300 Germans from Daghestan and Chechnya were deported.
- **October 30, 1941** - The SNK released Instruction No. 57k "About the displacement of persons of German nationality from industrial to agricultural areas" for the Uzbek SSR and the provinces of Molotov (Perm), Chelyabinsk, Sverdlovsk, and Chkalov (Orenburg).
- **November 2, 1941** - The SNK issued a resolution on the deportation of about 5,700 Germans who were listed as living in the Kalmyk ASSR.
- **November 21, 1941** - The SNK issued a resolution on the deportation of nearly 8,800 Germans recorded as living in Koshinsk Raion in Kubishev Oblast to their new destination of Kazakhstan.
- **January 6, 1942** - The SNK released Instruction No. 196ss "About the resettlement of persons of German nationality in the Uzbek SSR."
- **January 10, 1942** - The resolution of the State Defense Committee (GKO) "Concerning the Kind of Use for German Evacuees of Conscript Age from 17 to 50 Years"; it called for the labor conscription of 120,000 Germans then living in the eastern territories.
- **February 14, 1942** - The resolution of the GKO "Concerning the Mobilization of German Men of Conscript Age from 17 to 50 Years Permanently Residing in Districts,

Localities, and Autonomous and Union Republics”; the so-called Labor Army (*trudarmiia*) was thus formally created; it resulted in 40,000 additional Germans being inducted into the Labor Army.

- **May 29, 1942** - Resolution No. 1828ss of the GKO called for the deportation of ethnic Germans, Crimean Tatars, ethnic Romanians, and ethnic Greeks from Krasnodar region (krai) and Rostov Oblast.
- **October 7, 1942** - GKO Order 2383 expanded Labor Army conscription to all ethnic German men aged 15 to 55 and all ethnic German women aged 16 to 45 who held Soviet citizenship; as a result, 123,500 additional Germans, including 52,700 women, were inducted into the Labor Army.
- **January 8, 1945** - The resolution of the Soviet People’s Commissars of the USSR “Concerning the Legal Status of the Special Resettlers Assigned by Order to the Special Settlement”; at this time, the so-called “special settlements” (*spetsposelenie*) were officially established.
- **Late 1947** – Remaining Labor Army units were disbanded; however, for the next several years, the USSR’s deported peoples remained confined to remote regions under special surveillance in the so-called “special settlements.”
- **November 26, 1948** - The decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR “Concerning the Criminal Responsibility for Escape from the Place of Mandatory and Permanent Settlement of Persons Evacuated to the Remote Regions of the USSR at the Time of the Patriotic War” was signed; this exile was to last “forever,” and a punishment of 20 years of hard labor was set for those who attempted to leave the “special settlements” without special permit.
- **March 5, 1953** - Stalin’s death.
- **July 5, 1954** - In the USSR, children under age 16 were released from the “special settlements.”
- **May 9, 1955** - In the USSR, “mobilized” local Germans of the eastern regions were released from the “special settlements.”
- **December 13, 1955** - With the signing of the decree (war amnesty) of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR “Concerning the Removal of Restrictions in the Legal Status of Germans and Their Family Members Found in the Special Settlement,” the remaining ethnic German population was released from the “special settlements”; however, it called for no compensation or return of property confiscated during deportation and exile, nor were Germans allowed to return to their old homelands and native villages.
- **February 24-25, 1956** - At the Twentieth Communist Party Congress in Moscow, Khrushchev gave his so-called “Secret Speech,” in which he condemned Stalin personally for past political crimes; however, he made no mention of Stalin’s policy toward Volga and other ethnic Germans.
- **August 29, 1964** - The decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR “Concerning the Insertion of an Amendment in the Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR from 28 August 1941 ‘Concerning the Removal of Germans Residing in the Volga Region’” was signed; this “partial rehabilitation” policy did not allow the ethnic Germans to return to their old homelands, nor did it provide for the re-establishment of a Volga German republic and various national districts; the decree was not published widely in Russian, nor was it publicized to a wide audience for the

next twenty-five years.

