

## The Deportation of the Germans from Romania to the Soviet Union, 1945-1949

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Besides its significance in the history of World War II, the coup of August 23, 1944, whereby Romania left the Axis camp and joined the war effort of the Allies, also opened the door for a later series of events, the study of which was prohibited until the fall of Communism in 1989. The common denominator of all these events (deportations, expropriations and evictions, forced collectivization, mass arrests) was the use of violence in efforts to attain goals of social engineering, viz., to rearrange the political, social, and ethnic fabric of Romania in the second half of the twentieth century along the line of the blueprints of Communist construction. Violence became an “integral part of the ongoing community-structuring enterprise,”<sup>1</sup> a quintessential expression of proletarian dictatorship. Since violence perpetrated by either a home state or an occupier brings credit or accolades to neither, the element of violence was systematically shrouded in a pall of silence. This silence was imposed on perpetrators, victims, witnesses, and the researchers of these events. Whenever such instances of violence could not be ignored altogether, they were conveniently coated in euphemistic terms. The deportation of ethnic Germans from Romania to the Soviet Union in January 1945 was such a case: it never entered official histories of Romania until 1989, while the deportees and their families found out that in fact they had participated in the “reconstruction of the Soviet Union.”

### Description of Facts and Events

In January 1945 the ethnic Germans from what is now Romania's territory were rounded up to be transported to the Soviet Union for reconstruction work. The large-scale operation was launched on January 10, shortly after the Christmas and New Year holiday season, a period of lull in the traditional cycle of agricultural activity. It was also the time when families were still gathered together. The choice of the date, therefore, maximized the

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<sup>1</sup> Amir Weiner, "Nature, Nurture, and Memory in a Socialist Utopia: Delineating the Soviet Socio-Ethnic Body in the Age of Socialism," *American Historical Review* 104 (October 1999): 1114.

authorities' effort to round up a large number of people. Although the deportations focused on Transylvania and the Banat, the two regions which the ethnic German communities of Saxons and Swabians called their home, the measure also affected the ethnic Germans living scattered in the cities and villages of Wallachia and Moldavia. The same fate befell the Germans living in Satu Mare [Szatmár] county in northwestern Romania, who had been gathered up for the same purpose already on January 2-3, 1945. All men aged seventeen to forty-five and women eighteen to thirty years old were given two hours to pack up clothes and food that would last for fourteen days, then marched under guard to the nearest railroad station, where a brief medical examination established each individual's suitability for work. The unfit ranged from people with physical disabilities to pregnant women and women with children less than one year old; individuals in these categories were all sent back home. The rest had to embark in freight cars<sup>2</sup> belonging to the Romanian railroads. These box cars had previously been outfitted with bunks and a small stove. Light and air came through one or two small windows covered with an iron grating or barbed wire. Once a person got inside the car, there was no way that he or she could be recalled on the basis of some late minute reprieve. The cars, carrying about thirty persons each, were latched shut from the outside and set in motion eastward through Romanian territory. Once they reached the Soviet border (after several days of traveling) at the towns of Iași or Ungheni, the involuntary passengers disembarked only to be loaded again into wide gauge box cars belonging to the Soviet railroads. Larger in size, these cars accommodated forty people, well packed. Otherwise, the furnishings offered little change: the same bunks, a stove, plus a hole in the floor serving as a toilet (*ubornaya*). The space inside was so glutted with luggage that people had to sleep, sit, and stand in shifts. After a further journey of three to six weeks into Soviet territory, these trains reached their destinations in the Ukrainian and Ural industrial regions. Their human loads were transferred onto trucks and taken to camps in the neighborhood of industrial units, mines, or state farms. Another medical exam established each internee's fitness for either hard or normal labor, which also led to corresponding differentiations in the food rations. Conditions in the camps were harsh and eventually took

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<sup>2</sup> "One can chisel a permanent image into the edifice of twentieth century ethnic cleansing of freight cars, overcrowded with deportees, hungry, thirsty, starving, diseased, suffocating in unhygienic and barbaric conditions." Norman M. Naimark, *Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth Century Europe* (Seattle, 1998), 23.

their toll: housed in rundown buildings or wooden sheds, with several dozens crowded onto two and three tiered bunks in a room, working from dawn to dusk, chronically malnourished, infested with parasites, the deportees experienced a rising mortality that climbed to 15 percent.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, those who became ill and incapable of working were sent back to Romania or eastern Germany. The first returnees arrived in the fall of 1945. It was from them that relatives learned the first news about the deportees' fate and location.

