

Ethnic Erasure: The Role of Border Changes in Soviet Ethnic Cleansing and Return Migration

J. Otto Pohl

Modern national identification is intimately connected to cartography. The borders and place names on maps represent the historical ties of nationalities to specific territories. Maps are in this sense the title deeds to the collective property of national groups. The ink between nations delineates proprietary ownership of the land inside the borders by a specific group of people linked by a common history, culture and self-conception. The psychological connection of nationalities to the lands of their historical development receives strong reinforcement through the demarcation of this territory on maps. The members of a nationality come to feel that the lands, designated on their maps as their national homeland, exclusively belong to them collectively and cannot be alienated. They thus resist foreign claims that contest the national ownership of these lands. This feeling of exclusive rights by certain groups of people to particular territories is the core of modern nationalism.¹ Maps play an important role in inculcating, preserving and justifying this feeling. They are both a symbol and evidence that a defined territory does in fact historically belong to a certain people.

This connection to the symbolic representation of political borders becomes even more important for people deprived of control of their national territory. People under foreign occupation, or in exile, often display a particularly strong attachment to maps of their homeland as evidence of their unique national connection to the territory.² The acknowledgement of this connection demonstrated by maps provides proof of the illegitimacy of foreign claims to their land. This evidence both fortifies the national resistance of the victimised people and serves as a weapon to undercut international recognition of the occupier's legal and moral rights to the territory.

Maps help to create and preserve national identification. They can also be used as a weapon in dispossessing a people from their lands. The Soviet government made

¹ Robert Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR* (Princeton, NJ, 1994), pp. 4-8.

² As an example I noticed while living in London that Palestinians often wore clothing or jewelry with the representation of the borders of historic Palestine. They continued to express an emotional attachment to all the land of their ancestors despite the PLO's formal cessation of 78 % of this territory to Israel in 1988.

extensive use of maps for both purposes. In the 1920s and 1930s the Soviet leadership sought to promote the development of non-Russian nationalities within their own national territories. To this end they created national territorial state structures to promote the culture and cadres of non-Russian nationalities. This policy became known as *korenizatsiia* (literally to take root) and has been described by Terry Martin as the creation of an affirmative action empire.³ Although these territories had no political or economic autonomy they did use national languages in administration and education and practiced affirmative action with regards to members of the titular nationality. In many cases this policy successfully created territorially based nationalities out of more amorphous ethnic groups. People sharing a common language and culture in compact areas came to view themselves as having collective historical ownership over delineated geographical territories. The public symbols, educational systems and official media of these Soviet created ‘territorial’ units all deliberately reinforced this sense of territorial national identification. Maps played an important role as both symbols and educational tools in this construction of national consciousness among non-Russian nationalities. The Soviet government aimed to create a union of national territories, united under Moscow by socialist ideology, as the best way to rule the vast and diverse non-Russian population under its control. This policy saw a number of serious reversals in the 1930s and 1940s, most notably the complete disenfranchisement of certain nationalities during World War II.

During the 1940s, the Stalin regime forcibly dispersed eight nationalities in their entirety from their homelands to areas with deadly living conditions. In total the NKVD deported nearly two million people in the course of this ethnic cleansing. These deportees consisted of 846,340 Russian-Germans, 69,267 Karachais, 93,139 Kalmyks, 387,229 Chechens, 91,250 Ingush, 37,713 Balkars, 183,155 Crimean Tatars and 94,955 Meskhetian Turks.⁴ The Soviet government also sent another 203,796 Russian-Germans,

³ Terry Martin, ‘An Affirmative Action Empire: The Soviet Union as the Highest Form of Imperialism’, Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin (eds.), *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 67-90; Terry Martin, *An Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (London, 2001).

⁴ N.F. Bugai (ed.), *Iosif Stalin-Lavrentiiu Berii: ‘Ikh nado deportirovat’’: Dokumenty, fakty, kommentarii* (Moscow, 1992), doc 45, pp. 75-76 (Russian-Germans), doc 2, pp. 85-6 (Kalmyks), doc. 13, pp. 105-6 (Chechens and Ingush), doc. 29, pp. 113-114 (Balkars), doc. 20, p. 144 (Crimean Tatars), doc. 7, p. 157

forcibly repatriated from Germany and other countries, to internal exile in Siberia and Central Asia.⁵ The deported peoples suffered hundreds of thousands of deaths from malnutrition, exposure and disease in exile. The demographer D.M. Ediev estimates that the deaths, suffered above projected normal mortality by these nationalities in the decade following the deportations, exceeded 450,000, over a fifth of their total population.⁶ The Russian-Germans suffered an estimated 228,800 excess deaths (19.17 % of their total population), the Karachais 13,100 (19 %), the Kalmyks 12,600 (12.87 %), the Chechens 125,500 (30.76 %), the Ingush 20,300 (21.27 %) the Balkars 7,600 (19.82 %), the Crimean Tatars 34,200 (18.01 %) and Meskhetian Turks 12,900 (12.63 %). In the process of the deportations the Soviet government eliminated the national territories of these peoples along with their cultural infrastructures. In exile the deported nationalities lived under strict legal restrictions and constant surveillance without any publications or education in their native languages. The Soviet government used the deportees as a captive and cheap source of labour to develop Kazakhstan, Siberia, the Urals and Central Asia.⁷ Maps played a crucial role both in the Soviet policies of constructing territorially based nationalities and in the dispossession of some of these nationalities.