What are we to make of this staggering list of dates and statistics and series of events concerning the deportation and exile of Soviet Germans, above all those along the Volga? First of all, there is the sheer scale of these deportations. According to respected scholar Viktor Krieger in Germany, the estimated total number of Germans deported from the Volga German Republic in late 1941 stood between 365,000 and 371,000, along with approximately 46,000 from Saratov Oblast and about 26,000 from Stalingrad Oblast. In addition, official Soviet figures revealed that by the end of 1941, nearly 800,000 ethnic Germans had been “resettled” from the European territories of the Soviet Union to Kazakhstan and Siberia, including between 438,000 and 444,000 Volga Germans. In fact, as we can see from our historical timeline, multiple deportations against Germans took place, a process mostly completed between August 1941 and January 1942. Not least of all, Stalin received considerable assistance from all levels of the Soviet regime to conduct these massive population removals. Indeed, no single man could have carried out these removals without the resources made available by both party and state.⁵

We can also observe that the Soviet authorities were incapable of removing most ethnic Germans living in western Ukraine because of the rapid Nazi advance. In more limited numbers, the Soviets in some cases were already deporting Crimean and Ukrainian Germans living near the collapsing front about two or three weeks before the August 28, 1941, deportation decree and the formal liquidation of the Volga republic on September 7, 1941. Nearly 350,000 ethnic Germans in Ukraine, however, avoided deportation to the east until near the end of the war. More than 200,000 of them, attempting to flee west with the Nazis, were captured by the Red Army and Soviet authorities and were forced to join the Volga Germans and other national groups in Soviet exile in 1945 and 1946. Thus about 1.2 million Soviet German exiles lived in the east by the late 1940s.⁶

We find it difficult today to imagine the human suffering, confusion, fear and despair that resulted from this sudden mass population transfer in late 1941. Civilians—men, women and children, young and old alike—had to board cattle or freight cars to distant, untamed lands, with few provisions made available to them. George J. Walters in his 1982 book, *Wir Wollen Deutsche Bleiben: The Story of the Volga Germans*, recounted the following about the 1941 Volga German deportations. He wrote:

Perhaps the best account of what happened is given by Victor Leiker, a New Jersey journalist, who interviewed four natives of the Volga Republic in 1968. The people were given four hours in which to prepare for the evacuation. Anyone resisting or attempting to hide would be summarily shot, and a few were. Soldiers arrived a few hours after the order and herded the people to the banks of the river where they boarded barges and were taken to a railhead. Each person, regardless of age, was allowed one suitcase or bundle. Some suspected that they would be sent to Siberia and took all the clothes and bedding they could carry. Others took as much food as they could assemble. In the long run those with the extra clothing and bedding had the best chance of surviving the cold in the north where little or no preparation had been made for their arrival.

At the railhead the people were loaded into freight and cattle cars, some with open vents and some with no vents at all. And so began the long, horrible and disastrous trip to Siberia. No statistics are available, and we shall probably never know how many died on their trip to the forced labor camps and how many

in the forests, mines and fields of Siberia.... There was only one railroad running through the Volga Republic and it had no branch lines. The people were almost always forced to walk to the nearest railroad station. It can be imagined that many of those not in good health, that many of the old and young, did not make it to the station.⁷

During this era of deportation and exile, the Soviets segregated the men from the women and children. Scholar Irina Mukhina has recently examined how the Soviet deportation experience and hard labor of the 1940s and 1950s had ruined the health and reproductive capabilities of numerous young ethnic German women, many of whom had come to feel that they had not only been deprived of their humanity, but also their very womanhood. Separate labor battalions were established for the sexes (i.e., in agriculture, fishing, lumbering, oil extraction, and mining, etc.).⁸

The brutal Nazi-Soviet war and the period of forced resettlements and hard labor in the east resulted in the death of about 300,000 Soviet Germans (Volga and others) between 1941 and 1949. In some respects, the mass deportations and exile of Volga Germans and other nationalities during the Stalinist era stood as the tragic culmination of previous decades of Russian and Soviet persecution. Based on a detailed investigation of archival evidence, including NKVD (Soviet secret police) records, my longtime colleague Samuel D. Sinner has calculated the high and low mortality figures among the ethnic Germans during early Soviet rule. The continuities of Russian history become more evident here when we place Stalin's mass deportations within a broader timeframe. From 1915 to 1916, Russia's deportation of Volynian Germans under the last tsar during World War I killed between 63,000 and 100,000 (the Volga Germans were spared this fate in March 1917 only because of the breakout of first Russian Revolution). Between 1917 and 1925, ethnic German deaths in the USSR from civil war, shootings, and man-made and natural famines ranged from 360,000 to 365,000. From 1930 to 1937, at the peak of the Stalinist Terror, collectivization drives and man-made famines killed another 270,000 to 300,000 ethnic Germans. Another 200,000 to 300,000 perished as a result of the deportations and the Labor Army (*trudarmia*) in exile from 1941 to 1949. In all, approximately 890,000 to 1,000,000 ethnic Germans died in the late Russian Empire and early Soviet Union during a thirty-four-year period (1915-1949), most of them under Stalin's leadership.⁹

