The Soviet Massive Deportations - A Chronology

1934: Josef Stalin, who had ruled the USSR with an iron hand since the end of the 1920s, launched the Great Purge in January 1934 to consolidate his power.

1935: Between 7,000 and 9,000 Finns from Lembovo and Nikoulias districts, in the Leningrad region, became the first group to be massively deported based on ethnicity. Falsely accused of betrayal, the Finns were expelled to secure the Soviet frontiers. The People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD), forerunner of the Committee for State Security (KGB) orchestrated the operation, as it did for all subsequent mass deportations.

** (Gelb, 1996:237-269; Matley, 1979:1-16)

1936, April: About 35,700 Poles living alongside the Ukrainian frontier and some 20,000 Finnish peasants were deported to Kazakhstan for the same reasons as those previously mentioned. The deportation was class-based in the sense that it targeted specific economic categories; but it was also ethnically motivated, as it aimed to secure the frontiers.

** (Bugai, 1995:8-27; Polian, 2004:35-75)

1937, September-October: The first large-scale operation of massive deportation occurred in the Soviet Far East. About 175,000 Koreans living along the Chinese and Korean borders were relocated by force to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. They were charged with espionage, spying for the Japanese. After a brutal expulsion, the Koreans experienced severe living conditions. Moscow did not inform the local Uzbek and Kazakh authorities about the arrival of a large population of “administrative settlers.” Nothing was prepared to accommodate or provide them with basic supplies such as food, clothes and shoes. Although there was no reliable data regarding the Korean death toll, testimonies and NKVD documents indicate that many of them died from disease, starvation and lack of housing. By 1945, they joined the long list of “special settlers,” among other punished peoples.

*** (Gelb, 1995:398-412; Pohl, 1999:9-21)

1939, August 23: Germany and the Soviet Union signed a Nonaggression Pact, known as the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact.

1939, September 17: (Poland) The Red Army invaded Poland.

1940, February to April: (The Red Army annexed territories in the eastern parts of Poland) About 250,000 Poles and thousands of Ukrainians and Byelorussians were deported in three major waves to Siberia and to Central and Far Eastern Asia in order to remove the most active populations from the annexed territories. Although based on ethnic criteria, these forced expulsions mainly targeted families of military colonists, prisoners-of-war and foresters. They were dispatched to labor camps or executed. The deportees who survived the journey experienced very hard living conditions in exile. Most of the Polish citizens were allowed to return home when the USSR and Poland reached an agreement on July 30th, 1941.

*** (Lebedeva, 2000:28-46; Sword, 1994)

1941, June 13-14: (Baltic countries) In the aftermath of the Baltic States’ conquest, about 39,395 persons – Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians but also Poles, Finns, and Germans – were deported to the Soviet Far East. Ivan Serov coordinated the operation under the command of Lavrenti Beria.

** (Bugai, 1993:213-223; Polian, 2004:35-75)
1941, June 22: The Nazi army invaded the Soviet Union.

1941, August: The Finns, or Ingrians, inhabiting the Leningrad region and who had not been deported in 1932-1934, were expelled by force to Central Asia. The USSR took this measure to prevent them from assisting the Finnish army that had just invaded the Soviet Karelia region.

** (Pohl, 1999:21-27)

1941, August 28: A decree from the Supreme Soviet Presidium established that Russian-Germans were collectively responsible for collaboration with the German invaders, and ordered their massive deportation. From the end of August 1941 until June 1942, about 1,200,000 Russian-Germans were removed from their homes and relocated in Siberia and Central Asia. The operation mobilized thousands of soldiers, policemen and NKVD members. Hundreds of trains and vehicles were dedicated to this task at a time of Russian military retreat. No reliable data exists on the death toll among the Russian-German deportees.


1943, October 12: The Supreme Soviet issued a decree ordering the deportation of all the Karachays, a Turkish-speaking people inhabiting the North Caucasus. The USSR accused them of collaboration with the German army, which had been occupying Karachay territory for the previous six months. In November 68,938 persons, mainly disarmed (women, children, elderly people and war veterans) were transported under very hard conditions to Kirghizia and Kazakhstan. The men serving with the Red Army or fighting in partisan movements were demobilized and sent into exile or to labor camps. All the Karachays paid for the relationship that a few of their fellow Karachays had established with the German occupiers. This scenario became a common one for all punished peoples.

*** (Marie, 1995:57-71; Shamanov, 1993)

1943, December 27: Under Beria’s orders began the brutal deportation of the Kalmyks, a Buddhist people living in southern Russia near the Volga river basin. In three days, about 93,000 persons were expelled to Siberia. The lack of food and disease claimed the lives of thousands of people who had been forced into jam-packed cattle cars. Likewise, the settlements in exile were equally inhospitable. During the first glacial Siberian winter many died, faced with widespread indifference.


