Ethnic Cleansing and Collective Punishment: Soviet Policy Towards Prisoners of War and Civilian Internees in the Carpathian Basin

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In the wake of World War II, Soviet politics and propaganda achieved its greatest success in convincing the outside world that the foreigners in their forced labor camps were prisoners of war and war criminals. Since German armies and those of her allies had inflicted enormous damage during their retreat, Western public opinion was not much interested in what happened to these soldiers. Naturally, the Hungarian and German public felt quite differently.

Indeed, the fate of the prisoners and the push for and organization of their return were in the forefront of Hungarian domestic policy in the years after the war. Up until this time the Hungarian press and official documents had only mentioned "prisoners of war," even though everybody in the country knew that the Soviet armed forces had abducted not only POWs but also a great many civilians. Following the Communist takeover, even the euphemistic "POW" question became a taboo. Only after the fall of Communism in 1989/90 did the fate of several hundred thousand Hungarian prisoners of the Soviet Union again come into focus, and it did so both for political reasons and for historical research.

Today all history textbooks make reference to the fact that it was not only Hungarian soldiers who fell into Soviet captivity at the end of World War II, that a large number of civilians were captured and imprisoned or deported as well. Yet the few sentences generally devoted to the subject are not enough to reveal what actually happened to the captive Hungarians, and the entire topic gets lost within the broader treatment of the conclusion of the war and the rebuilding of the country. Even among Hungarians who consider themselves educated, there are many who believe that only soldiers were captured, and that whatever happened to them was really just part of the natural course of the war. The decades of collective amnesia have, it seems, left their mark, leaving scholars with quite a task if they are to uncover the once widely known facts.

Immediately after 1989/90 a number of survivors of postwar Soviet captivity were still alive and could be interviewed. Writer Ilona Szébeni published a set of interviews about forty-four
Collective Punishment in the Carpathian Basin

women abducted from the Bodrogköz region. Péter Rózsa spoke to survivors deported from the Nyírség area. Zoltán Szente recorded the troubles of innocently convicted young people. Mihály Herczeg edited a book from the recollections of one-time "Levente" paramilitary youth organization members in Hódmezővásárhely. Both Sándor Sára and the Gulyás brothers made documentary movies about captured women and men. Dozens of real POWs, civilians taken to forced labor, and former internees sentenced under false charges have written their memoirs, some of which were published. The output of historians is somewhat more modest. György Dupka and former KGB colonel Alexei Korsun have published contemporary documents about the deportations from Carpatho-Ruthenia/Subcarpathia. Ferenc Dobos has written about the deportations in eastern Slovakia, and the Romanian-Hungarian Democratic Alliance (RMDSZ) described in a White Book the tragedies suffered by individuals from Transylvania. György Zielbauer has discussed the story of members of Hungary’s German population. Comprehensive treatments about the fate of the prisoners have been published by Miklós Füzes, Zalán Bognár, József Domokos, and myself.

2 Péter Rózsa, Ha túléled, halgas! [If you Survived, Be Quiet!] (Budapest, 1989); Zoltán Szente, Magyarok a GULAG szigeteken [Hungarians in the GULAG Archipelago] (Szeged, 1989).
Although together with local histories there are over a dozen works on the subject of Soviet captivity, a large number of blank spots remains in the history of POWs, civilian internees, and political prisoners. In the last few years several important documentary volumes have been published in Russia, but the original Soviet sources are themselves frequently contradictory or contain information that cannot be interpreted. However, the original documents and the international literature clearly indicate that everything that happened in Hungary was not unique but an integral part of Soviet policy regarding the occupied territories. The point was not even just to punish the people they had conquered; collective responsibility and ethnic cleansing were at the very heart of the Soviet system.

The Soviet Union was not a national state, and its leaders never wanted it to become one. In the early 1920s Soviet policy towards its nationalities supported the strengthening of the various ethnic groups in order to stabilize the regime. But in the second half of the decade the policy changed fundamentally. Following the famine and destitution which resulted from the forced collectivization of agriculture, Poles, Finns, Lithuanians, Estonians, Latvians, and Bulgarians living along the borders fled in droves to their mother countries. Because of the troubled atmosphere along the borders and the great number of escape attempts, the border zone was expanded, and massive relocations were carried out to weaken the ethnic groups’ cross-border ties. Ethnic cleansing per se began in 1930.