Precise figures on the number of dead will elude us, and academic debates about the actual motives of Soviet authorities might even at times create differences of opinion, but the larger destructive portrait of the Soviet "social experiment" is now firmly established. Only in recent years have we begun to come to terms with the truth. During each of these decades—the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s—roughly one-fourth to one-third of ethnic Germans fell victim to the young Soviet regime under Lenin and especially under Stalin—about one million souls. This ethnic group reclaimed its pre-World War I population level only in the 1960s.¹⁰ As if ethnic German losses were too much for us to contemplate, it is even more staggering to consider the number of deaths in the USSR as a whole during the same period—20 to 30 million under Stalin, and another 20 million as a result of World War II.

By the mid-1950s, ethnic Germans comprised almost 40% of the 2.75 million Soviet citizens forcibly resettled to the expanses of Siberia and Central Asia. They therefore represented the

largest nationality group in Soviet exile during the 1940s and 1950s, with about 1.2 million of them confined to the so-called “special settlements” (*spetsposelenie/Sondersiedlungen*).¹¹

The exile of Soviet Germans continued in Central Asia and Siberia long after the Kremlin issued various post-Stalinist decrees, including the December 1955 “war amnesty” that released Germans from special confinement and the August 1964 “rehabilitation” that removed wartime accusations against them. By the time of the 1989 Soviet census, more than two million ethnic Germans were counted in the country, most of them still living in Russian Siberia and Kazakhstan, but at the same time they also figured as the largest nationality group in the USSR (ranked fifteenth out of more than 120 official Soviet nationality groups) that could not claim a republic or territorial homeland of its own within the Soviet federative system. Unlike some of the deported Soviet peoples of the period, such as the Chechens, Ingush, and Kalmyks, the ethnic Germans and others, including the Crimean Tatars and the Meskhetian Turks, never received the opportunity to reclaim their previous national and cultural status.

Actual official statements from the Soviet Union have given more credence to the contention that genocide (i.e., both physical and social-cultural destruction) had been directed against its ethnic Germans and other nationality groups during the Stalinist period. Between 1989 and 1991, the declining Soviet regime enacted a series of far-reaching “rehabilitation” measures for its ethnic Germans and other persecuted nationality peoples.

In the spirit of Mikhail Gorbachev’s *perestroika* (“restructuring”), the USSR Supreme Soviet issued an important official declaration on November 14, 1989, guaranteeing the rights of the “repressed and deported peoples.” The declaration referred to the Balkars, Ingush, Kalmycks, Crimean Tatars, Chechens, Meskhetians Turks, Greeks, Koreans, Kurds, Karachai, and Germans. In support of Soviet society’s ongoing “renewal” and “democratization” at the time, the new governmental policy was now to reflect the truth about the past and provide the country with a positive legal precedent. The declaration acknowledged the “bitterness” of the Stalinist era. In particular, the USSR Supreme Soviet criticized the Stalinist policies of removal and repression, even declaring such past actions as “criminal” and “illegal.” The government also guaranteed that such abuses of power would never happen again, promising to enact legislation that would reinstate the rights of these national groups.¹²

On April 26, 1991, Soviet Russia (the RSFSR, the largest and most dominant of the Soviet republics) went so far as to acknowledge that under Stalin it had waged a policy of “genocide” (*genotsid*) and “slander” (*kleveta*) against the various “repressed and deported peoples,” including the ethnic Germans. The soon-to-be RSFSR president and Gorbachev’s chief political rival at the time, Boris Yeltsin, signed the law “Concerning the Rehabilitation of the ‘Repressed Peoples,’” in many respects the culmination of previous Soviet rehabilitation resolutions and decrees.¹³ Moscow’s pronouncement proved most remarkable, as few modern states in confronting their past have made an open confession on an issue of such a sensitive and tragic nature. Undeniably, Yeltsin and others displayed rare moral courage when they signed off on this dramatic political statement. The Soviet Union by this time was already in its agonizing death throes, but in no uncertain terms, the Russian Federation as the anchor of the Soviet Union took a significant lead in establishing the legal foundation for subsequent measures toward its repressed and deported nationalities.