Following the resettlement of the deported peoples, the Soviet regime liquidated their national autonomous territories. The borders of these units disappeared from the maps of the Soviet Union along with the presence of their previous populations and much of the evidence that they had ever lived there. Stalin and his henchmen altered the cartography and toponymy of the USSR to reflect the massive ethnic cleansing of these nationalities from their traditional areas of settlement. This ethnic erasure from the official publications of the Soviet Union, however, did more than just reflect the changed demographics of these territories in the wake of the deportations. The historical claims to these lands, by the deported peoples, rested in part upon the evidence provided by maps, place names and geographical association. By eliminating this evidence, the Stalin

(Meskhetian Turks); N.F. Bugai (ed.), ‘‘Porgruzheny v eshelony I otravelny k mestam poselenii...’’ L. Beria-I. Stalinu’, *Istoriia SSSR* 1 (1991), doc. 4, p. 145 (Karachais).

⁵ Bugai (ed.), *Iosif-Stalin-Lavrentiiu Berii*, doc. 45, pp. 75-6.

⁶ D.M. Ediev, ‘Demograficheskie poteri deportirvannykh narodov SSSR’, *Polit.Ru* (24 February 2004) found at <http://www.polit.ru/research/2004/02/27/demoscope147.html> downloaded on 3 March 2005, table 2, p. 14.

⁷ A good collection of personal accounts of the deportations and Soviet decrees is contained in S.U. Alieva (ed.), *Take to bylo: Natsional’nye repressi v SSSR, 1919-1952 gody*, (Moscow, 1993).

regime undermined the ability of these nationalities to return from exile and reclaim their lands from new settlers. The abolition of the national territories of the deported peoples thus aimed at reinforcing their banishment from their homelands in perpetuity.

The Soviet government ordered the elimination of the territorial units of all the deported peoples either at the time of the deportations or shortly afterwards. On 7 September 1941, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet dissolved the Volga German ASSR.⁸ This decree assigned the republic's capital of Engels, along with 15 of the territory's 22 cantons (districts), to Saratov Oblast. The remaining 7 cantons became incorporated into Stalingrad Oblast. The same body ordered the deportation of the Karachais and the abolishment of the Karachai Autonomous Oblast on 12 October 1943.⁹ This decree divided the former Karachai national territory among Stavropol Krai, Krasnodar Krai and the Georgian SSR. The decree, issued by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet ordering the deportation of the Kalmyks on 27 December 1943, also called for the elimination of the Kalmyk ASSR and the division of its territory.¹⁰ Most of the land of the former Kalmyk ASSR, six out of eleven *uluses* (districts) became incorporated into the newly formed Astrakhan Oblast in the RSFSR. The Soviet government, however, attached two *uluses* to Stalingrad Oblast, two more to Rostov Oblast and one to Stavropol Krai. The Presidium of the Supreme Soviet abolished the Chechen-Ingush ASSR on 7 March 1944.¹¹ This decree divided the lands of the Chechens and Ingush between a newly formed Grozny Okrug within Stavropol Krai, the Dagestan ASSR, the North Ossetian ASSR and the Georgian SSR. The North Ossetian ASSR received most of the territory formerly inhabited by the Ingush deportees. Finally, the Stalin regime abolished the national territory of the Balkars and divided their lands between territories belonging to other nationalities. The Presidium of the Supreme Soviet transformed the Karbardian-Balkar ASSR into the Karbardian ASSR on 8 April 1944 and granted part of the lands previously belonging to the deported Balkars to the Georgian SSR.¹² The

⁸ Document reproduced in V.A. Auman and V.G. Chebotareva (eds.), *Istoriia rossiiskikh nemtsev v dokumentakh, 1763-1992 gg.* (Moscow, 1993), p. 163.

⁹ Document reproduced in Alieva (ed.), *Tak eto bylo*, vol. I, pp. 258-9.

¹⁰ Document reproduced in A. Pan'kin and V. Papuev (eds.), *Dorogoi pamiati* (Elista, 1994), p. 5.

¹¹ Document reproduced in Alieva (ed.), *Tak eto bylo*, vol. II, p. 87.

¹² Document reproduced in *ibid*, vol. II, p. 266.

national homeland of Stalin and Beria profited handsomely from the deportations. It acquired territory from the Karachais, Ingush and Balkars as a result.

The Stalin regime divided the lands of the liquidated national territories between at least two territorial units in every case, but one. Only the lands of the Crimean ASSR remained undivided following its elimination as a territorial unit on 30 June 1945.¹³ The Presidium of the Supreme Soviet downgraded the status of Crimea and eliminated the territory's national connotations without altering its borders. The Crimean peninsula continued to constitute a single united territory after its de-Tatarisation and reorganisation as the Crimean Oblast. This geographical unity also survived the transfer of the Crimean Oblast from the RSFSR to the Ukrainian SSR on 19 February 1954.¹⁴ The Crimean peninsula's natural borders continued to receive recognition in a downgraded form throughout the Soviet era.

