

Romanian Germans and the Memory of the Deportation to the Soviet Union

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ABSTRACT

This contribution discusses the memorialisation of the deportation of Romanian Germans to the Soviet Union, which took place in 1945, emphasising the links between the deportation and previous events and processes such as the appeal of Fascism for Romanian German communities and the mass enrolment of Romanian Germans in the SS.

In January 1945, under Soviet pressure, between 70,000 and 80,000 Romanian citizens of German ethnicity were deported to the Soviet Union, for the 'reconstruction of the country': men between 17 and 45 years old, and women between 18 and 30 years old.¹ Most of the deportees ended up in the coal mines in the Donbas region, while about 10% were deported to the Urals and elsewhere.² Some of them were released in 1946 and 1947, yet these people were not sent back to Romania, but to Frankfurt/Oder, in the Soviet-occupation zone in Germany. In most cases they attempted either to go back from there to their home country, or to cross into what would subsequently become the Federal Republic of Germany. Subsequently, the great majority of the survivors were freed in 1949, and sent back to Romania. Around 15% of the deportees died during the deportation.³ The temporary resettlement for forced labour took place after Romania's sudden change of sides during the Second World War, which occurred on 23 August 1944 and transformed Germans in Romania from a privileged group into the enemy within, a potential fifth column of Hitler's Germany. The fact that around

63,000 Romanian German men were fighting in SS and Wehrmacht units at the time was also particularly relevant in this context.⁴ It also contributed to the gender imbalance amongst the deportees: around 40% were men, while about 60% were women.

Under state socialism, the deportation was to a large extent taboo in Romania. With the exception of a short period in the early 1950s, in which Romanian authorities attempted to present it as 'reconstruction' of the Soviet Union and the deportees as individuals who had the opportunity to contribute to building socialism, the forced labour experience of Romanian Germans was absent from official discourses.⁵ Only community spaces such as the church provided to a certain extent opportunities for addressing the deportation and remembering its victims.⁶ In part, the

4 For the enrolment of Romanian Germans in the SS, see Paul Milata, *Rumäniendeutsche in der Waffen-SS* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2007).

5 Annemarie Weber, *Rumäniendeutsche? Diskurse zur Gruppenidentität einer Minderheit 1945-1971* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2010), 108-123.

6 A detailed account of how the deportation was addressed in the church sphere is still to be written. Amongst the sources to be used for such an analysis, one should probably include the newsletters (*Heimatblätter*) published by Romanian Germans originating from the same locality after their migration to the Federal Republic. See for example the articles in *Zeidner Gruß* about the commemorative efforts (religious services, composition of a song dedicated to the deportees) taking place in the Lutheran Church in Codlea/Zeiden/Feketalom: *Aus Zeiden. Zeidner Gruß. Heimatbrief der Zeidner Nachbarschaft*, Pfingsten 1955, 5 and Hans Mieskes, "Danksagung an Lehrer Hans Mild", in *Zeidner Gruß. Heimatbrief der Zeidner Nachbarschaft*,

1 Mathias Beer, "Der Zweite Weltkrieg und die Nachkriegszeit", in *Siebenbürger und die Siebenbürger Sachsen*, by Konrad Gündisch with the collaboration of Mathias Beer (Munich: Langen Müller, 1998), 221.

2 Georg Weber et al., *Die Deportation von Siebenbürger Sachsen in die Sowjetunion 1945-1949. I: Die Deportation als historisches Geschehen* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 1995), 404.

3 Beer, "Der Zweite Weltkrieg", 221.

privacy of the family space probably also enabled the transmission of discourses and narratives about the deportation.

One of the specificities of Romanian German history in the second half of the twentieth-century is connected with the process of mass migration of Germans from Romania to West Germany. In effect, this process started in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War: for example, for Romanian Germans who had fought in the SS, going back to Romania was out of the question. In this context, organisations of Transylvanian Saxons and Banat Swabians in West Germany such as the Homeland Associations (*Landsmannschaften*), or the Aid Committee (*Hilfskomitee*), founded in the early 1950s, attempted to take on the task of managing Romanian German identities and official memories.