Arguably, in 1991 Yeltsin outmaneuvered his nemesis Gorbachev in competition for political support from the national minority peoples. The RSFSR's new reform-minded outlook probably resulted from several other factors as well. First, the Kremlin faced increasing domestic pressure from both political reformers and various ethnic associations inspired by *perestroika*. Second, it sought diplomatic support from the West; reforms could help improve Russia's standing in the international community. Third, in the case of the large ethnic German minority at the time, Soviet and Russian officials believed that state efforts to rehabilitate this group and others could encourage a recently united Germany to provide significant foreign investment and subsidies to a region desperate for material and financial assistance. Ample evidence indicates a close correlation between the former USSR's passage of rehabilitation measures for German minorities and the procurement of diplomatic and financial support from united Germany at this time. At the time, ethnic German activists also appreciated these political possibilities.¹⁴

Few in the West have known about Soviet Russia's public admission of guilt about waging slander and genocide against its minority peoples. The April 26, 1991, law also announced generous "rehabilitation" assistance for ethnic Germans and other repressed nationalities.¹⁵ How the struggling new independent Russian republic would live up to its promises and provide adequate compensation for these victims and survivors, however, remained a different matter altogether, as experience later made clear.¹⁶

By the late 1980s, Moscow had concluded that fundamental reform was essential in all spheres of Soviet society, including nationality affairs. Gorbachev was thrust into this turbulent, but promising, period of change. He exhibited a keen awareness of the country's basic socio-economic problems, though he still underestimated the region's festering national problems.

One of Gorbachev's earliest reforms included the right of Soviet citizens to immigrate. In January 1987, ethnic Germans began to leave the USSR in significant numbers for the imagined ancestral homeland of West (later united) Germany, becoming a flood by the early to mid-1990s, a phenomenon that bore striking resemblance to Soviet Jews who had departed for Israel in more recent decades. The 1989 Soviet census registered more than 950,000 Germans in Kazakhstan and over 840,000 in Russia. Because secretive Soviet officials were reluctant to reveal how many ethnic Germans lived inside the country, the West German government viewed these figures with astonishment immediately following the Cold War, actually believing that only 50,000 to 100,000 ethnic Germans had been residing in Kazakhstan.¹⁷

Based on Germany's "right of return" policy for those of proven German descent, more than two million ethnic Germans from the former USSR have migrated to united Germany since the early 1990s. Most of them did so in the first half of that decade, shortly after the Cold War. Subsequently, the German government incrementally tightened immigration requirements and restrictions on ethnic German "settlers from abroad" (*Aussiedler*), reducing it today to a near trickle.¹⁸

Rising ethnic tensions and a decline in the standard of living led to the exodus of ethnic Germans after Gorbachev. As a result, Kazakhstan can today claim only about 300,000 ethnic Germans, down from nearly one million in 1989. Some sources cite a lower figure at 230,000, however.

In Russia, only about 600,000 ethnic Germans remain, some of them having fled the Central Asian states.¹⁹ After 1989, other former Soviet republics in Central Asia have witnessed an equally significant depletion of their ethnic Germans, many of whom were among their most prized citizen-workers.²⁰

Much like its many historical tragedies, the former Soviet Union's historical ironies abound. In the last few years, Russia and Kazakhstan have sought to keep what remains of their precious ethnic German minorities, and even hoping to build up these communities again. For example, former Russian President (now Prime Minister) Vladimir Putin has moved recently to reach out to "homesick" German émigrés and ethnic Russians in the West to convince them to return to Mother Russia. Because of its worsening demographic decline, Russia has sought to formulate plans to entice these people to make the journey home. In view of rising oil and natural gas revenues, Putin and his supporters have come to believe that cash and social benefits over the course of the next several years will lure at least some of these former citizens back to their "homeland." Almost like the tsars of old, the Putin government devised a program in 2007 worth more than 2.8 billion rubles (\$109 million) to improve housing, health care, and education, and therefore encourage German émigrés to return to Russia.²¹

Similarly, Germany and Kazakhstan within the past decade have tried to build diplomatic bridges and mutual economic incentives by keeping productive citizens of German ancestry in Central Asia. Both governments are hoping that the ethnic Germans of Kazakhstan might someday serve as a geopolitical and economic "bridge" to allow Germany and the successor states of the former Soviet Union to cultivate closer mutual relationships. Recently, for instance, Kazakhstan under President Nursultan Nazarbayev has granted more than 2,000 German returnees with state citizenship.²²