After Stalin's death on 5 March 1953, the Soviet regime instituted a number of reforms that greatly reduced the punitive apparatus of the state. As part of these reforms the Soviet government dismantled the special settlement regime. Already on 5 July 1954, the Council of Ministers released all children under 16 from these restrictions.¹⁵ In the next few years the Soviet regime released most of the remaining special settlers. Before the end of 1955 they began to completely free condemned nationalities from these restrictions in their entirety. On 13 December 1955, they released the Russian-Germans.¹⁶ They followed this with the release of the Kalmyks on 17 March 1956.¹⁷ Then they released the Crimean Tatars, Meskhetian Turks and Balkars on 28 April 1956.¹⁸ Finally, they released the Chechens, Ingush and Karachais from the limitations of the special settlement regime on 16 July 1956.¹⁹ The same decrees that eliminated the special settlement restrictions, however, also prohibited the deported nationalities from returning to their homelands or receiving compensation for confiscated property. Only near the end

¹³ M. Guboglo and S. Chervonnaia, *Krymsko-Tatarskoe natsional'noe dvizhenie, istoriia, problemy, perspektivy* (Moscow, 1992), vol. II, doc. 14, p. 48.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, vol. II, doc. 18, p. 50.

¹⁵ Document reproduced in I. Aliev (ed.), *Reabilitatsiia narodov i grazhdan, 1954-1994, gody: Dokumenty* (Moscow, 1994), pp. 21-2.

¹⁶ Document reproduced in *ibid*, pp. 23-4.

¹⁷ Document reproduced in *ibid*, p. 24.

¹⁸ Document reproduced in *ibid*, pp. 24-5.

¹⁹ Document reproduced in *ibid*, pp. 23-6.

of 1956 did the Soviet government change its policy in this matter for some of the exiled groups.

The partial rehabilitation of the deported peoples during the Khrushchev era involved territorial rehabilitation for the North Caucasians and Kalmyks. The Russian-Germans and Crimean Tatars completely and permanently lost their former national territories. They along with the Meskhetian Turks also remained prohibited from returning to their homelands in any significant numbers. The Soviet government restored national territories to the Karachais, Kalmyks, Chechens, Ingush and Balkars in early 1957.

In late 1956, the Soviet regime decided to territorially rehabilitate the deported North Caucasians and Kalmyks. On 24 November 1956, the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party passed a resolution recommending the restoration of national autonomy to these nationalities.²⁰ The resolution explicitly excluded the possibility of restoring national autonomy to the Crimean Tatars. It noted that the Crimean ASSR was a multi-national republic and that the Crimean Tatars had only constituted 20 % of the population. The decree thus denied the Crimean ASSR had in fact functioned as a Crimean Tatar national territory. It further noted that a Tatar ASSR (Kazan) already existed on the Volga and that the Crimean Tatars could live there if they so desired. This bit of sophistry overlooked the fact that despite their similar names the Volga Tatars and Crimean Tatars constituted two distinct nationalities with very different histories and territorial homelands. Finally, the decree pointed to the present status of Crimea as a Ukrainian oblast. This was a complete red herring regarding the restoration of Crimean Tatar autonomy. Other republics besides the RSFSR had ASSRs and creating one in Ukraine presented no constitutional problems. Nevertheless, the regime felt it necessary to justify its refusal to restore the Crimean ASSR. The resolution made no similar attempt to justify the Soviet leadership's refusal to restore the Volga German ASSR. The anti-German prejudices of the dominant Russian nationality remained strong enough that the continued exile and discrimination against the Russian-Germans by the regime needed no explanation.

The Presidium of the Supreme Soviet soon acted upon the resolution passed by the ruling body of the Communist Party and recreated national territories for the Karachais,

²⁰ Document reproduced in *ibid*, pp. 44-9.

Kalmyks, Chechens, Ingush and Balkars with a decree on 9 January 1957.²¹ On 11 February 1957, this resolution became ratified in Soviet law.²² The Soviet government recreated the Karbardian-Balkar ASSR and Chechen-Ingush ASSR and formed the Kalmyk Autonomous Oblast and Karachai-Circassian Autonomous Oblast. The native populations of these territories also received the right to return to their homelands from exile in Siberia, Kazakhstan and Central Asia. During the next two years a majority of these exiles returned home. By 1959, 84.3 % of Karachais, 61.2 % of Kalmyks, 58.2 % of Chechens, 45.3 % of Ingush and 81 % of Balkars again lived in their national territories.²³ The next census in 1970 showed 86.1 % of Karachais, 80.4 % of Kalmyks, 83.1 % of Chechens, 72.1 % of Ingush and 86.3 % of Balkars living in their designated homelands. The foremost grievance of these deportees had been resolved. They had returned to their homelands.

The restoration of the national territories of the deported peoples remained incomplete. In the case of the Kalmyks their restored national territory had been downgraded, from an ASSR before the deportations, to an autonomous oblast. The Presidium of the Supreme Soviet rectified this deficiency on 29 July 1958.²⁴ On this date it upgraded the Kalmyk AO to the Kalmyk ASSR. The Karachais had enjoyed their own autonomous oblast prior to the deportations. Now they had to share their national territorial unit with the larger unrelated Circassian population. Neither the Kalmyk AO and later ASSR and Chechen-Ingush ASSR received all of their former territories back. Two former *uluses* of the Kalmyk ASSR remained outside the re-established territory. Located on the eastern border of the territory these districts remained part of Rostov Oblast.²⁵ These *uluses* had been over 90% non-Kalmyk before the deportations and their permanent loss caused few problems.²⁶ The Soviet government also did not return the Ingush territory of Prigorodnyi Raion annexed to the North Ossetian ASSR. This land represented close to one sixth of Ingushetia's total area. Its loss accounts, to a large part, for the lower return rate of

²¹ Documents reproduced in *ibid.*, pp. 49-55

²² Documents reproduced in *ibid.*, pp. 49.

²³ Pavel Polian, *Against Their Will: The History and Geography of Forced Migrations in the USSR* (Budapest, 2004), table 11, p. 198.