With discourses underlining “German victimhood” prevalent in West Germany in the first post-war decades,⁷ one could expect an emphasis on the memorialisation of the deportation from the Romanian German communities there. Nevertheless, such an emphasis came only later. In the 1950s and the 1960s, the need for a discursive and political integration into the broader ‘German expellee’ community led to highlighting the experiences of Saxons from Northern Transylvania, which bore more similarities to the expulsions of Germans from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, or Yugoslavia.⁸

Am Georgentag 1957, 5-6.

7 Robert G. Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

8 See also Cristian Cercel, “The Deportation of Romanian Germans to the Soviet Union and Its Place within Transylvanian Saxon Memory Discourses in Germany in the 1950s and the 1960s”, in *New Europe College Ștefan Odobleja Program Yearbook 2012-2013*, ed. Irina Vainovski-Mihai, 56-60.

Northern Transylvania had been under Hungarian control between 1940 and 1944 and the German population in the region was evacuated by the Wehrmacht in late August and early September 1944. Consequently, around 50,000 Northern Transylvanian Saxons fled to Austria and Southern Germany, most of them settling down there for good.⁹

Hence, letting aside some exceptional cases, a growing general interest in the deportation amongst the Romanian German communities in West Germany can be noticed starting in the second half of the 1970s and the 1980s. Nevertheless, further research should undoubtedly look in depth at the yet unestablished links between the particular Cold War context, anti-Communist discourses and the *Ostpolitik* in West Germany, and the memory discourses disseminated within Romanian German communities.

Interest in the deportation gained momentum after 1989, not only in the Federal Republic of Germany, but also in Romania. In the new political context in the latter country, former deportees founded an association to represent their interests. Also supported by the Democratic Forum of Germans in Romania, they managed to be placed, from a legislative point of view, on equal footing with the former political prisoners under state socialism and hence enjoy the same rights as the latter. A profusion of memorialistic texts and oral history interviews followed: its seeds had been planted before 1989, yet such testimonies became more and more visible starting in the 1990s.¹⁰

9 Hans-Werner Schuster, “Grundzüge der Entwicklung der Landsmannschaft der Siebenbürger Sachsen in Deutschland”, in *60 Jahre Verband der Siebenbürger Sachsen in Deutschland. Grundzüge seiner Geschichte*, ed. Hans-Werner Schuster (Munich: Verband der Siebenbürger Sachsen in Deutschland e.V., 2009), 9.

10 Just some examples: Hermann Rehner,

The plight of the deportees has also been symbolically recognised by relevant political figures in both Romania and West Germany. The year 1995 is a milestone in this respect, as important manifestations took place in both countries, marking the fiftieth anniversary of the deportation. Braşov/Kronstadt/Brassó and Munich were the cities where the events took place. In the former case, Ion Iliescu, Romania's president at the time, and Nicolae Văcăroiu, the country's prime-minister, sent their official messages to the participants, thus acknowledging the suffering of Romanian Germans.¹¹ A large exhibition dedicated to the deportations of Germans from the entire Southeastern Europe was inaugurated in Munich. The city's deputy mayoress, Gertraud Burkert, and state secretary of the Bavarian government, Gerhard Merkl, attended the vernissage and held speeches on the occasion.¹²

Wir waren Sklaven: Tagebuch eines nach Rußland Verschleppten (Bucharest: Concordia, 1993); Liane Weniger, *Schatten am Don. Als Zwangsdeportierte aus Siebenbürgen in Kohlebergwerken in Russland, 1945-1946* (Dortmund: Forschungsstelle Osmitteluropa, 1994); Helmut Berner, Doru Radosav (ed.), *und keiner weiß warum. Donbaß. Eine deportierte Geschichte* (Ravensburg: Landsmannschaft der Sathmarer Schwaben, 1996); Ernest Ulrich, *Din cartea vieţii mele: am fost deportat în U.R.S.S.* (Petroşani, Editura Fundaţiei Culturale "Ion D. Sîrbu", 2005; Lavinia Betea, Cristina Diac, Florin-Răzvan Mihai, Ilarion Țiu (ed.), *Lungul drum spre nicăieri. Germanii din România deportați în URSS* (Târgoviște: Editura Cetatea de Scaun, 2012).