The story of the massive deportations, relocations, and internments that took place in the following two decades is not easy to unravel. The great ethnic make-over in the Soviet Union took place at the same time as the Gulag empire was developed, while specific groups of society were completely or partially annihilated. Each of these actions, such as the deportations of “kulaks” in Belarus, Ukraine, and former Polish territories in the spring of 1930, served both aims at once. Some ethnic groups were “merely” relo-
Collective Punishment in the Carpathian Basin

cated, while others were forced into labor camps. Some of the ethnic groups were designated as potential enemies and deported for internal security reasons, while during the war collective retribution was the dominant motive. To uncover what actually happened and to carry out the investigative work is further complicated by the fact that POWs and the civilian deportees from the Soviet-occupied territories were assigned to the same network of camps and suffered the same fate.

In the spring of 1935, under the rubric of a "preventive" strike for internal security reasons, 45,000 persons from the area of Kiev and Vinnica were relocated to East Ukraine. Many of the forced settlers were ethnic Germans and Poles. That same year and in the spring of 1936, 29,000 Finns were taken from the border zone of Leningrad to Siberia. In 1936/37, 171,000 Koreans were removed from the border zone in the far east.

With the outbreak of World War II ethnic and political cleansing gained a new impetus. As the Soviet Union's western borders expanded considerably and the Baltic states were annexed, a large number of prisoners of war and "other hostile elements" came under Soviet domination. In order to control the masses of "potential enemies," the Soviet leadership set up a new camp system, namely the GUPVI—Glavnoe Upravlenie NKVD SSSR po delam voennoplennych i internirovannych (Main Administration for POW and Internee Affairs).

The existence of the GULAG camp administration has been known in the Western Hemisphere since the mid-fifties. The eventual access to ex-Soviet archives made it possible for scholars to discover another "archipelago," namely the GUPVI, which was built for POWs and internees. The establishment of the GUPVI goes back to the time immediately following the outbreak of the war. L. P. Beria issued a general directive on September 19, 1939, to govern the administration of POWs and internees. The directive proves that from the very beginning of the war the Soviet administration did not make any distinction between soldiers and the civilian population.

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10 On the organization of "archipelago GUPVI" see Stefan Karner, Im Archipel GUPVI. Kriegsgefangenschaft und Internierung in der Sowjetunion 1941-1956 (Vienna, Munich, 1995), 55.
Some 250,000 Polish soldiers were captured during the Soviet attack on Poland. After a while some of the privates were set free, but about 40,000 prisoners were taken to forced labor camps. Roughly 14,000 of the captured officers were executed in summer 1940. Of those who had escaped from the German-occupied territories, 145,000 civilians were taken to a GUPVI camp, and around ten thousand ended up in the Gulag. The civil servants who had worked in the Polish administration were also considered “socially dangerous elements” and were arrested and sentenced. Several tens of thousands of undesirable Poles were able to escape POW and internment camps and the Gulag, but were deported instead. For security reasons, the convicts’ families, roughly 60,000, were taken to Kazakhstan. Also for the purpose of strengthening the Soviet regime, Polish settlers who had arrived in the early 1920s were deported to western Siberia. This operation affected some 140,000 people. In the spring of 1941, 86,000 Poles were relocated to the central Soviet Union to “cleanse” the border zone. A similar wave of arrests and deportations took place in the Baltics and Bessarabia. The actions in these territories in 1939 and 1940 served both to change the ethnic face of these areas and to utterly transform—the local population.

Internal security and collective retribution were both factors in the deportation of Germans in the Soviet Union. By June 1942, 1.2 million Germans had been taken to Central Asia and Siberia, and tens of thousands to the GUPVI and Gulag camps. The charge—in fact unfounded—of collaboration with the Germans, based really on the notion of collective responsibility, was the reason for the deportation of Karachays, Kalmyks, Ingush, Chechens, Balkars, and Crimean Tartars, altogether some 900,000. In November 1944 the Meskethians, Kurds, and Hemchins living along the border with Turkey were taken to Siberia, also on ethnic grounds, as well as to protect the border zone, for internal security reasons.