²⁴ Document reproduced in Aliev (ed.), *Reabilitatsiia narodov i grazhdan*, pp. 55-6.

²⁵ Pan'kin and Papuev (eds.), *Dorogoi pamiati*, map 4, p. 13.

²⁶ Polian, *Against their Will*, p. 199.

Ingush to their homeland in comparison to other deported North Caucasians.²⁷ Attempts by the Ingush to return to areas of their homeland, annexed to North Ossetia, met strong Ossetian resistance and led to a violent inter-ethnic clash between the two peoples in the fall of 1992 and this claimed 590 lives and displaced 57,000 people.²⁸ The restoration of national territories to the deported peoples, like other aspects of Soviet rehabilitation, remained incomplete. Neither the Soviet or later Russian government ever remedied these deficiencies.

The most outstanding shortcomings in Soviet territorial restoration to the deported peoples remained the failure to restore any territory to the Russian-Germans and Crimean Tatars. The Soviet regime's policies of discrimination against these nationalities spurred movements among them aimed at securing the right to return to their homelands and restoring their previous autonomous republics. In particular, the Crimean Tatars developed a strong national movement centred on returning to a reformed Crimean ASSR. The borders of this former territorial unit played a strong symbolic role in defining the Crimean Tatar homeland.

Restoring the borders of the Crimean ASSR formed one of the central demands of the Crimean Tatar national movement from its very beginning. Prior to the deportations the Crimean Tatars had internalised the territory of the Crimean ASSR as their national homeland.²⁹ They considered its borders to be their legitimate territorial state-formation inside which they had proprietary rights. The deportations and exile in special settlements only strengthened the emotional bond between the Crimean Tatar people and this territory. Soon after the elimination of the special settlement restrictions, Crimean Tatar activists began to agitate for the reestablishment of the Crimean ASSR. In September 1956, five Crimean Tatar Communist Party members, formerly influential in the Crimean ASSR, submitted a petition to the Soviet leadership.³⁰ This petition appealed for the collective right to return to a restored Crimean ASSR and compensation for property lost during the deportations. Subsequent petitions also made the restoration of the Crimean

²⁷ Ibid, pp. 200-1.

²⁸ Ibid, pp. 227-32.

²⁹ Brian Williams, *The Crimean Tatars: The Diaspora Experience and the Forging of a Nation* (Leiden, NL, 2001), pp. 332-3.

³⁰ G. Bekyrova, 'Crimean National Movement in the 50s-60s: Formation, First Victories and Disappointments', *Krimski studii* at <http://www.cidct.org.ua/en/studii/13-14/7.html> downloaded on 7 November 2002, p. 6.

ASSR one of their key concerns. Between July 1957 and May 1969, the Crimean Tatars sent 32 petitions to Moscow.³¹ Petitioning became one of the most important instruments in the Crimean Tatar national struggle. The restoration of the Crimean ASSR, along with the right to return to their homeland, constituted the primary demands of these petitions.

One petition in particular stands above the others as representative of the will of the Crimean Tatar people. On 28 March 1966, a delegation of 65 Crimean Tatars presented the 23rd Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union with a 33-page appeal.³²

Attached to this petition were over 130,000 signatures, a figure representing the vast majority of the adult Crimean Tatar population. This petition stressed the link between the Crimean Tatar people and the territory of the former Crimean ASSR. Among other things it highlighted the socialist accomplishments of the Crimean ASSR prior to the deportations. Like earlier and subsequent petitions it demanded the restoration of the Crimean ASSR within its previous borders and the re-establishment of all its institutions. The Crimean Tatars demanded not only to be allowed to return to their homeland, but also that the Soviet government reinstate the previous political borders of this homeland. These demands remained constant throughout the Soviet era.

The Crimean Tatars considered their attachment to the territory of the Crimean ASSR to be the defining core of their national existence. The founding of the Crimean ASSR on 18 October 1921 became a date the Crimean Tatars began to publicly commemorate in exile. Between the 8th and 18th of October 1966, to mark the 45th anniversary of the founding of the Crimean ASSR, Crimean Tatars held public protests throughout Uzbekistan.³³ They demonstrated for the restoration of the Crimean ASSR on these dates in Andijan, Fergana, Margilan, Yangiyul, Tashkent, Angren and Bekabad. The police violently broke up many of these demonstrations. A number of demonstrators received administrative detention of 15 days. The Soviet authorities put 11 Crimean Tatar activists on trial for organising these protests and sentenced some of them to prison terms for as long as two years. These tactics, however, did not end Crimean Tatar political activism. They continued to hold public demonstrations for the restoration of the Crimean ASSR on the

³¹ Radio Liberty, *Sobranie dokumentov samizdata (Materialy perepechatany iz Arkhiv Samizdata)*, 630, vol. 12, pp. 2-5.

³² Document reproduced in *Tashkentskii protsess* (Amsterdam, 1976), pp. 9-51.

³³ *Ibid*, pp. 69-77.

dates marking the formation of the Crimean ASSR, Lenin's birthday and their deportation from their homeland.

