

The Deportation of Germans from Romania to Forced Labor in the Soviet Union

by Hannelore Baier

ABSTRACT

The year 2015 marks the 70th anniversary of the deportation of women and men of German origin from Romania to forced labor in the Soviet Union. In January 1945 nearly 70,000 working-age persons were coercively transported to the Donbass. For those affected, it seemed to be a cloak-and dagger operation. However, documents show that the exploitation of "German laborers" for the reconstruction of the areas of the Soviet Union destroyed by the war was addressed by the Allies and meticulously planned by the Soviet Ministry of Internal Affairs (NKVD). Ethnic Germans (Volksdeutsche) as well as German citizens from all over Central Eastern Europe were deployed for reconstruction.

In the first half of the 20th century, the deportations of groups of the population on the basis of their ethnic affiliation and their deployment as forced laborers took on new dimensions as a means of enforcing the political interests of those in power. Millions of Jews lost their lives during hard labour in Third Reich concentration camps. Yet millions of Soviet citizens were also exploited as foreign workers (Fremdarbeiter) for Nazi Germany. The deportation and the deployment of German laborers – both German citizens as well as ethnic Germans (Volksdeutsche) – as a potential reparation payment for rebuilding the Soviet Union was addressed during the preparations for the Conference of Foreign Ministers of the Allied Powers in Moscow (October 1943) as well as the Teheran Conference (November/December 1943), without an agreement being reached though. An accord on German reparation payments, including work carried out by Germans, was reached at the Yalta Conference in February 1945, thus one and a half months after the beginning of the roundup of German civilians from the areas to the east of the Oder and Neisse rivers.¹ Documents from Moscow

1 Georg Weber, Renate Weber-Schlechter, Armin Nassehi, Oliver Sill, Georg Kneer, *Die Deportation von Siebenbürger Sachsen in die Sowjetunion 1945-1949*, Weimar, Wien: Böhlau-Verlag, 1995; Band 1, *Die Deportation als historisches Geschehen*, p. 78.

archives (RGASPI², GARF³) indicate that the deportation of German civilians for labor purposes by the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) was planned and managed at the central level. Its execution began after the areas were "liberated" by the Soviet Army.

STALIN'S COMMAND

In November 1944 a stocktaking of the Germans living in the operational area of the 2nd, 3rd and 4th Ukrainian Front of Eastern Europe (Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia) was carried out. On 15 December, 1944, the results of this "counting of Germans" (*Deutschenählung*) were presented by the People's Commissioner for Internal Affairs L.P. Berija to I.V. Stalin, the People's Commissioner for Defense as well as V.M. Molotov, the People's Commissioner for External Affairs.⁴ The NKVD (Ministry of Internal Affairs) had registered a total of

2 Pavel Poljan, „Internierung und Deportation deutscher Zivilisten aus den besetzten deutschen Gebieten in die UdSSR.“ *Berichte und Studien des Hannah-Arendt-Instituts für Totalitarismusforschung e.V. an der TU Dresden*, 35/2001, pp. 39-53.

3 Günter Klein, „Im Lichte sowjetischer Quellen. Die Deportation Deutscher aus Rumänien zur Zwangsarbeit in die UdSSR 1945“. *Südostdeutsche Vierteljahresblätter*, 2/1998, pp. 153-162.

4 Klein, *Im Lichte sowjetischer Quellen*, 154.

551,049 persons of German ethnicity, among them 97,484 men aged between 17 and 45 years. The largest German community was located on Romanian territory and consisted of 421,846 people. The original intention was to only deploy men aged 17 to 45 to rebuild the destroyed industry in Ukraine. However, as it was assumed that some of the registered men were not suitable for work, a decision was made to also transport women aged 18 to 30 years along with them.

The “mobilization and detainment of all Germans capable of working, including men aged 17 to 45 years and women 18 to 30 years” with both German as well as other citizenships from Romania, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Bulgaria and Czechoslovakia, and their transport to work in the USSR took place on the basis of the Secret Command No. 7161ss of the State Committee for Defence. It was signed by Stalin on 16 December 1944.⁵ According to the directive, the coordination and organization of the mobilization were the responsibility of the NKVD. In order to execute the directive, the commanders of the Ukrainian Front and the deputy directors of the Allied Commissions (Alliierte Kontrollkommissionen) were supposed to establish contacts to the government authorities in the affected countries. The deportation order stipulates that the mobilized Germans are to be deployed for the reconstruction of the mining industry in the Donbass and the black iron metallurgy in the south. The last point in the 10-point command demanded that the mobilization be carried out in December 1944 and January 1945 and that the laborers arrive at their workplaces by 15 February 1945. Beria reported on the developments on 22 February 1945. According

5 Klein, *Im Lichte sowjetischer Quellen*, 155; Stefan Karner, *Im Archipel GUPVI*, Wien, München: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1995, p. 27.

to his report, 112,480 persons – 61,375 men and 51,105 women – were “mobilized, detained and transported for labor in the USSR” in the timeframe between 25 December 1944 and 31 January 1945. The largest share of them – 69,332 persons – were Germans from Romania.⁶