The practice of charging collective responsibility and cleansing on ethnic and social-class grounds continued in the Eastern European areas liberated from German occupation just where they had left off in 1941. The special units of the NKVD (the People’s Commis-

sariat of Internal Affairs) arrested and deported the families of the Ukrainian National Union (Organisatia Ukrainsky Nationalistov), who had fought against both the German and Soviet armies, and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army’s (Ukrainska Povstanska Armia) partisans, some 100,000 people in all. They arrested over a hundred thousand army deserters and collaborators, and persons who were considered possible enemies of the Soviet regime. Ethnic and political cleansing continued in the Baltics and the recaptured Polish territories.

Soviet policy toward Hungary, as far as collective retributions and ethnic and political cleansing are concerned, was in many respects the same as Soviet policy toward all the occupied areas, but with the state of war that existed between the two countries there were also major differences.

The captured soldiers and the civilians abducted from Hungary for a variety of reasons met a similar fate as their counterparts elsewhere. Until autumn 1944 relatively few, around 70,000, members of the Hungarian army were taken prisoner. Soviet troops entered Hungary in September 1944, and at that point there were close to 800,000 soldiers in the Hungarian Army. By January 1945 their number had diminished to half a million, while by late February only 200,000 soldiers remained. The majority of the quickly dwindling number of servicemen, on recognizing that the war was senseless, left their divisions without leave and fled home. There were relatively few who fell into captivity during a military operation. Most became prisoners of war because they had believed in what the Soviet fliers had proclaimed and had surrendered or gone over to the other side at the front in the hope of a quick release.

But civilians suffered the same extent as ordinary soldiers. On the basis of contemporary documents of Hungarian localities and eyewitness accounts, I have come to the conclusion that civilians were arrested in two waves.

The first wave took place two or three days after the Soviet takeover of a given larger settlement. The occupational forces rounded up civilians to do communal-reparation work. In most cases the unsuspecting civilians were gathered into concentration camps and then deported to the Soviet Union via Romania. We have only occasional information on the actual number of civilians

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who were arrested just after the end of hostilities. On October 28, 1944, six days after the occupation of Hajdúböszörmény, 300 civilians were rounded up and deported. More than 2,000 civilians were deported from Nyíregyháza on November 2. In mid-November 300 civilians were rounded up in Hajdunánás. The approximate figure in Kolozsvár/Cluj-Napoca, the center of Transylvania, is three to five thousand. On February 13, 1945, the victory announcement of the Red Army proclaimed that the Soviet forces had taken 110,000 POWs during the fifty days’ battle for Budapest, the capital of Hungary. Out of these 110,000 prisoners, 40,000 were civilians.

In general, the second wave of arrests took place a month to a month and a half after the arrival of Soviet troops. Unlike the first wave, it was a carefully planned operation directed against the ethnic Germans in general and also against the Hungarian population in the territories Hungary had regained between 1938 and 1941. This second wave of deportations was the instrument of collective punishment.

There are two documents which indicate that the Soviet leadership intended to punish not only Germany but to a lesser extent Hungary as well. V. M. Molotov wrote in a June 7, 1943, letter to Archibald Clark Kerr, the British ambassador in Moscow: “The Soviet government believes that it is not only the Hungarian government that must bear responsibility for Hungary’s armed support to Germany ... but also to a certain degree the Hungarian people.” A few months later, on December 14, 1942, Molotov reacted to Eduard Beneš’s anti-Hungarian invective by again exclaiming, ”The Hungarians must be punished!”

Soviet policy, however, was not driven solely by its notion of collective responsibility. During the war and in the early postwar period, the Soviet Union was certainly desperately short of labor.

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16 MOL (Hungarian National Archives) KÚM Szu tük. XIX-J-1-j IV-48229. Box 25044/45.
17 Fehérkönyv az 1944. Ősz magyarralnes atrocitásokról, [White Book about the atrocities committed against Hungarians in the Fall 1944], 27-30.
18 On the numbers of captured Hungarians see Bognár, Hazatérés, 11; and Krisztian Ungváry, Budapest ostroma [The Battle for Budapest] (Budapest, 1998), 293.
Hence, forced labor from occupied territories seemed a logical measure to relieve the shortage. Changing the ethnic structure of the occupied and annexed lands was another element of Soviet policy. A further aim of the security forces was the elimination of potential political enemies. Deportation of civilians was also a part of a "mind control" tactic of the Soviet occupational forces. The Soviets wanted the civilians to remain in a state of fear. Individuals could sense that deportation might be hanging over them, but they never knew if they would be deported or not, or why or for how long.