Despite severe persecution from the Soviet authorities, the Crimean Tatar national movement continued to push for the right to return to a restored Crimean ASSR throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. In the late 1980s, Gorbachev removed the political constraints preventing the Crimean Tatars from returning home from Uzbekistan. In December 1987, the Soviet government ceased physically preventing Crimean Tatars from settling in the Crimea.³⁴ On 14 November 1989, the Supreme Soviet issued a decree titled "On Recognising the Illegal and Criminal Repressive Acts against Peoples Subjected to Forcible Resettlement and Ensuring their Rights".³⁵ This decree specifically denounced the deportation of the Crimean Tatars and other nationalities as a crime against humanity and called for the unconditional return of their former rights as Soviet citizens. The Crimean Tatars interpreted this to mean the right to unrestricted return to their homeland and sought to accomplish this goal before the regime changed its mind. During the next five years the Crimean Tatar population of Crimea increased from 38,000 to 260,000.³⁶ More than half the Crimean Tatar population of the USSR successfully returned to Crimea during this time.³⁷ The strong connection to their ancestral homeland, kept alive through several generations of exile, motivated the majority of the population to move to a land they personally had never seen at great personal cost and risk.³⁸ Their territorial national identification, with the land of the Crimean peninsula, overrode all other concerns including economic ones in spurring this mass migration.

Since 1991, economic factors have made the return to Crimea progressively more difficult. The flow of Crimean Tatars returning to Crimea reached its height in this year with over 40,000 migrants.³⁹ The 1991 hyper-inflation wiped out the savings of most

³⁴ Polian, *Against their Will*, p. 215.

³⁵ Document reproduced in Alieva (ed.), *Tak eto bylo*, vol. III, p. 257.

³⁶ Andrew Wilson, 'Politics in and around Crimea: A Difficult Homecoming', Edward Allworth (ed.), *The Tatars of Crimea: Return to the Homeland* (Durham, NC, 1998), pp. 282-3.

³⁷ The Forced Migration Project of the Open Society Institute, *Crimean Tatars: Repatriation and Conflict Prevention* (New York, 1996), p. 27.

³⁸ Greta Uehling, *Having a Homeland: Recalling the Deportation, Exile, and Repatriation of Crimean Tatars to their Historic Homeland* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Michigan, 2000), pp. 479-80.

³⁹ Polian, *Against their Will*, p. 215.

Crimean Tatars living in Uzbekistan and dramatically increased the real price of housing in Crimea. At the same time real estate values collapsed in Uzbekistan, largely as a result of sales by Crimean Tatars and others leaving the republic. It thus became extremely difficult for Crimean Tatars to sell their houses in Uzbekistan and buy new ones in Crimea. Following the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the newly independent Uzbek government also put up a number of legal and financial obstacles to emigration that further reduced the number of Crimean Tatars leaving.⁴⁰ In 1992, the number of Crimean Tatars returning to Crimea fell to 25,000.⁴¹ The following year it was only 17,000 and in 1994 only 11,000. By 1995 it had declined to 9,000 before almost completely ceasing. The Crimean Tatar prediction that the window of opportunity for returning to their homeland was only of limited duration proved largely correct.

Activists from among the exiled Russian-Germans also demanded the restoration of the Volga German ASSR during the 1950s and 1960s. Unlike the Crimean Tatars the movement by the Russian-Germans to restore the Volga German ASSR never attracted the active support of more than a small minority of the nationality's population. Participants in the movement remained largely confined to members of the Communist Party, writers, teachers and other intellectuals that had been actively involved in the official culture of the Volga German ASSR. These people had taken a direct role in the construction of the Volga German ASSR and developed a strong attachment to the administrative territory and its borders. The vast majority of the Russian-German population, however, did not. Even the one third of the Russian-German population, which had lived in the Volga German ASSR prior to the deportations, did not by and large develop an emotional attachment to the state-formation.⁴² Instead their sense of homeland remained rooted in their individual villages and the Volga region in general. This general area included the Saratov and Stalingrad oblasts, both of which had numerous settlements inhabited by Russian-Germans. It also remained defined in terms of the necklace of German settlements rather than a territory with demarcated borders. For a small cadre of educated elite Volga Germans, however, the borders of the Volga

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 216.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 215.

⁴² Bugai (ed.), *Iosif Stalin-Lavrentiiu Berii*, doc. 1, p. 36. The 1939 Soviet census counted 1,427,232 ethnic Germans in the USSR of which only 366,685 lived in the Volga German ASSR.

German ASSR assumed an almost sacred status. These men and women actively campaigned for its restoration for over a decade before their movement finally disintegrated.

The first efforts undertaken by Russian-German activists on behalf of restoring the Volga German ASSR started in the late 1950s. Individual Volga German activists, most of them members of the Communist Party and many of them teachers began to write letters to the Soviet government asking for the restoration of their national territory. Dominik Hollmann began sending such letters in 1956 and Adolf Bersch in 1957.⁴³ These letters appealed to the Soviet government to return to the 'Leninist nationality policy' of *korenizatsiia* that had created the Volga German ASSR. Largely un-coordinated, these activists did not organise a collective movement for the restoration of national autonomy until the mid-1960s.

The Soviet government largely ignored the Russian-German activists of the 1950s and early 1960s. It could not, however, ignore the pressure from the West German government linking improved diplomatic and economic relations with the Soviet government's treatment of the Russian-Germans. In response to this pressure the regime officially annulled the accusations of mass treason made against the Russian-Germans during World War II.⁴⁴ On 29 August 1964, the Supreme Soviet issued a decree exonerating the Russian-Germans of the charges of treason it had levelled against them in 1941.⁴⁵ This decree admitted the falsehood of the treason charges against the Russian-Germans and noted that the vast majority had been loyal citizens of the Soviet Union. It further stated that the Russian-Germans had made important contributions towards the Soviet war effort against Nazi Germany and in the development of the Soviet economy after the war. In particular it stressed the vital role played by Russian-Germans in developing the industry and agriculture of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. The decree, however, did not repeal the residency restrictions confining the Russian-Germans to Kazakhstan, Siberia and Central Asia. It justified this refusal to grant these people equal rights with other Soviet citizens on the basis that they had become 'rooted' in their

⁴³ Eric Schmaltz, *Reform, 'Rebirth', and Regret: The Early Autonomy Movement of Ethnic Germans in the USSR, 1955-1989* (Ph.D. thesis, University of Nebraska, 2002), pp. 104-6.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 116-7, 177-8.