THE DEPORTATION OF THE ROMANIAN GERMANS

It is uncertain when the Romanian government was informed about the planned deportation. According to accessible files, General V.P. Vinogradov, the Vice-President of the Allied Commission for Romania, initially notified the Prime Minister’s staff orally. There is a record of the conversation on 3 January 1945 between the Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs C. Vișoianu and Burton Berry, the political representative of the USA in Bucharest, during which he addressed the intention of the Soviet representative to “round up” citizens of German origin and “transfer them to Soviet Russia”. The roundup command, i.e. the order by the Allied Commission to the (then) Chairman of the Council of Ministers Rădescu to mobilize and detain the Germans who were able to work between 10 and 20 January, is only preserved as an annex to a letter from Berry from 6 January 1945. A first written protest by the Romanian government was sent to Vinogradov on 13 January 1945. It refers to the “worst devastation of all economic and administrative activities of the state” as a consequence of such a measure as “the obligation of the Romanian government [...] to monitor the interests of all its subjects, regardless of their ethnic origin”.⁷ In a lively

6 Klein, *Im Lichte sowjetischer Quellen*, 155-157.

7 Archive of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Fund 71-1939, E9, Volume 164,

written diplomatic correspondence between the USA and Great Britain, who were overtly blindsided by their partner's course of action, Churchill stated his opinion to Foreign Minister Eden on 18 January 1945: "Why are we making a fuss about the Russian deportations in Roumania of Saxons and others? It was understood that the Russians were to work their will in this sphere. Anyhow we cannot prevent them".⁸

Romanian authorities conducted the first registration of German citizens as well as Romanian citizens of German ethnicity in September 1944. Those affected interpreted it as preparation for the imminent deportation, which was unlikely though. Indications can be found in Romanian documents from late December 1944 and early January 1945 that Soviet officers demanded "tables with names, ages and professions" of Romanian citizens of German origin. In a public order by the Ministry of Internal Affairs to the government inspection offices of the police dated 31 December 1944 a reference is made to the command by the Presidency of the Council of Ministers given by telephone on 19 December.⁹ The public order provides details on the gathering procedure in accordance with the tables and specified age categories" and the transportation procedure – after the roundup command is specifically issued. In the first roundup commands, women with children aged under one year as well as persons with handicaps are named as the only exceptions.

pp. 43, printed in German in Weber et. al., *Die Deportation von Siebenbürger Sachsen...*, Volume 3, 126 et seq.

⁸ Weber et. al., *Die Deportation von Siebenbürger Sachsen...*, Vol. 3, p. 166.

⁹ Hannelore Baier, ed., *Deportarea etnicilor germani din România în Uniunea Sovietică 1945*, Sibiu, p. 37 et seq.

Women who are married to Romanian men, children with a Romanian parent or parent of another nationality, professionals who are irreplaceable in businesses, nuns, monks, and pastors are exempted from the measure in later orders. These additions to the original orders partially did not reach the persons authorized with the detainment until the people were already being transported in cattle wagons to the USSR. In some places mixed Soviet-Romanian patrols carried out the roundups, while in other places the Romanian gendarmes or police were sent out alone. The conviction is embedded in the collective conscience of the generation that experienced these events that the Soviet Union required laborers and that Romania supplied "the Germans". This view was reinforced by the sweeping measures of persecution indiscriminately carried out against Romanian Germans.

The roundup command for Romania stipulated that the Germans capable of work were to be mobilized between 10 and 20 January. In some regions members of the Romanian and Soviet military and police took brutal actions and people below and above the specified age limits were also arrested. People with illnesses or people who had a German name, but did not consider themselves German, were also transported away. In other places, verifications were carried out and people who did not correspond with the defined criteria were freed. Some people were taken off the street and detained, while others were able to bring warm clothing, bed sheets, eating utensils and food with them after the roundup command was announced. According to note dated 2 February 1945, a total of 21 trains with 10 to 60 (cattle) wagons full of "rounded up and wagonned Saxons" departed from the operational area of Kronstadt/Braşov (which

comprised all of southern Transylvania) between 16 and 29 January.

The number of Romanian Germans deported to the USSR for reconstruction activities or “Aufbauarbeit”, which was the official term used later, is likely to have been slightly under 70,000: according to a comprehensive report from the office of the Romanian Prime Minister in 1947, which compiles data from the Ministries of Internal and Foreign Affairs, 70,148 Romanian citizens – the large majority of them of German origin – were sent to work in the Soviet Union in 1945. They were joined by 300 German citizens from two prison camps. In a statistic regarding the “mobilized and detained (ethnic) Germans” from the Soviet authorities from March 1946, the number of Romanian Germans was stated to be 53,946 (27,680 women and 26,266 men).¹⁰ This figure may be correct, because the first approx. 8,000 persons who had become disabled were brought home in the late autumn of 1945, while further movements of sick persons were carried out in February 1946. There were very many deaths in the winter of 1945/1946 (due to starvation, illness and work accidents). The “mobilization” was stated to be a wartime measure. However, it can be assumed that the labor assignment was intended for the duration of a five-year plan. Those who were able to defy disease, hunger and heavy labor came home in late 1949. Relatively exact figures on the death rate can be obtained from the Transylvanian Saxons and the three-volume book published by Georg Weber and his colleagues¹¹. Ten percent of the approx.