Although we have limited access to ex-Soviet archives we are able to document some Soviet directives which were aimed at the concentration and the deportation of ethnic Germans and Hungarians. The 4th Ukrainian Front released its Resolution No. 0036 on November 12, 1944, which states that in Carpatho-Ruthenia, "Hungarian and German service-age nationals are living in numerous localities who, like enemy soldiers, must be arrested and sent to prison camp!" In a report from December 17, 1944, the commander of the NKVD troops securing the resolution of the 4th Ukrainian Front, Major General Fagayev, wrote that "Between November 18 and December 17, NKVD details arrested altogether 22,951 individuals in the area of Carpatho-Ruthenia and transferred them to prison camps.... The purging operations continue on the home front." According to local historians the total number of deportees, however, reached 40,000. The deportations continued outside the territory of Subcarpathia. The male population was deported in the whole upper Tisza River region, an area next to Subcarpathia.

The punishment character of the deportations is obvious in southeastern Slovakia, the region which belonged to Hungary during the war. In this region (between the eastern border of Slovakia and Rozsnő/Rožňava) Hungarian males were rounded up and deported the same way as in Subcarpathia. The mass deportations stopped in early February, and the Hungarian population in the central and the southwestern part of Slovakia escaped deportation at this time. The next year, in 1946, however, about 100,000 Hun-

21 György Dupka and Alekszei Korszun, A „Malenykij Robot” a dokumentumokban, 15.
22 Ibid., 28.
garians were transferred to Hungary within the framework of the Czechoslovak-Hungarian population exchange agreement. The Czechoslovak attempt to dissolve its Hungarian minority is a subject beyond the subject of this study. Here I can only suggest the reasons why the deportations in the Rozsnyő/Rožňava area were halted. For one, the strip of land in southwest Slovakia, which had belonged to Hungary during the war, was not part of the 4th Ukrainian Front’s operational zone; therefore the November 12 resolution could not be applied here. Another possibility is that the Hungarian armistice of January 20 was the reason for halting the massive deportations.

Whatever the case, the armistice did not affect the deportations in the territory left to Hungary. In most of this area, organized deportations “officially” affected only German nationals. On December 16 the High Command of the Soviet Army issued a directive for the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th Ukrainian Fronts. This directive dealt with the “mobilization” and deportation of German males between seventeen and forty-five years of age, and women between eighteen and thirty, in the territories of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria. The directive was signed by Stalin and targeted ethnic Germans. In reality it also struck Hungarians.

In the present-day territory of Hungary the second wave of mass internment began in early January 1945. On the basis of contemporary documents and memoirs it seems that internment of civilians was carried out on the basis of lists and quotas set up presumably by the GUPVI-camp administration. Since the local organs of the NKVD had to fulfill the claimed contingents, not only ethnic Germans, but Hungarians with German names and Hungarians with Hungarian names were also deported. We still do not have a clear picture of the whole process of deportation. In some regions the total male population was “mobilized.” There were dozens of villages where Hungarian females were deported too. Other regions, however, were not affected at all by the directives on “mobilization.”

As is clear from NKVD chief Lavrenti Beria’s January 5, 1945, letter to the Bucharest headquarters of the NKVD, the job of compiling the list of designated internees was assigned to the local authorities on the basis of registration certificates and police records. An indication that the deportations were centrally orga-

24 Karner, Im Archipel GUPVI, 25.
nized is that unsuspecting people were rounded up in much the same way everywhere. In villages all men between eighteen and fifty years old would—to a drum beat—be called on to do compulsory communal work. Those who appeared would be locked into schools, movie houses, or larger cellars, and after a wait of several hours or days they would be driven in a forced march to reception camps twenty-five to thirty kilometers from the front. During several days of marching the captives would get nothing to eat, and the guards, NKVD men, would shoot anyone who tried to escape. On Hungarian territory there were some eighty reception camps. Linked to these was a network of concentration camps. On Hungarian territory there were ten such concentration camps, in which over 20,000 prisoners were held. They were located in Baja, Debrecen, Gödöllő, Jászberény, Székesfehérvár, Vác, Cegléd, Szeged, Kecskemét, and Békéscsaba.