⁴⁵ Document reproduced in Auman and Chebatoreva (eds.), *Istoriia rossiiskikh nemtsev v dokumentakh*, pp. 178-9.

territories of exile. Nor did the decree offer any restoration of national autonomy or compensation for lost property. The Soviet government acquitted the Russian-Germans of the crime of treason and admitted that the Stalin regime's accusations had been false and malicious. It did nothing, however, to remove the continuing punishment of exile that had been imposed for this imaginary crime.

The official exoneration of the Russian-Germans from the charges of treason without **ending** their exile spurred an organised movement for the restoration of the Volga German ASSR. In the wake of the 29 August 1964 decree, Russian-German activists gathered in Frunze (Bishkek), Kyrgyzstan, to coordinate efforts to lobby the Soviet government for the restoration of the Volga German ASSR.⁴⁶ At this meeting, they put together a delegation tasked to travel to Moscow and petition the Soviet leadership on this matter.⁴⁷ The Russian-German autonomy movement can trace its birth to this meeting. The movement would sponsor three delegations to Moscow armed with petitions requesting the restoration of the Volga German ASSR before disintegrating in 1967.

These delegations made the restoration of the Volga German ASSR their top priority in talks with the Soviet leadership. Nine members of the first delegation met with Anastas Mikoian on 2 January 1965.⁴⁸ They stressed that German language and culture could only survive in the USSR if the Soviet government restored the Volga German ASSR and its former institutions.⁴⁹ Otherwise they claimed they were doomed to be immersed in the much larger surrounding Russian population. Mikoian refused to consider any moves towards granting territorial autonomy to the Russian-Germans.

Despite failing to convince Mikoian to redress their primary grievance, the delegation did not give up. Before returning home the delegates drafted two documents and submitted them to Brezhnev and Mikoian on 9 January 1965.⁵⁰ Both of these documents stressed the importance of the territory of the Volga German ASSR for preserving the national language and culture of the Russian-Germans. The first document was a collective letter on “the question of the complete rehabilitation of the Soviet German people and the

⁴⁶ V. Fuchs, *Rokovye dorogi: Povolzhskikh nemtsev 1763-1993 gg.* (Krasnoiarsk Krai, 1993), p. 165.

⁴⁷ Schmaltz, *Reform, 'Rebirth', and Regret*, pp. 121-2.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

⁴⁹ Fuchs, *Rokovye dorogi*, pp. 157-8.

⁵⁰ Schmaltz, *Reform, 'Rebirth', and Regret*, p. 130.

restoration of the Soviet-German republic.”⁵¹ The second document was a longer report on the history and present day situation of the Russian-Germans, titled “Information on the Question of the Rehabilitation of the Soviet Germans.”⁵² It provided a history of the Russian-Germans, particularly the Volga Germans, since 1764 and their present grievances. Among other topics it discussed the formation of the Volga German Workers Commune, its upgrading in status to the Volga German ASSR and its socialist accomplishments. The document contrasted the failure of the Soviet government to restore this administrative territory with its more generous treatment of the deported Kalmyks and North Caucasian nationalities. It stressed that the current problems of the Russian-Germans such as continued defamation and discrimination, lack of cultural institutions, lack of German language education and publications and under representation in political institutions could only be solved by restoring the Volga German ASSR. The Russian-German activists responsible for drafting this document attached a list of 660 signatures in support of their efforts to restore their previous autonomy.⁵³ The Russian-German national movement during the 1960s centred round returning to a restored Volga German ASSR.

Russian-German activists had demonstrated an ability to effectively organise to further their political goals in January 1965. The small Russian-German autonomy movement, however, had also exposed itself to repression from the Soviet regime. Already in the wake of returning from the first delegation, the KGB began to threaten and harass Russian-German activists in an effort to dissuade them from continuing their struggle for full rehabilitation.⁵⁴ The Soviet government restrained from arresting any of the delegates at this stage. It did, however, succeed in firing a number of activists from their jobs and depriving them of future employment. The tolerance shown towards the Russian-German activists in the 1960s contrasted sharply with the much harsher treatment of the Crimean Tatar national movement.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Letter reproduced in V. Grigas, L. Bauer and F. Ruppel (eds.), *RePatria: Sbornik materialov posviashchennykh nemtsev sovetskogo souiuza* (Frankfurt am Main, 1975), pp. 49-52.

⁵² Document partially reproduced in *ibid*, pp. 6-14.

⁵³ Fuchs, *Rokovye dorogi*, p. 165.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*.