Some observers, however, have expressed skepticism about such proposals, especially when it comes to persuading millions to leave the West for the former USSR. Ethnic German activist Adolf Braun has recently said that "Russia has missed the boat.... People here are no longer prepared to integrate Germans from Russia [into society] as they did in the 1970s and '80s."²³ Germany's National Association (Landsmannschaft) of Germans from Russia has also stated that, though some would be willing to repatriate, Putin's plan would have worked if it had been implemented a few decades ago.²⁴ Longtime Volga German activist Yuri Haar has concurred with this sentiment as well, noting that few *Aussiedler* in Germany will return to the former USSR because they have no cultural enclave in which to settle, such as a republic along the Volga. For example, today only about 12,000 Volga Germans can be found in the Saratov Region, most of them an older generation of exiles having returned from Central Asia since the end of the Soviet era. One persistent problem for émigrés is that the leaders of the former Soviet republics have not yet offered them assurances that they will also help revitalize the ethnic German community in the east. Even Kremlin officials acknowledge the uphill battle they face to convince their former compatriots to return.²⁵ Perhaps the former USSR "has missed the boat" in this regard.

In closing, a few short remarks appear in order about historical memory in connection with the Soviet deportation of Volga Germans and others. With respect to these victims and survivors, our memory of them is their future. We must carry on the torch for past generations, just as

future generations, we earnestly hope, shall do the same for us. We live in a modern, ever-changing society that tends to possess an increasingly short memory span, but that is human nature. The individual of the future, however, might well prove to be the one who retains the longest historical memory. Despite our frequent forgetfulness and complacency, most people exhibit a fundamental desire to be remembered, to leave a record, to believe that their lives have held purpose and meaning. During the long exile or what some Germans in Russia have better described as “the years of the Great Silence” (*die Jahre des grossen Schweigens*)—notably during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s—many Soviet citizens of German nationality must have often despaired that the outside world would either never know of or would soon forget their terrible plight—that their cries and whispers in those bleak prisons and torture cellars and in the remote wildernesses of exile would fall dead silent. Indeed, many feared that the dark memory of their trials, sufferings and tribulations under Communism might remain concealed behind the walls and barbed-wire fences of the imposing Soviet police state—or even simply be buried in the remote twilight kingdom of mass graves.

Yet here we are now resurrecting their stories for posterity. Scholars such as Ruth Derksen-Siemens, Samuel D. Sinner, Ronald J. Vossler and others for the past several years have begun to let the world hear their voices again, but this time more resolutely, as a call to our own time, from those Germans who stayed behind in Russia. One of the striking features of the large corpus of 1920s and 1930s famine and gulag letters written by Soviet Germans and then mailed or even smuggled to their American relatives is that they pleaded not just for assistance, whether material or spiritual, but also for the world never to forget or ignore what had happened to them—namely their own apocalypse and day of judgment, the end of the world as they knew it, when the lines of communication between friends and loved ones would be forever severed and the worst had come to pass.²⁶ In other words, “Remember us as we remember you,” as one Mennonite family in the Soviet Union repeated in their extensive secret correspondence with Canadian relatives during much of the 1930s. “Remember us.”²⁷

On this matter of oppression and memory for victims and survivors, longtime journalist Leon Wieseltier years ago enunciated the fine line that all people must walk when it comes to historical memory and leading a normal life. He observed that “[i]n the memory of oppression, oppression perpetuates itself. The scar does the work of the wound. That is the real tragedy: that injustice retains the power to distort long after it has ceased to be real. It is a posthumous victory for the oppressors, when pain becomes a tradition. This is the unfairly difficult dilemma of the newly emancipated and the newly enfranchised: an honorable life is not possible if they remember too little, and a normal life is not possible if they remember too much.”²⁸ For Soviet-era survivors, including the Volga Germans and others, this dilemma has proved quite the challenge.