The Provisional Hungarian Government intervened with the Allied Control Commission in the interest of the mobilized Hungarians and Germans who were not members of Nazi organizations. The interventions had no direct result, but finally the Allied Control Commission gave its consent to set up lists of deportees for each locality. The work was done by local authorities in late 1944. These once top secret registers are held in the Military Archives in Budapest. According to the still incomplete collection of documents, the number of deported civilians from within today’s Hungarian borders ranges from 120,000 to 140,000.26

In northern Transylvania, under the pretext of "mobilizing" Germans, mainly Hungarians were rounded up and handed over to the Soviet authorities. The tally for deported Hungarians ranges between forty and fifty thousand. If we consider the wartime territory of Hungary, twice the country’s current size, the total number of civilian internees ranges between 180,000 and 200,000.

In addition to the real prisoners of war and civilian internees, there was a third set of prisoners. This group included those Hungarians who were arrested and sentenced by Soviet military tribunals on charges of "anti-Soviet" activity. Who belonged to this group of victims? Soldiers who served in the occupational forces

26 Magyarország a második világháborúban, Lexikon [Hungary in the Second World War, Encyclopaedia] ed. Péter Sipos-István Ravasz (Budapest, 1997), 498. This is a statistic on the number of those Hungarians who were reported by local governments to be captured by the Soviet Army. The final figure is 94,778. Since most of the captured civilians from Budapest were not reported, the released figure is not accurate. On the numbers of the captured civilians see also Tájékoztató gyorsfelvétel a a községek és városok közérdekű viszonyairól [An Informative Quick Survey of the Public Relations of Villages and Towns], Magyar Statisztikai Szemle 1 (1946): 12-13.
on Soviet territory were arrested automatically, regardless of what they had actually done there. Members of the “Levente” paramilitary youth organization were also suspicious. The members of this organization were teenage boys who had to serve in auxiliary forces in the final months of the war. Most of these formations were evacuated to Germany during the great retreat in early 1945. Those boys who were able to avoid evacuation and remained in Hungary were considered by the NKVD as potential partisans and were treated as such. High-ranking officials and representatives of non-Communist political groups and parties were also arrested and sentenced to death or twenty-five years of imprisonment.

The fate of the convicts was different from that of POWs and civilian internees. While these groups belonged to the GUPVI camp administration, the convicts were sent to the Gulag. In their case deportation was an instrument of political cleansing. The convicts who were still alive could return to Hungary after Stalin’s death. In the sixties, the Soviet Attorney General annulled the sentences of most of the surviving convicts, if they applied for this. Thirty-five hundred former convicts were exonerated in this way, although they never received any compensation from the Soviet Union. Since only survivors were rehabilitated, the actual original number of convicts must have been around 10,000, according to "SZORAKÉSZ," the central organization of Hungarian GULAG survivors.27

According to the postwar statistics of the Ministry of Defense, within Hungary and outside Hungary about 450,000 soldiers fell into Soviet captivity. Together with civilian prisoners, the total number of Hungarians and ethnically German Hungarians in Soviet custody must have been 600,000 to 640,000. Some newly available Soviet documents confirm these estimates, which are based largely on Hungarian sources. We know now that the Soviet camp authority registered 526,000 Hungarian captives.28

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28 Gosudarstvennaia archivnaia sluzba Rossiiskoi Federacii, Centr hranenia, istori-kodokumentalnih kollekci [State Archives of the Russian Federation, Center for preservation of historical collection], Moscow, MVD, fond: 1/n opis: 01e delo: 81.
tistics were compiled well after the arrival of prisoners. Consequently, the figure of 526,000 does not include the number of those who died in transit camps or during transit. With these added, the Soviet figure of 526,000 coincides with my estimate of 600,000 to 640,000.