⁵⁵ This difference has two main sources. First, the Crimean Tatar movement with its large and highly active grass roots base posed a much greater threat to the Soviet regime than the much smaller and more quiescent Russian-German movement. Repressing it thus had a higher priority. Second, the Crimean Tatars had no

A second Russian-German delegation again tried to convince the Soviet government to restore the Volga German ASSR in the summer of 1965. A delegation of 30 Russian-Germans met with five representatives of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR on 15 June 1965.⁵⁶ They presented the representatives of the Soviet leadership with a list of 4,498 signatures on behalf of their endeavour to secure the restoration of the Volga German ASSR.⁵⁷ The delegation argued their case over the course of three hours.⁵⁸ This delegation again stressed the need to restore the Volga German ASSR to prevent the total cultural deprivation and assimilation of the Russian-Germans. They sought to refute the official Soviet arguments against allowing the Russian-Germans to return in bulk to a restored Volga German ASSR. They noted that the territory remained under-populated and needed agricultural labour. This was followed by representatives of the Central Committee countering by noting the greater economic need of the Soviet state for the labour of the Russian-Germans in Kazakhstan and Siberia. For obvious historical reasons neither of these areas of exile could serve as an alternative homeland in the USSR for the Russian-Germans.

This same delegation remained in Moscow and lobbied to meet with Brezhnev. They failed to achieve this goal. Mikoian, however, did agree to see the delegation on 7 July 1965.⁵⁹ Like the first delegation to meet with Mikoian, these Russian-German activists argued for the restoration of the Volga German ASSR. They presented their arguments within the framework of national equality and Leninist policies. The lack of a specific national territory left the Russian-Germans in an unequal position versus other nationalities in the USSR. They lacked official recognition, cultural institutions and protection from discrimination all of which the Volga German ASSR had previously provided them with to varying degrees. Discrimination against Russian-Germans in the USSR was especially pronounced in the area of higher education.⁶⁰ The various national

powerful external patrons. The Russian-Germans in contrast were a concern of the West German government and their treatment by Moscow played a role in West German-Soviet economic relations.

⁵⁶ Schmaltz, *Reform, 'Rebirth', and Regret*, p. 144.

⁵⁷ Grigas, Bauer and Ruppel (eds.), *RePatria*, p. 53.

⁵⁸ Schmaltz, *Reform, 'Rebirth', and Regret*, pp. 146-55.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 155-67; Fuchs, *Rokovye dorogi*, pp. 167-9.

⁶⁰ In 1979 only 43 Russian-Germans out of 1,000 in Kazakhstan had university educations versus 117 out of 1,000 for the general population. In Omsk Oblast these numbers were 39 out of 1,000 for Russian-Germans and 98 out of 1,000 for the general population. In Altai Krai it was 40 out of 1,000 for Russian-

territories in the USSR all practised varying degrees of affirmative action privileging the admission of titular nationalities to universities. The Russian-German activists thus believed that equal rights for their people could only be guaranteed by granting them the same national territorial status they had enjoyed in the Volga prior to the deportations. Mikoian refused to budge on the issue of restoring the Volga German ASSR. He again stressed that the economic priorities of the Soviet state required that the Russian-Germans stay in northern Kazakhstan and western Siberia rather than return to the Volga. The delegation left the meeting without success.

A final Russian-German delegation could only be organised in July 1967. This delegation gathered a total of 8,123 signatures in support of their endeavour.⁶¹ The Soviet government, however, had run out of patience with the movement. The delegation only managed to meet with a minor official named Stroganov, at the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, who told them that the matter had been permanently settled.⁶² In the wake of this failure, the autonomy movement disintegrated. KGB harassment, failure to mobilise the Russian-German population behind the movement, and an inability to make political progress with the Soviet government, all contributed to the movement's demise. Other than some contacts with Moscow based human rights' activists, the Russian-German autonomy movement left no evidence of further activity during the 1960s. During 1968, the only recorded activities by autonomy activists are the anonymous attendance of several Volga Germans at Aleksei Kosterin's funeral and the passing on of material on the movement by activists to Piotr Grigorenko.⁶³ For the years 1969 to 1971, there are no mentions of Russian-German political activism in the known *samizdat* (unofficial publications in the USSR associated with various political dissident, human rights and national movements) record. The Russian-German political activism that re-emerged in the USSR in 1972, abandoned the goal of restoring the Volga German ASSR in favour of fighting for the right to emigrate from the USSR to West Germany. The West German

Germans versus 80 for 1,000 for the general population. A. Shtraus and S. Pankrats (ed.), *Svidetel'stva prestuplenii* (Bishkek, 1997), pp. 238-9.

⁶¹ Benjamin Pinkus and Ingeborg Fleishhauer, *Die Deutschen in der Sowjetunion: Geschichte einer nationalen Minderheit im 20 Jahrhundert* (Baden-Baden, 1987), p. 505.

⁶² Fuchs, *Rokovye dorogi*, pp. 177-9.

⁶³ George Saunders (ed.), *Samizdat: Voices of the Soviet Opposition* (New York, 1974), p. 284 and 330.

state had replaced the Volga German ASSR as the chosen homeland of the Russian-Germans.