11 "Mesajul domnului Ion Iliescu, Preşedintele României, adresat participanţilor la manifestările comemorative prilejuite de împlinirea a 50 de ani de la deportarea în URSS a unor grupuri de etnici germani din România - Braşov, 14 ianuarie 1995 -," Preşedintele României, http://www.presidency.ro/pdf/date_arhiva/482_ro.pdf (accessed 6 October 2015); The text of Nicolae Văcăroiu's message, in German: "Eine schreckliche Vergeltung. Brief des Premiers Văcăroiu an die Teilnehmer der Veranstaltung," *Allgemeine Deutsche Zeitung für Rumänien*, 21 January 1995.

12 See Hans-Werner Schuster, Walther Kon-

In addition, in the context of Romania's lobbying to join NATO and the European Union, the country's then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Adrian Severin, officially apologised in 1997 to his German counterpart, Klaus Kinkel, for the treatment of Romanian Germans during communist rule in Romania.¹³ More precisely, he highlighted three "traumatic practices" directed against Romania's Germans between 1945 and 1989: the deportation to the Soviet Union, the deportation of Banat Swabians to Bărăgan (1951-1956) and the process through which the Romanian state "sold" its citizens of German ethnicity during the Cold War, i.e. allowed them to migrate only in exchange for cash payments or other financial advantages offered by the West German state.¹⁴ Hence, Romanian Germans became in effect the first ethnic group that was granted exculpatory attention from high-ranked representatives of Romanian authorities. Jews and Roma, who had been victims of pre-1945 genocidal violence in Romania, had to wait longer in order for their suffering to be acknowledged. Moreover, this acknowledgment was highly contested.

Thus, after 1989, the deportation of Romanian Germans to the Soviet Union has turned into an official *lieu de mémoire*, acknowledged as such both within and outside the community.

schitzky (ed.), *Deportation der Südostdeutschen in die Sowjetunion* (Munich: Haus des Deutschen Ostens, 1999).

13 "Guvernul Ciorbea dezavuează total deportarea și vânzarea etnicilor germani din România în perioada comunismului. Declarația d-lui ministru Adrian Severin", *România liberă*, 3 May 1997, 3; Andreea Bratosin, "Ministrul român de externe cere scuze pentru abuzurile din trecut împotriva etnicilor germani", *Adevărul*, 3-4 May 1997, 7.

14 Florica Dobre, Florian Banu, Luminița Banu, Laura Stancu (ed.), *Acțiunea "Recuperarea". Securitatea și emigrarea germanilor din România (1962-1989)* (Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedică, 2011).

Its relevance within the identity discourses and practices of Transylvanian Saxons, Banat Swabians or Satu Mare Swabians is highlighted by the commemorative events taking place each January in both Romania and Germany, by the numerous articles appearing in Romanian German (or even in Romanian) publications every year in the same period of time, and by the many commemorative plaques in localities in Transylvania and Banat referring to those who perished during the deportation (often placed alongside those who died in the Second World War). Moreover, in 1995 a monument dedicated to the deportees was erected in Reșița/Reschitz/Resicabánya in western Romania. The international success of Nobel Prize laureate Herta Müller's most recent (2009) novel, *Atemschaudel* (translated into English as *The Hunger Angel*), dealing with the deportation, also stands as evidence of the constantly growing mnemonic interest in the phenomenon. It also suggests that the deportation is being inscribed into the global landscape of memory and is gaining relevance beyond the Romanian German context.