Conditions started improving after 1946: a more diversified and ameliorated medical care reduced the mortality rate; with the working hours cut down to eight (provided one fulfilled her/his daily quota), the internees enjoyed more leisure time, even a weekly day off, filled, however, with supervised cultural programs. The relations with the local Russian and Ukrainian population, who upon arrival had often thrown stones at the Germans, had warmed up: little by little they befriended them, and also bought some of the Germans' clothes (as they were more fashionable than the ones available in the Soviet Union). Many German women who could sew were asked by the Russian officers to make dresses for their wives.

Finally, the years 1948-1949 marked the beginning of the end of the forced labor for the ethnic Germans from Romania. Gradually, they returned, again by trainloads, although under improved circumstances, to Romania (disembarking at Sighet [Máramarossziget]) or East Germany (end-station Frankfurt an der Oder). The last internees made the return voyage in 1951. The total figure of ethnic Germans from Romania subjected to this form of *Zwangsarbeit* (forced labor) is estimated at 75,000, of whom some 10,000 never lived to see the day of their return home.<sup>4</sup>

The end of deportation showed again the duplicity of the Soviet and Romanian Communist regimes. On the one hand, the Germans were sent off with speeches full of gratitude for their contribution and bands played while they embarked on the

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<sup>3</sup> Theodor Schieder, ed., *Dokumentation der Vertreibung der Deutschen aus Ost-Mitteleuropa*, 8 vols. (Bonn, 1954-1961; reprint ed. 1994), vol. 3—*Das Schicksal der Deutschen in Rumänien*, 80E (hereafter cited as *Schicksal*).

<sup>4</sup> Both *Schicksal* and Georg Weber et al., *Die Deportation von Siebenbürger Sachsen in die Sowjetunion 1945-1949*, vol. 1 (Köln, Weimar, Wien, 1995) give these figures. According to Günter Schödl, *Land an der Donau* (Berlin, 1995), 596, the number of deportees ranged between 75,000 and 80,000 (40,000 from the Banat, 26,000 from Transylvania, and some 15,000 from Satu Mare county and the rest of Romania). Elemér Illyés in *National Minorities in Transylvania* (Boulder, 1987) gives a higher estimate, that of up to 100,000.

westbound trains decorated with fir branches. On the other hand, authorities in both countries did their best to erase the traces of material memory: diaries and sketches of scenes from their life in the USSR were confiscated. As to forms of discourse connected to the deportation, the Romanian regime took good care that censorship remained tight and that the episode did not surface; to speak of it remained a taboo. Even when Romania experienced a relative cultural thaw between 1963 and 1971, the episode of the deportations was not tackled either in scholarly or artistic works.

Until the overthrow of the Ceaușescu dictatorship in December 1989, this episode in the series of deportations that were a dreaded fact of life in the decade following the end of World War II was only dealt with in books published in the West. Many publications issued by various German émigré organizations mentioned quite briefly the deportation to the Soviet Union, usually as an integral part of the larger narrative concerning the history of the Saxons and Swabians of Romania.<sup>5</sup> Scholarly research in the Federal Republic of Germany has either included these deportations in the larger theme of the uprooting/cleansing (*Vertreibung*) of ethnic German populations from East Europe in the wake of World War II,<sup>6</sup> or else within the larger pattern of demographic changes induced by the migration of Germans in Europe within the last 1000 years.<sup>7</sup> The memory of the deportations was saved through oral history. The testimonies of a great number of deportees were archived in the decade after the war the Federal Ministry of Expellees, Refugees, and War Casualties (*Bundesministerium für Vertriebene, Flüchtlinge und Kriegsgeschädigte*). After 1989, when some Romanian and Soviet archives became more accessible to researchers, a comprehensive study was published in 1995 by a group of historians from