30,000 deported persons died during the deportation, while an additional two percent died during the journey back or immediately after arrival. Three times more men died than women. The death rate varies according to the camp and work place and with regard to the places of origin depending on the random course of action taken during the roundup or the compliance with the age limits, which were exceeded upwards or downwards in some places.

THE EFFECTS

Between 14.5 and 20 percent of the German community was deported from the administrative districts with a Transylvanian-Saxon population. Children and older people remained behind. For example, 455 deported persons left behind 333 children in Sighișoara (Schäßburg). The deportation to Russia became embedded in the conscience of the German community as the moment of the breach of trust to Romania, even though the misappropriation of their entire property in rural regions carried out by the first communist-dominated government in March 1945 had even more profound consequences for the social structure and transformation of the communities.

In the note of protest to the Allied Commission, the Romanian government referred to the consequences of the displacement of laborers on the country’s economy. On 19 February 1945 Vinogradov sent an order to the Chairman of the Council of Ministers to immediately put the Germans who eluded the “mobilization” in work battalions and to deploy them to labour assignments inside the country. Due to their ethnicity, Romanian Germans were subject to various forms of forced labor in different parts of the country up to 1948.

¹⁰ Karner, *Im Archipel GUPVI*, p. 30.

¹¹ Prof. Dr. Georg Weber (1932-2013), theologian, sociologist, and specialist in other disciplines at the Westfälische Wilhelms University of Münster, primary area of research: sociology of migration.

Ceaușescu and Romanian continuously praised themselves for having been the only country in the Eastern Block from which the Germans were not expelled from during the Second World War and in the immediate aftermath. Policy-makers at that time would have liked to have done so, but there were disagreements between them and they simply missed the right moment. When the request by the German government to evacuate Romanian Germans was addressed by the Council of Ministers in September 1944, an agreement was reached to consent to it in principle and carry it out “when the circumstances enable it”. At that point in time, expelling Germans was out of the question, because the area was already a theater of war. Only the representative of the Communist Party voted against expelling the Germans – and it can be assumed that he did so at the request of the Soviets. He stated as a reason that the evacuation would give Germany a new supply of persons and goods.¹² It is unclear why Romania did not request the expulsion of the Germans at the Potsdam Conference. Negotiations were held in October 1944 in the Council of Ministers regarding the revoking of Romanian citizenship from those who exhibited disloyalty to the Romanian state. However, no such directive was passed. In 1946, part of the leadership of the Communist Party exerted demands for their expulsion during the peace negotiations in Paris and aimed to gain Stalin’s consent for this (in the context of talks regarding the upcoming elections). Stalin declined: “The war is over.

12 National Archive of Romania (Arhivele Nationale ale Romaniei), Fund of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party, Chancellery, vol. 7/1944, pp. 9-10, partial printing in Romanian in Hannelore Baier (ed.): *Germanii din Romania 1944-1956*, Sibiu: Editura Honterus, 2005, pp.58-59.

It has become difficult to expel them.”¹³

SUMMARY

For the German community in Romania, the deportation of working-age women and men to the Soviet Union in January 1945 signified a breach of trust by the Romanian government, because it implemented the measure ordered by Stalin. One was not aware of the many thoughtless followers in National-Socialist Germany and that their conformity was punished. The deportation order affected all “Germans” due to their ethnic affiliation and no distinction was made between National-Socialists and their opponents. The German minority was not expelled from Romania. However, after the reversal of weapons of 23 August 1944 disciplinary measures were applied against them, which were accompanied by hateful slogans, but no efforts to systematically address and elucidate the National-Socialist atrocities.

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13 Annemarie Weber ed., *Die Deutschen in Rumänien 1944-1953. Eine Quellensammlung*, Köln Weimar Wien 2015, p. 157.

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Book publications (selection):

Editor of the document collections: *Deportarea etnicilor germani din Romania in Uniunea Sovietica 1945* [The deportation of Romanian Germans to the Soviet Union in 1945] Sibiu/Hermannstadt 1994; and *Germanii din Romania 1944-1956*, [The Germans in Romania 1944-1956] Hermannstadt/Sibiu 2005

Co-author of the schoolbook *Geschichte und Traditionen der deutschen Minderheit in Rumänien* (History and Traditions of the German Minority in Romania). Textbook for the 6th and 7th grade.

Co-author of *Kauf von Freiheit* (Purchase of Freedom) Interviews with Dr. Heinz-Günther Hüscher on family reunions/ransom for Romanian Germans. Hermannstadt/Sibiu 2013

Collaborator on the source book *Die Deutschen in Rumänien 1944-1953* (The Germans in Romania) Böhlau 2015

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