Linked with particular pre-1989 discourses, a narrative of Romanian German victimhood has emerged in both Romania and the Federal Republic of Germany following the fall of the Ceaușescu regime. The deportation to the Soviet Union and the migration to West Germany, sometimes coined as "human trafficking", occupy a central place in this narrative. Yet this rather simplified narrative eschews what happened before the deportation of January 1945. This omission plays a highly important role in the construction of Germans as the paradigmatic victims in Romania's recent history. In addition, variants of this narrative, which do not neglect the pre-1945 background, somehow manage to link the prehistory of

the deportation, e.g. the mass enrolment of Romanian Germans in the SS in April 1943, with the deportation as such by means of the same victimhood glue. According to such narratives, Transylvanian Saxons and Banat Swabians were putatively not only victims of the Soviet-backed communist takeover of Romania, but also of National-Socialism.¹⁵

April 1943 and January 1945 should be indeed linked as part of one and the same narrative. Yet this is not the story of pure Romanian German victimhood, but rather a story emphasising the interweavings between the rather uncritical embrace of National-Socialism within Romanian German communities, the enrolment in the SS, and the deportation to the Soviet Union for the 'reconstruction of the country'. In effect, the deportees were victims (the gender imbalance amongst the deportees is also telling in this respect) who were forced to pay for the guilt of those who actively took part in a war of extermination and annihilation unleashed by Nazi Germany. Yet remembering and speaking only about the former and their suffering or equating the former with the latter is simply a way to avoid addressing sensitive and thorny issues in the twentieth-century history of Romanian Germans.

This history is also one of privilege. As a consequence of the First World War, the Romanian state incorporated regions with sizable German-speaking groups, which

15 See for example the letter by Paul Philippi (at the time President of the Democratic Forum of Germans in Romania) addressed to then German President Roman Herzog (1996), in which the former pleads for an official acknowledgment of the status of Romanian Germans as "victims of National-Socialism": Paul Philippi, "Verstrickung, Schuld und Opfer", in *Kirche und Politik. Siebenbürgische Anamnesen und Diagnosen aus fünf Jahrzehnten. Teil II: Zwischen 1992 und 2005* (Sibiu: hora Verlag, 2006), 150-151.

formerly belonged to the Habsburg Empire (Transylvania, Banat, Bukovina) or to the Russian Empire (Bessarabia). Thus, according to the results of the census conducted in Romania, there were 745,421 ethnic Germans in the country in 1930.¹⁶ Against the background of assimilationist pressures coming from Romanian authorities and the international economic crisis, a process of radicalisation took place, which was also linked with Hitler's coming to power in Germany and with the attractive message of Nazism for Germans abroad. Nevertheless, at least amongst Transylvanian Saxons, Fascism was not simply an ideological import, but had significant indigenous tenets, as the case of Fritz Fabritius' Self-Help (*Selbsthilfe*) movement founded as early as 1922 shows.¹⁷ The process of right-wing radicalisation within Romanian German communities became particularly visible, i.e. entered the mainstream of Romanian German political life in the 1930s, also with support from Berlin. The programmatic statement (*Volksprogramm*) issued following the political assembly of Transylvanian Saxons (*Sachsentag*) from October 1933 spoke of "*Lebensraum*", "willingness to sacrifice for the entirety of the Volk" (*Opferbereitschaft für das Volksganze*), or racial hygiene (*Rassenhygiene*).¹⁸ In Banat,

16 Sabin Manuilă, *Recensământul general al populației României din 29 decembrie 1930*. Volumul II: *Neam, limbă maternă, religie* (Bucharest: Editura Institutului Central de Statistică, 1938), XXIV.

17 Tudor Georgescu, "Pursuing the Fascist Promise: The Transylvanian Saxon 'Self-Help' from Genesis to Empowerment, 1922-1935", in *Re-Contextualising East Central European History*, ed. Robert Pyrah, Marius Turda (London: LEGENDA, 2010), 55-73.

