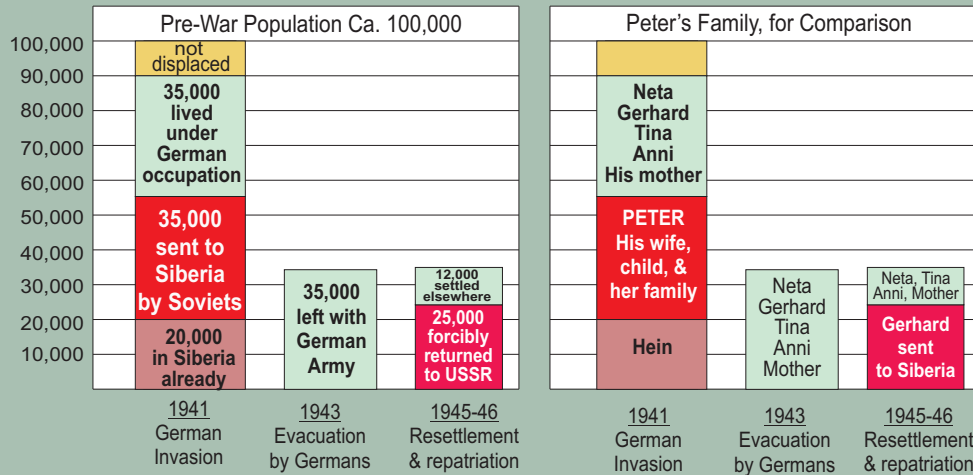


ETHNIC CLEANSING

World War II and the Russian Mennonites (1941-46)

World War II & the Russian Mennonites



About 100,000 Mennonites lived in the USSR at the time of the German Invasion in June, 1941. About 20,000 had already been arrested during the 1930s. In 1941, some Mennonites disobeyed Soviet evacuation orders and hid or fled toward the invading army to escape exile. They fared well as a group under German occupation 1941-43, and largely favored leaving with the Germans in 1943. After the war, many who had found their way out of the USSR were returned against their will. Some, like Peter, were sent to the Gulag; others were shot.

Peter's Family: Peter's wife Susie, their daughter, and his inlaws, the Sawatzkys, were sent to Siberia. As a tractor driver, Peter had to transport his machinery over the Dnieper River, and then was sent to a prison camp in the Ural Mountains. Peter's siblings and mother, except for Hein, who had been arrested in 1937, all hid or fled toward the Germans, lived under German occupation, and escaped in 1943. With the exception of Gerhard, who was captured at the end of the war and returned to Russia, the remainder were among the minority who were not sent back to the USSR.



Ethnic Germans murdered by the Soviets at Ternopil prison in Ukraine as German troops approached on July 10, 1941. Their families are identifying the bodies.



Germans being sent to Siberia in 1941. Those like Peter Dyck who survived the long, cold journey by cattle car, provided labor for Soviet projects, slaving for years in the Gulag.

ETHNIC CLEANSING

Exile and Forced Labor for Germans in the Soviet Union (1930s-1950s)

Ethnic Cleansing:

The mass expulsion or killing of members of an unwanted ethnic or religious group in a society

Germans living in the Soviet Union were among the many ethnic groups of people to be forcibly relocated to Siberia and Central Asia. Once there, the Soviet government put them in Gulag camps and used them for slave labor.

After the Soviet government had disposed of the “kulak” class (wealthy farmers and landowners who opposed collectivization of any nationality), ethnic groups were targeted next, beginning in the 1930s. Germans were the largest group sent into exile, but Poles, Romanians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Finns, Tartars, Greeks, Turks, Armenians, Koreans, and Chechens were deported as well to remote parts of the USSR.

Between 1930 and 1931, 1.8 million ethnic people were sent to labor colonies and camps. Transported under the worst conditions, usually in crowded cattle cars, about a half million died of exposure, starvation, overcrowding, and disease. Between 1932 and 1940, about 390,000 of the remaining population died in labor camps in the far north. In all, approximately 1 to 1.5 million people perished because of the forced relocations.

Since Germany invaded Russia during both World Wars, the Germans in the USSR were natural enemies of the Soviet government, viewed as potential turncoats. In 1941, Germans were exiled to Siberia as the German army invaded Ukraine. In 1942,

all male Germans between the ages of 16 and 50 and all females ages 16 to 45 without children younger than 3 were conscripted to labor duty in “labor columns.” They were sent to work in mining, petroleum, construction, and other industries. They built factories and railroads and dug mines under terrible conditions, and perished by the thousands. Between 1941 and 1949, over three million Germans were sent to Gulag camps, and approximately 40 to 45 percent of them died.

The German labor columns were supposed to have been dismissed after the war ended in 1945, but the imprisoned Germans were not released. On November 26, 1948, Stalin made their banishment permanent. The Soviet government called these Germans “special settlers,” and they were not allowed to return home. The Soviet government continued to benefit from their slave labor.

After the chancellor of Germany visited the Soviet Union in 1955 and signed numerous Soviet-German agreements, the status of “special settler” was abolished. Many Germans were freed, but they were still not allowed to return to their homes in Ukraine.

In 1989, two million ethnic Germans still lived in the Soviet Union, about 120,000 in Kazakhstan, and 840,000 in Russia and Siberia. After the breakup of the USSR, many were able to immigrate to Germany.

Deaths of People in Soviet Exile, 1930s-1950s