From the tales of survivors it becomes evident that life in the camps, the prisoners’ quarters, and working conditions varied greatly. Camps were usually surrounded by a triple wire fence. Day and night there were guards in the watchtowers and along the fences. Initially, inmates stayed in bunkers dug into the ground, later in communal wooden barracks. The latter had three tiers of bunks, with a sixty-centimeter-wide space per prisoner. In most places the prisoners slept on wooden boards, but elsewhere there were straw bags for mattresses. In contrast to transit camps, barracks could usually be deloused, but cockroaches continued to plague the prisoners. Inmates worked ten to fourteen-hour days. In theory, Sundays they were exempt from work, but the commanding officers would find work for them on these days too. There were places where prisoners got unsubstantial wages, but not everywhere. Those had the best chances for survival who were able to work as skilled laborers in some factory or farm. They came into contact with the local population who, as a form of barter, would give them some food or simple articles. But the majority of prisoners worked in mines, forest clearing, or road and railway construction. The worst conditions were in the Gulag camps, where condemned prisoners were held. The three most notorious camp districts (Vorkuta, Norilsk and Kolyma) were located north of the Arctic Circle. Survivors remember winter temperatures often reaching -60° C, and even worse was the constant wind. In the far east, the Taiset camp deserves mention, where the prisoners began to build the Baikal-Amur railway (BAM), hailed as the construction project of the century.

The minimal and unbalanced nourishment, abominable living conditions, and overstraining work caused quick deterioration in the physical state of the prisoners. Medical care was practically nonexistent. Although there was a "dispensary" in most camps, it was run by prisoner doctors without equipment or drugs. If someone had a fever he had a chance to get to a hospital. With no supplies there either, actual treatment was out of the question, but at least the prisoners were left in peace for a while. It was really the

infections that caused massive deaths. Many prisoners suffered chronic diarrhea. Most of these lost more and more weight and wasted away until they succumbed. Malaria and typhus were rampant.

A great many prisoners fell victim to the abuse of their guards. Even more died from work-related "accidents," such as mine cave-ins or explosions, and freezing to death. The dead were usually buried in unmarked mass graves, often without being registered. No one officially notified the family of the death of their relative. Such news usually came, if at all, much later from a fellow prisoner who had survived.

Although the statistics of survivors are not absolutely precise, I will draw the conclusion that out of 600,000 prisoners, fewer than 400,000 were repatriated to their original countries.29 Most of the survivors returned by the end of 1948. A total of 200,000 and 240,000 prisoners perished, a tally much higher than the complete casualty number of the Hungarian army during the war. These prisoners became the martyrs of Soviet forced labor camps.

Referring to the tragic fate of the prisoners, some historians use the terms "Holocaust," "Hungarian holocaust," or "genocide."30 In my judgment, the fate of most of these prisoners, in general, does not meet the criteria of genocide, as established by the Genocide Convention of the United Nations in 1948. These deportations did not take place with the intent to destroy the Hungarian or German nation as a whole. Apart from exceptional cases, the Russian guards did not kill any inmates deliberately. On the other hand, due to epidemics and malnutrition, massive casualties were an integral part of life in the forced labor camps.

Contrary to the Soviet role in the fate of Volga Germans, Karachay, Kalmyks, Chechen, Ingush, Balkars, Crimean Tartars, and Meskethians, the Soviet government had no program to transfer the whole Hungarian nation, or even the entire German ethnic group in Hungary. Soviet policy in Hungary followed the Baltic, Polish, and Romanian scenarios of 1939-1941 and 1944/45. Moreover, to eliminate the real or potential critics of the Soviet regime, the Soviets punished these nations "only" by deporting a part of their manpower to use as forced labor for an unspecified period of time.


30 Füzesi, Modern rabszolgaság, 48.
My earlier comment about genocide referred to the fate of the Hungarian prisoners in general. My conclusion is different, however, if I limit my evaluation to the fate of Hungarians in Subcarpathia and Eastern Slovakia. Although here only the male population was deported, there is an undeniable similarity with the fate of above mentioned nations, the Karachai, Kalmyks, Chechen, Ingush, Balkars, Crimean Tatars and Meskethians. In other words, these two Hungarian groups were deported solely because of their Hungarian ethnicity. Consequently their story is an example of ethnic cleansing, and as such should become part of the international literature on genocide.