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<sup>5</sup> Alliance of Transylvanian Saxons, *The Transylvanian Saxons: Historical Highlights* (Cleveland, Ohio, 1982); G. C. Paikert, *The Danube Swabians: German Populations in Hungary, Rumania and Yugoslavia and Hitler's impact on their Patterns* (The Hague, 1967); Johann Schmidt, ed., *Die Donauschwaben 1944-1964: Beiträge zur Zeitgeschichte* (Munich, 1968).

<sup>6</sup> Wolfgang Benz, ed., *Die Vertreibung der Deutschen aus dem Osten: Ursache, Ereignisse, Folgen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> Lothar Dralle, *Die Deutschen Ostmittel- und Osteuropa: ein Jahrtausend europäischer Geschichte* (Darmstadt, 1991); Andreas Baaden, *Aussiedler-Migration: historische und aktuelle Entwicklungen*, (Berlin, 1997); Hans-Ulrich Engel, ed., *Deutsche unterwegs: von der mittelalterlichen Ostsiedlung bis zur Vertreibung im 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich, Vienna, 1983); Dieter Kraeter and Hans Georg Schneege, *Die Deutschen in Osteuropa heute* (Bielefeld, 1969).

Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität, Münster.<sup>8</sup> The hefty, three-volume work offers the inquisitive reader not only a detailed narrative of the events and personal testimonies, but also pictorial representations (photos and sketches) that the deportees managed to smuggle out of the camps. However, by focusing on the deportation of only the largest segment of the German population of Romania, the Saxons, this work fails to render a full picture of what happened to the Swabians or the Zipsers. In post-Communist Romania historians and anthropologists tried to recover the memory of the deportation by the methods of oral history. This may betray a need for unmediated access to the voice of those who suffered, as well as the urgency to make it heard, since many of these survivors have now reached an advanced age. However, an analysis of archival documents and of the "other side" as it were, would be crucial to the understanding of this period.

### Motive

First of all, in establishing the categories of population that were deported, the question arises why these people were subject to the indemnity of forceful removal from home and relocation.

The Germans of Romania (the Saxons of Transylvania, the Swabians of the Banat and of Satu Mare [Szatmár] county) were singled out for deportation because of their ethnicity. This was the sole criterion of selection reflecting the collective guilt ascribed to this ethnic group in the wake of World War II, and which, after the end of the war, would justify the expulsion of the ethnic Germans from Czechoslovakia and Poland, and the exchanges of population between Czechoslovakia and Hungary (the infamous Beneš decrees). The Soviets, under Stalin had already applied the principle of collective guilt in order to deport whole ethnic groups to remote regions in the Asian part of the USSR. The Volga Germans were deported to Kazakhstan and other regions of inner Asia a couple of months after Germany attacked the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941. It was a prophylactic reason that the Soviet authorities provided for this forced mass relocation: the Volga Germans were viewed as potential saboteurs and traitors who might cooperate with the invaders. The deportation of Germans for labor at the end of the war, on the other hand, can be viewed as a punitive measure directed against the entire ethnic group. The Germans of Romania were not the only ones shipped away to

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<sup>8</sup> Weber, *Die Deportation von Siebenbürger*, vol. 1.

labor camps in the USSR: the same fate befell the German population living in the south of Hungary, in the Polish lands east of the Oder and the Neisse, the Baltic countries, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia. All in all, some 500,000 German men and women participated in the reconstruction of the war-torn Soviet economy.<sup>9</sup> It is true that before August 23, 1944, many of the ethnic Germans from Romania had fought in the *Waffen SS*. After Romania joined the side of the Allies, some withdrew with the German army from the territory of Romania, while others stayed at home relying on their status as Romanian nationals and, consequently, thought that they would not be affected by the quick advance of the Red Army. However, among the ethnic Germans of Romania, a sizeable number of individuals had, throughout the war, held antifascist, liberal, or social democratic views which caused them to refrain from joining the *Volksgruppe* (the pro-Nazi organization of the Germans living in Romania). A few Germans were even members of the underground Romanian Communist Party. Such subtleties meant nothing to the Soviet military authorities who oversaw the deportations and who made no effort at determining guilt or innocence on a case-by-case basis. The only decisive factor remained the individual's German name.