Over the years, scholars, institutions, and others have played their part in trying to reconcile this careful balance between memory, justice, and reconciliation for the former Soviet Union, notably the Landsmannschaft der Deutschen aus Russland (National Association of Germans from Russia) founded in 1950 in Stuttgart, Germany,²⁹ and in 1989 the human rights organization “Memorial” established in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and other cities across the former Soviet Union.³⁰ Germans from Russia and their associates, too, have continued to make great strides on this side of the Atlantic. Since 1968, we have enjoyed the fruits of the American Historical

Society of the Germans from Russia (AHSGR) based in Lincoln, Nebraska.³¹ In 1971, the Germans from Russia Heritage Society (GRHS) was formed in Bismarck, North Dakota.³² This year, we celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection at the North Dakota State University Libraries (NDSU GRHC) in Fargo.³³ This year also marks the fifteenth anniversary of the creation of the Dr. Sidney Heitman Germans from Russia Collection at Colorado State University in Fort Collins.³⁴ On June 12, 2007, the International Memorial to the Victims of Communism was unveiled in Washington, D.C.³⁵ Most recently, in the summer of 2008, we have been most fortunate to witness the founding of the Center for Volga German Studies (CVGS) here at Concordia University in Portland.³⁶ This international network of scholars and institutions will prove vital to preserve and honor our heritage, to make our memory the future.³⁷

Concerning our role in perpetuating historical memory, Duke University professor Mariana Torgovnick recently commented on the matter of the promises and perils of modern archives: “Subject to fire, flood, war, and the simple passage of time, archives offer less permanence and certainty than we commonly think. They don’t represent the truth in a full, direct, or unmediated way; they don’t guarantee immortality and memory. Although archives are repositories for facts, they depend on living beings to animate them, and so mistakes, alterations, and distortions come with the territory. Still, there’s no doubt that we value the archival spirit and reach for it instinctively.”³⁸

Therefore, at the end of the day, our most precious resource in helping remember the past is you—and our memory is the future. It comes down to people continuing to breathe life into our old documents, records, artifacts, and traditions, to give them truth, clarity, authenticity, purpose and meaning. Shortly after Stalin’s death in 1953, the first cracks began to appear in the great Soviet edifice, and in time its walls and foundations crumbled. Today, we are still picking up the pieces, and this remains one of our lifelong tasks.

So much more could be discussed on this historic day, and I am most happy to respond to questions or inquiries following my talk and in future correspondence.

Thank you very much.

¹ Concerning the Volga German ASSR and various German national districts in the context of early Soviet history, please consult: Adam Giesinger, *From Catherine to Khrushchev: The Story of Russia’s Germans* (Battleford, Saskatchewan, Canada: Marian Press, 1974), pp. 279-284; Barbara Dietz and Peter Hilkes, *Russlanddeutsche. Unbekannte im Osten. Geschichte, Situation, Zukunftsperspektiven* (Munich: Olzog Verlag, 1992), pp. 17-18; Aleksandr Mrdjenovic, “The Genesis of Volga German Political Autonomy, 1917-1918,” in *Germans from Russia in Colorado*, ed. Sidney Heitman (Fort Collins, CO: The Western Social Science Association, 1978), pp. 23-43; Mrdjenovic, “The Volga German *Gemeinschaft* and Political Autonomy amidst Domestic Turmoil, 1914-1922,” M.A. Thesis, Department of History, University of Kansas-Lawrence, 1976; Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism, 1917-1923*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1964); Rex A. Wade, ed., *Documents of Soviet History: Volume 1: The Triumph of Bolshevism, 1917-1919* (Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic International Press, 1991); Wade, ed., *Documents of Soviet*

History: Volume 2: Triumph and Retreat, 1920-1922 (Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic International Press, 1993); Wade, ed., *Documents of Soviet History: Volume 3: Lenin's Heirs, 1923-1925* (Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic International Press, 1995).

² See also Viktor Krieger, *Secret Criminal Proceedings against the Last Volga German Government during the Years 1944-46*, trans. Alex Herzog (Lincoln, NE: American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, 2005).

³ J. Otto Pohl, "Stalin's Genocide against the 'Repressed Peoples,'" *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (June 2000): pp. 267-293.