1944, February 23: The Soviet government deported the Chechens and the Ingush, two Muslim peoples of the North Caucasus [1]. Although the Germans had only occupied a region in the extreme northwest of the Republic, Chechens and Ingush were accused of betrayal and massive collaboration with the German occupiers, like the other punished peoples. Beria’s administration used methods resembling those of earlier deportations. Yet this operation proved to be more difficult due to the uneven nature of the terrain. Furthermore, the resistance of a few Chechen and Ingush groups slowed down the NKVD soldiers’ agenda. Nonetheless, in seven days nearly 478,000 people, comprised of 387,000 Chechens and 91,000 Ingush, were arrested, loaded into hundreds of convoys and then resettled in Central Asia, mainly in Kazakhstan. It is difficult to set an exact death toll due to the lack of evidence. According to different estimations, between 30% and 50% of the deportees died, either during the journey or in the first years of exile in the special settlements.


1944, March 7: The deportation of the 38,000 Balkars, a small Turkish people living near the Elbruz Mountain in Northern Caucasus, began. Three days later, all deportee-convoys were en route to Central Asia. Between 20% and 40% of the Balkars died between 1944 and 1956.


1944, May 18: The Crimean Tatars, a Muslim Turkish-speaking people originating from the
peninsula of Crimea located on the borders of Black Sea, were deported. This forced removal took place one month after the German army, who had occupied the peninsula from 1942 to April 1944, retreated. In two days roughly 190,000 persons, mostly women, children and elderly people, were loaded into freight trains and transferred to an unknown destination. Most of them landed in Uzbekistan, while others arrived either in the Volga basin or Siberia. The forced expulsion, along with thirteen years of exile as special settlers, took a heavy toll among the Crimean Tatars. According to different studies and censuses, between 20% and 46.2% of them died either during the journey or in the first year and a half of exile.


1944, June: Other non-Slavic peoples living in Crimea were deported a few weeks after the Crimean Tatars: 12,075 Bulgarians, 14,300 Greeks and about 10,000 Armenians were expelled from their homes and sent to Central Asia against their will. All of them were accused of treason and more specifically, of having commercial interests that linked them to the German occupiers. At the same time, Greeks from Rostov and Krasnodar were exiled to the eastern regions of the Soviet Union. They were suspected of having a close relationship with Greece, as most of them had refused Soviet citizenship and struggled to maintain their Greek culture.


1944, November: Muslim Turkish-speaking peoples living in Georgia along the Turkish borders (the Meskhetian Turks, the Khemchins and the Kurds) became the next target of the Stalinist national policy. Given that the Nazi army had never reached Georgia, they could not be accused of massive collaboration. Instead they were charged with being Turkish spies. About 90,000 persons were brutally expelled and relocated to Central Asia to “clean” the frontiers. This constituted the last large-scale operation.

The NKVD continued hunting down all members of these groups who might have managed to escape deportation, for some reason.

*** for the Meskhetian Turks, ** for the Kurds and * for the Khemchins (Bugai, 1995:163-186; Marie, 1995:111-129; Pohl, 1999:129-137)

1945, May 8: End of the Second World War, called the “Great Patriotic War” in the former USSR.

1948: Confronted with the large insurrection that followed the Baltic States’ annexation, the Soviet central apparatus decided to deport new groups of Lithuanians, Estonians and Latvians: about 48,000 persons were sent to Siberia.

** (Bugai, 1993:213-223; Polian, 2004:65-100)

1948, November 26: Stalin issued a decree by which all massive deportations were declared definitive.

1949, March: The previous measures did not stop the revolts in the Baltic States. In response, Stalin ordered the deportation of an additional 30,000 families, that is to say a total of about 95,000 persons, to discourage insurgents and bring all the opponents to heel. All deportees became special settlers and lived under the NKVD’s harsh rule.

* (Bugai, 1993:213-223)

1949: About 37,000 Greeks living in Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and the Krasnodar Region were deported to Kazakhstan. Like their fellow Greeks forcibly removed in 1944, they were accused of disloyalty and non-integration.

** (Bugai and Koconis, 1999; Pohl, 1999:119-129)

1950: After the organized famine of 1946-47, the Soviet government decided to deport
approximately 100,000 Moldavians from Moldavia, who were suspected of having close ties with their Romanian neighbors. They too joined the long list of special settlers and endured especially difficult conditions in exile.

* (Polian, 2004:75-130)

1953: Stalin died.

1954, July: The USSR Council of Ministers passed a resolution that “liberated” some categories of deportees: those employed in socially useful professions and children under ten.

1956: During the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Union’s Communist Party, Leonid Khrushchev declared that earlier massive deportations were arbitrary and criminal acts. The Supreme Soviet Presidium decided to rehabilitate the majority of the punished peoples, thereby authorizing them to return to their region of origin. But this measure did not include the Crimean Tatars, the Russian-Germans, or the Meskhetian Turks. These three groups were neither collectively rehabilitated nor allowed to return. They were condemned to stay in exile, scattered and deprived of all collective rights.

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