Let us now see how the lists of deportees were drawn up. Late in August 1944, three days after August 23, the Romanian authorities registered all ethnic Germans who were Romanian citizens with a view toward later use in public work. A second, and similar, registration occurred in October 1944, whereby again the ethnic Germans were conscripted for work. It was on the basis of these lists that the Germans were rounded up in the first days of January 1945.

### **Agency**

Who actually carried out these deportations? In the case of the Germans deported to the Soviet Union, establishing clear-cut responsibility is complicated by Romania's political status after the armistice with the Allies (the treaty was signed in Moscow, on September 12, 1944). This made Romania a "friendly country," thereby not occupied by the Red Army. The Romanian authorities retained jurisdiction and formally restricted the Red Army's freedom of initiative. In practice, however, the agreement was observed only on paper. In reality, the Romanian authorities had to comply with the orders of the Soviet representatives. When on

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 72.

January 3, 1945, Lieutenant General Vladislav Petrovich Vinogradov, the representative of the Allied Control Commission in Bucharest, ordered the deportation of the ethnic Germans, the Romanian authorities provided the railroad cars, as well as the personnel necessary for the roundup of deportees. According to the Armistice Treaty, Romania was to help the Soviet war effort by supplying, among other things, means of rail transportation. Since the Armistice Treaty made no mention of possible forced labor, or any other kind of labor for that matter, the German deportees had to be integrated with cargo shipped from Romania to the USSR. Units of the Romanian police, army, and gendarmerie participated in the action together with Soviet troops, but the initiative, the organization and the supervision of the entire operation remained in Soviet hands. Owing to its precarious grip on power,<sup>10</sup> the government of General Rădescu had little choice but to fulfill the Soviet demands. Aware that the Red Army was deporting citizens of Romania, a country termed as "friendly," the Romanian government issued an official note of protest, transmitted to General Vinogradov, accusing the Soviets of breaking the provisions of the Armistice Treaty. Needless to say, this protest, as well as other similar statements made by political leaders Iuliu Maniu and Dinu Brătianu, went totally unheeded.

### **Legal basis**

The deportation had no previous legal basis since neither international documents or agreements, nor the Armistice agreement had stipulated it by the time the deportation started. The deportation of the ethnic Germans in January 1945 was codified a month later, in February, during the Yalta conference, when the use of forced German labor came to be included in the category of war reparation. The Soviets thus created a situation and only afterwards justified it legally. Moreover, the Germans were not even told where they would be taken away. The Germans expected that they would be transported to different areas in Romania to help repair the ravages of the war, as they had previously been mobilized for a couple of days to clean streets, clear roads of snow, or repair railroads. Upon finding out that they had crossed the Romanian-Soviet border, their anticipations turned to the worst.

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 154-163.

**In Lieu of Conclusion**

For the Swabians of the Banat, the deportation to the Soviet Union was not the only episode of forceful removal. In 1951, those living in the countryside were again rounded up and deported to the Bærægan, a vast plain in the southeast of Romania. This time, the deportation was not motivated ethnically, but socially: the Romanian Communist regime, following the Soviet model, decided to deport all the owners of middle and small size farms in the Banat, irrespective of their ethnicity. The deportation to Bærægan lasted until 1955.

Certainly, the deportation to the Soviet Union and its memory was one of the causes that led to the dramatic shrinking in size of the German community in Romania up to the present day. The massive waves of emigration to West Germany in the seventies, eighties, and early nineties had among their root causes also the fact that, although the Swabians and Saxons called Romania their *Heimat*, since the end of World War II this homeland, through its Communist and nationalist policies, had proved not to be so sheltering any more. They left behind a material culture that testifies to a rich historical past, but a culture that is now irretrievably fading from reality, to be stored only in memory.