⁴ Cited in Volga Germans.net, Norka: A German Colony in Russia Website: <http://www.volgagermans.net/norka/Norka_Deportation.htm>. Few references can be found in the broader American culture on the Volga German deportation of 1941. In 1947, however, Scottish author Bruce Marshall (1889-1987) wrote the novel *Vespers in Vienna*, which treated the issue of the Soviet repatriation of Displaced Persons (DP's) from postwar occupied Austria. In the story, one of the main protagonists is an escaped Soviet citizen, Olga Alexandrova, a professional ballerina who now goes by the name of Maria Bühlen. Hiding out in Vienna, Maria is a Volga German refugee whose family had experienced deportation and death under Stalin only a few years earlier. After the war, Soviet occupational authorities request British assistance to capture her and other Russian refugees for their prompt return to the USSR—and presumably, to remote exile and hard labor, or worse. A Roman Catholic convert whose religious sensibilities permeated his writings, Marshall had served as an officer in the British Army in both world wars. Retiring as a lieutenant colonel, he drew inspiration for the novel from his time spent in the British Displaced Persons Division in Austria immediately following World War II. As the Cold War began, the novel formed the basis for Hollywood's anti-Communist film *The Red Danube* (1949), starring a young Janet Leigh as Maria. After the film's release, the novel was re-issued under the movie title. See also endnote six below for background information concerning Soviet refugees, specifically the ethnic Germans, near the end of World War II.

⁵ I am particularly indebted to Pohl's quite detailed and well-referenced Blog Site: <<http://jpohl.blogspot.com>>. Cf. Dr. Viktor Krieger's Website: <<http://www.viktor-krieger.de/>>. See also the chronology of events section in Eric J. Schmaltz, *An Expanded Bibliography and Reference Guide for the Former Soviet Union's Ethnic Germans: Issues of Ethnic Autonomy, Group Repression, Cultural Assimilation, and Mass Emigration in the Twentieth Century and Beyond* (Fargo, ND: Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, North Dakota State University Libraries, 2003), pp. xvii-xx.

⁶ Schmaltz, "'The Long Trek': The SS Population Transfer of Ukrainian Germans to the Polish Warthegau and Its Consequences, 1943-1944," *Journal of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (Fall 2008): pp. 1-23.

⁷ George J. Walters quoted in Volga Germans.net, Norka: A German Colony in Russia Website.

⁸ Irina Mukhina, "'The Forgotten History': Ethnic German Women in Soviet Exile, 1941-1955," *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 57, No. 5 (July 2005): pp. 729-752; Mukhina, *The Germans of the Soviet Union* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).

⁹ Samuel D. Sinner, *The Open Wound: The Genocide of German Ethnic Minorities in Russia and the*

Soviet Union, 1915-1949/Der Genozid an Russlanddeutschen 1915-1949 (Fargo, ND: Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, North Dakota State University Libraries, 2000).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ 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]), p. 255.

¹² “Deklaration des Obersten Sowjets der Union der Sozialistischen Sowjetrepublik: Über die Qualifizierung der Repressalien gegenüber den gewaltsam ausgesiedelten Völkern als gesetzwidrig und verbrecherisch sowie über die Gewährleistung ihrer Rechte [Nov. 14, 1989],” *Neues Leben* (Moscow), No. 49 (Nov. 29, 1989): p. 2.

¹³ “Zakon Rossiiskoi Sovetskoi Federativnoi Sotsialisticheskoi Respubliki ‘O reabilitatsii repressirovannikh narodov’ [Apr. 26, 1991],” *Sovetskaia Rossiia* (Moscow), No. 90 (May 7, 1991): p. 3.

¹⁴ Schmaltz, “Reform, ‘Rebirth,’ and Regret: The Early Autonomy Movement of Ethnic Germans in the USSR, 1955-1989,” Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of History, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2002; Schmaltz, “Reform, ‘Rebirth’ and Regret: The Rise and Decline of the Ethnic-German Nationalist *Wiedergeburt* Movement in the USSR and CIS, 1987-1993,” *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (June 1998): pp. 215-247; Schmaltz and Sinner, “‘You Will Die Under Ruins and Snow’: The Soviet Repression of Russian Germans as a Case Study of Successful Genocide,” *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Sept. 2002): pp. 327-356, part of special topic issue “Stalin’s Policy of Mass Deportation as Genocide.”

¹⁵ “Zakon Rossiiskoi Sovetskoi Federativnoi Sotsialisticheskoi Respubliki ‘O reabilitatsii repressirovannikh narodov,’” p. 3.

¹⁶ Schmaltz, “Reform, ‘Rebirth,’ and Regret: The Early Autonomy Movement of Ethnic Germans in the USSR, 1955-1989”; Schmaltz, “Reform, ‘Rebirth’ and Regret: The Rise and Decline of the Ethnic-German Nationalist *Wiedergeburt* Movement in the USSR and CIS, 1987-1993”; Schmaltz and Sinner, “‘You Will Die Under Ruins and Snow.’”