During the 1970s, the emigration movement supported by Moscow-based dissidents and the West German government had some success. They secured the right, to leave the USSR and settle in West Germany, for 63,204 Russian-Germans between 1971 and 1980.⁶⁴ In the early 1980s, a deterioration of relations between West Germany and the USSR led to significantly decreased emigration. In the late 1980s under Gorbachev, the option of restoring an autonomous German territory on the Volga again resurfaced, but ultimately lost out to the alternative of immigration to Germany within a few years.⁶⁵ Russian-German delegations met with the Soviet leadership in April, July and October of 1988 regarding the issue of restoring the Volga German ASSR. Activists from these delegations formed the Russian-German society *Wiedergeburt* (Rebirth) at a conference on 28-31 March 1989 to promote restoration of an autonomous territory on the Volga. During 1989 and 1990 there appeared a slight possibility that the Soviet government might restore the Volga German ASSR. Strong anti-German prejudice by the Russian inhabitants of the Volga region, however, swayed the Soviet government, and even more so the subsequent Russian government to oppose restoring autonomy. By early 1991, it had become clear that no future regime in Moscow, regardless of ideology, was going to allow a German republic on the Volga. At the same time, the Soviet government had removed all restrictions on emigration. Between 1987 and 1999, a total of 1,790,609 Russian-Germans (80%) and non-German family members (20%) had left the USSR and its successor states and arrived in Germany. The 1989 census counted 2,038,600 Russian-Germans in the Soviet Union.⁶⁶ Thus a substantial majority of the Russian-German population of the former USSR managed to move to Germany before 2000. Continued emigration, natural attrition and assimilation will eliminate all but a small remnant of the remaining Russian-German population in Russia, Kazakhstan and Central Asia in the coming decades.

The Russian-Germans differed considerably from the other deported peoples with national administrative territories. The Crimean Tatars, Chechens, Ingush, Karachais,

⁶⁴ Polian, *Against their Will*, table no. 12, p. 209.

⁶⁵ Ibid, pp. 203-10.

⁶⁶ Ibid, table no. 10, p. 194.

Balkars and Kalmyks all considered themselves to be the native peoples of their lands. The Russian-Germans, however, could trace their migration to the Russian Empire back only to 1763, less than two centuries before their deportation.⁶⁷ They thus did not have the sense of being primordially rooted in the territory of the Volga or elsewhere in the USSR that had developed among the other deported peoples. The Russian-Germans settled in the Russian Empire before the advent of nationalism in Germany and remained cut off from political developments in Central Europe until quite recently. They thus remained a pre-national diaspora. Consisting of geographically disparate settlements, founded decades apart and further divided by different dialects and religious denominations, the Russian-German settlements never developed a strong concept of themselves as a single nationality tied to a specific territory. Attempts by the Soviet government to create a territorially based Soviet German nationality linked to the Volga German ASSR had only limited success.⁶⁸ Over two thirds of Russian-Germans lived outside its borders and those within it had stronger attachments to their local villages than to the region as a whole. Only a small core of intellectuals developed a strong attachment to the territory. Still tenuously linked to Central Europe by sentimental cultural ties it was easy for the Russian-Germans to switch their chosen homeland from the Volga German ASSR to West Germany. The Russian-Germans never became firmly rooted in the Russian Empire the way Dutch settlers did in South Africa. This failure explains a large part of the comparative weakness of the Russian-German movement to return to their homeland in the USSR versus other deported nationalities.

In contrast, the other nationalities with administrative territories deported by Stalin all had lived in the same concentrated geographic areas for centuries. They thus had a much stronger historical connection with these lands. The administrative territories, created by the Soviet government during the 1920s for these nationalities, corresponded with these ancient settlement patterns and encompassed the majority of the titular nationalities within their borders. These administrative territories thus further strengthened the already strong ties to defined geographic areas among these peoples. They also created

⁶⁷ German colonists began settling the Volga in response to a manifesto issued by Empress Catherine II on 22 July 1763 inviting Christian foreigners to come settle in the Russian Empire. This manifesto is reproduced in Auman and Chebotareva (eds.), *Istoriia rossiiskikh nemtsev v dokumentakh*, pp. 18-21.

⁶⁸ Ingeborg Fleischhauer and Benjamin Pinkus, *The Soviet Germans: Past and Present* (New York, 1986), p. 60.

indigenous elites who viewed themselves as the legitimate leaders of these territorial nationalities. Communist Party members took the initiative in the 1950s in organising national movements for the return to their homelands among the deported peoples. They considered it their duty as national leaders to lead their people back to their national homelands and restored national state formations. The deported North Caucasians and Kalmyks achieved this goal in the late 1950s.

The Crimean Tatars developed a highly territorial national consciousness during the Soviet era. The Crimean ASSR built upon a growing sense of modern national identification by the Crimean Tatars linked to the Crimean peninsula. It also situated itself as the successor of the Crimean Khanate as the legitimate state formation of the Crimean Tatar people. More so than any of the other deported peoples the Crimean Tatars had evolved into a modern territorial nation in the European mode prior to the deportations. As in the case of other nationally conscious people, exile only strengthened the psychological attachment of the Crimean Tatar people to the territory of the Crimean ASSR.⁶⁹ This intense emotional connection to a land the Soviet government had stolen fuelled a decades' long massive political movement, among the Crimean Tartars, aimed at returning to their homeland.

The national borders created within the USSR during *korenizatsiia* helped form territorial identifications between existing ethnic groups and these new administrative units. The success of this linkage differed depending upon the level of national cohesion and consciousness already present among the nationality. The greater the level of existing national consciousness the more the group tended to identify with these newly created territories. The Crimean Tatars internalised the Crimean ASSR as an important part of their collective existence. In contrast only a minority of the Russian-Germans had similar feelings towards the Volga German ASSR. The differences in political mobilisation between these two nationalities in exile stemmed, in a large part, from this previous discrepancy. The deportations failed to reverse the solidification of the Crimean Tatars into a modern territorial nation and prevented the Russian-Germans from ever developing into one.

⁶⁹ Williams, *The Crimean Tatars*, pp. 4, 413.