18 Harald Roth, *Politische Strukturen und Strömungen bei den Siebenbürger Sachsen 1918-1933* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 234-240); Gündisch, *Siebenbürger und die Siebenbürger Sachsen*, 190-196;

the National-Socialists received almost 20% of the votes in the elections for the Banat Swabian Council (*Volksrat*), which took place in April 1933.¹⁹ Internecine conflicts within the Romanian German extreme right-wing camp and some opposition from Romanian authorities hindered to a certain extent the swift coagulation of a unitary movement. Opposition to National-Socialism came mainly from conservative groups centered around the Catholic Church in Banat and the Lutheran Church in Transylvania, but lacked assertiveness. Some pockets of left-wing opposition (and subsequently resistance) could be found mainly within the working-class milieu in Banat.²⁰

Against the background of the right-wing radicalisation taking place in Romania as a whole, of the Romanian-German rapprochement, and under pressure from Berlin, Romanian German developments were forcibly coordinated with events in Nazi Germany in the late 1930s, the so-called *Gleichschaltung*. In November 1940, Germans in Romania, represented now by the Berlin-backed German Ethnic Group (*Deutsche Volksgruppe*), were granted a high degree of autonomy by the dictatorial regime of Ion Antonescu, who would subsequently (1941) thrust Romania into an alliance with Nazi Germany.²¹ It was in effect the very first case of autonomy granted on ethnic grounds in the history of the Romanian state. This autonomy lasted until 23 August 1944, when Romania changed sides in the war. At the same time, also in 1940, Germans from Bukovina, Bessarabia, and Dobruja were relocated to the

Georgescu, "Pursuing the Fascist Promise", 63-65.

19 Mariana Hausleitner, *Die Donauschwaben 1868-1948. Ihre Rolle im rumänischen und serbischen Banat* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2014), 115.

20 *Ibid.*

21 *Ibid.*, 192.

newly expanding German Reich as part of the 'Heim ins Reich' program.²²

One of the strange effects of the Romanian-German war alliance was the mass enrolment of Romanian Germans in the infamous Waffen-SS.²³ The drafting, which was sanctioned by an interstate Romanian-German agreement, took place in April 1943. The text of the agreement stated that the Romanian German volunteers would join units of the "Wehrmacht-SS", translated into Romanian as "armata germană SS" (The German army SS).²⁴ There may have been pragmatic reasons for confusing conflation of the two terms, such as allowing the possibility for the conscripts to join either of the two organizations. At the same time, the wording actually also mirrored the fact that for some recruits there was no proper difference between the German army and the SS: they were simply going "to the Germans".²⁵

The voluntary character of this enrolment can be taken with a pinch of salt. Yet the acceptance of the National-Socialist ideology amongst Romanian Germans, tightly linked with an uncritical embrace of anything related to Germany, greatly facilitated the recruitment. The deportation to the Soviet Union, tragic as it is, stands in direct relationship with these previous events and, on a more general level, with the genocidal policies and with the population transfers carried out by the Nazis and their allies from September 1939 onwards.²⁶ Considering the dire economic situation of the Soviet Union as a consequence

of the Nazi aggression, the deportation was simultaneously also clearly motivated by Soviet workforce requirements in the Donbas region and thus was intended to resuscitate an industry destroyed by the war. The official wording 'reconstruction of the country' in effect referred to the Soviet post-war realities. Public memory discourses and memorialisation attempts related to Romanian Germans should attempt to address and account for the complex interconnections sketched above and thus move away from the attractive, yet oversimplifying, victimhood narrative. Narrating victimhood without narrating previous perpetrations is, in this particular case, a rather incomplete and very much biased way of dealing with the past.

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22 Dirk Jachomowski, *Die Umsiedlung der Bessarabien-, Bukowina- und Dobrukschadeutschen: von der "Volksgruppe" in Rumänien zur „Siedlungsgruppe“ an der Reichsgrenze* (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 1984).

23 Milata, *Rumäniendeutsche in der Waffen-SS*.

24 *Ibid.*, 151-152.

25 *Ibid.*, 173.

26 Weber et al., *Die Deportation*.