¹⁷ “Kazakhstan: Special Report on Ethnic Germans,” IRIN News (Feb. 25, 2005): <<http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=28051>>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid. Pohl, a political science and history professor at the American University in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, has cited the German population figure in Kazakhstan at 230,000. He also has observed the rise of “ethnocracies” in the Central Asian states of the former Soviet Union, whereby the concept of minority rights remains negligible, despite the strong multinational character of the region. See Dec. 2007 email correspondence.

²⁰ Pohl, *Catherine’s Grandchildren: A Short History of the Russian-Germans under Soviet Rule* (Lincoln, NE: American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, 2009), p. 89; Schmaltz, *An Expanded*

Bibliography, pp. xxxiii-xxxv.

²¹ Nikolaus von Twickel, "Kremlin Reaches Out to Homesick Germans," *The Moscow Times* (Sept. 12, 2007): p. 1 (Website: <<http://www.moscowtimes.ru/stories/2007/09/>>). See also Clifford J. Levy, "Its Population Falling, Russia Beckons Its Children Home," *The New York Times* (Mar. 22, 2009) at Website: <NYTimes.com>; "Russia Wants Its Germans Back," RFE/RL Report Online (Sept. 12, 2007).

²² Justin Burke, "Kazakhstan Wants to Lure Its Ethnic Germans Back," *Kazakhstan Daily Digest* (Apr. 19, 2000) on the Eurasia.net Website: <<http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/Kazakhstan/hypermail/200004/0037/html>>; "Kazakhstan – Auf Wiedersehen (Germans Flee Kazakhstan)," *The Economist* (Apr. 15, 2000): n. pag.; Marco Laurer, "Russian-Germans: Back to the *Heimat*" (June 11, 2007) at Website: <<http://kazakhstan.neweurasia.net/2007/06/11/russian-germans-back-to-the-heimat/>>; Sonia Phalnikar, "Russia Hopes to Lure Back Ethnic Germans" at the Deutsche-Welle Website (Sept. 7, 2007): <<http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,2772792,00.html>>.

²³ Twickel, p. 1.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Svetlana Bocharova, "Germans Leave Saratov without Saying Goodbye," *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, Vol. 56, Issue 23 (July 7, 2004): p. 22; Phalnikar; Alex Rodriguez, "Legacy, But No Home, for Russia's Germans: Deportations Forever Shattered a Volga River Enclave," *Chicago Tribune* (July 13, 2008): n. pag.; Twickel, p. 1.

²⁶ For example, see two notable works of editor and translator Ronald J. Vossler: "*We'll Meet Again in Heaven*": *Germans in the Soviet Union Write Their Relatives, 1925-1937* (Fargo, ND: Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, North Dakota State University Libraries, 2001); *The Old God Still Lives: Ethnic Germans in Czarist and Soviet Ukraine Write Their American Relatives, 1915-1924* (Fargo, ND: Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, North Dakota State University Libraries, 2005).

²⁷ Ruth Derksen-Siemens, ed., "*Remember Us*": *Letters from Stalin's Gulag (1930-1937): Volume One: The Regehr Family*, trans. Peter Barga and Ann Barga (Kitchener, Ontario, Canada: Pandora Press, 2008).

²⁸ Leon Wieseltier, "Scar Tissue," *The New Republic*, Vol. 200, No. 23 (June 5, 1989): p. 20.

²⁹ The Landsmannschaft der Deutschen aus Russland Website: <<http://www.deutscheausrussland.de>>.

³⁰ The Memorial Website: <<http://memo.ru/eng/index/htm>>.

³¹ The AHSGR Website: <<http://www.ahsgr.org/>>.

³² The GRHS Website: <<http://www.grhs.org>>.

³³ The NDSU GRHC Website: <<http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/>>.

³⁴ The Dr. Sidney Heitman Germans from Russia Collection Website: <<http://lib.colostate.edu/gfr/>>.

³⁵ The Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation Website: <<http://www.victimsofcommunism.org>>.

³⁶ The CVGS Website: <<http://cvgs.cu-portland.edu/>>.

³⁷ Established in 1999 in Nuremberg, Germany, another excellent professional ethnic organization is the *Historischer Forschungsverein der Deutschen aus Russland* or HFDR (the Historical Research Association of Germans from Russia). Its Website: <<http://www.HFDR.de/>>.

³⁸ Marianna Torgovnick, "File under Fleeting: Archives Are More Ephemeral Than They Seem," *The Chronicle Review* (Sept. 5, 2008): p. B15.