“Ethnicity and Loyalty: The Volksdeutsche’s Relationship with the Soviet Union”

Erika Weidemann

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As a child, Lilly Zaft lived in a German settlement along the Dnieper River in southern Russia. However, her connections with Russia were not limited to her birthplace. Family stories tell of how her grandfather and his family, German landowners living in Russia, were sent to Siberia during World War I because of their German nationality. Escaping on the way there, Lilly’s grandfather then became involved in an attempt to rescue the captive Tsar Nicholas II. Unsuccessful, the family eventually settled in Chortitza, a German settlement established in the Ukraine in the late 1700s and the town in which Lilly would be born.[[1]](#footnote-1) Lilly, her family, and many others known as the Volksdeutsche were Germans living outside their nation’s boundaries prior to the Second World War. Naturally, the identity and nationality of the Volksdeutsche were contested factors only made more complicated by the century’s wars. Coming to a head during World War II, Volksdeutsche found their country of residence fighting against their country of nationality. Because of the shared ties and willingness to help the invading Germans, Volksdeutsche were considered traitors by the Soviet Union preceding, during, and immediately after World War II.

Now known as Germans from Russia, this particular group of Volksdeutsche emigrated from their homes in different parts of Germany to Russia in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Catherine the Great, the Russian tsarina and a German herself, wanted people to settle the vast Russian territory. In 1763, she authored a manifesto inviting Germans to come colonize and farm vast uninhabited parts of Russia including the area along the Dnieper River north of the Black Sea where the town of Chortitza was located. The main reason why thousands of Germans responded to her invitation was the special benefits and exemptions that she offered the foreigners. These included funds for travel to Russia, religious freedom, tax exemptions, and immunity to military conscription. A translated manifesto reads, “All foreigners coming to Russia to make their homes…will be offered every helping hand and consideration….”[[2]](#footnote-2) The German Russians were identified by the places where they settled with names such as the Volga Germans, the Bessarabian Germans, and the Caucasus Germans.

Desiring free land and a new start, 228 German Mennonites from Prussia founded Chortitza and its surrounding villages in 1789 as German settlements.[[3]](#footnote-3) At first, the settlers used the land as grazing pasture for sheep; however, soon there were orchards planted and grain started to be grown. When Lilly’s grandfather came to tour the factories his family owned there in the 1890s, farming implements and even steam engines were being produced.[[4]](#footnote-4) When a hydroelectric dam opened in 1932, this area of the Ukraine between Alexandrovsk and Ekaterinoslav came to be known as “the industrial engine of southern Russia.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

While not all Volksdeutsche held strong ties to Germany and German culture, the Black Sea German Russians were still using their German language and practicing their original religion and German customs 150 years after the first settlers arrived. Even though the non-German population numbered 12,000 in 1941, the German settlers had not become members of the Russian Orthodox Church, still spoke German instead of Russia, and maintained their German way of life in this foreign country.[[6]](#footnote-6)

By 1914, the German population in Russia totaled approximately two million with 660,000 living in the Black Sea region.[[7]](#footnote-7) Of those, 13,965 resided in the Chortitza settlements.[[8]](#footnote-8) When Lilly was born in 1936, the nationality of her family was still German. The obvious ethnicity of the Germans during a time of tense circumstances made life hard for them. Prior to World War II, the Soviet Union’s plan for the area included closing churches, barring German from being taught in school, and collectivizing farms. Anna Braun, a German Russian who lived in Einlage, a town neighboring Chortitza, recalled how the Russians “one night [in 1936] …fetched my husband after they searched the house for three long hours” taking with them “letters from our relatives in America.”[[9]](#footnote-9) The Soviets then imprisoned her husband and sentenced him to death. “From 1935 onward they [the German Russians] were effectively cut off from the outside world. Correspondence with foreign relatives and friends was treated as traitorous activity.”[[10]](#footnote-10) The Soviet government also found other ways to prove that the ethnic Germans were conspiring against them such as claiming that they refused to learn the language of their country of residence.[[11]](#footnote-11) Herman Schmand, a German visitor to the Ukraine, wrote that the Volksdeutsche were in the “worst condition” because of the Soviets.[[12]](#footnote-12) Between 1929 and 1941, the Soviet Union had exiled ten percent of the population of the Chortitza settlements.[[13]](#footnote-13) By 1941, forty-three percent of Chortitza citizens had lost their main provider.[[14]](#footnote-14) In order to escape capture and exile to Siberia, Lilly’s father would travel by train to various places, never staying in one area too long. He also hid in a secret cellar in their house to avoid detection.[[15]](#footnote-15) Volksdeutsche were learning how to live low-profile lives in order to avoid being noticed by the Soviet Union whose decisions to deport Germans living in the Ukraine reflected their distrust toward the Volksdeutsche.

One of the reasons why the Soviet Union distrusted the ethnic Germans living in their country was because of the German government’s policy regarding these Volksdeutsche. The government was using their Volksdetusche scattered from Silesia to the Crimea to act as buffer zones and to play a role in preserving ethnic purity. In addition, these settlements were to act as though they were fragmented parts of the German empire.[[16]](#footnote-16) Germany employed propaganda to ensure that the Reichsdeutsche, Germans living in Germany, viewed the Volksdeutsche as fellow Germans.[[17]](#footnote-17) “[W]ith proliferating reports of Stalinist oppression in the Soviet Union, Germans came to view the plight of the Russian Germans as part of a life-and-death struggle of the German people against enemies both at home and abroad.”[[18]](#footnote-18) While the Nazis used the Volksdeutsche’s position to their own advantage, programs by the Reichsdeutsche providing aid to their fellow Germans living in Russia only caused the Soviet Union to view the German Russians more suspiciously.[[19]](#footnote-19) Later, during the war “Hitler transferred the ethnic Germans…because he no longer was able to use these groups against their governments as he had done in the past.”[[20]](#footnote-20) One could argue that the Soviet Union’s attitude and subsequent treatment of the German Russians was the result of Germany’s belief in the brotherhood of the Volksdeutsche and their use of them to fulfill their own designs and accomplish their own purposes.

Some have termed World War II as “the apogee of forced migrations.”[[21]](#footnote-21) On August 31 of 1941 after Germany declared war on the Soviet Union,the Soviet Union announced their decision to begin deporting the German Russian population beginning with the Volga Germans in order to ensure that they would not help Germany.[[22]](#footnote-22) In all, approximately 1.2 million ethnic Germans were forcibly evacuated in the days before the arrival of the German army.[[23]](#footnote-23) Stalin declared, “Where our troops come in the Germans run away.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Walter Koehn, his grandmother, and the other German-Russian villagers were taken from their home one hundred miles southeast of Chortitza and marched to a nearby field. His grandmother’s reasoning behind the Russians’ desire to kill them was that first, the Russians believed they were German spies and second, they did not want the advancing Germans to find anyone or anything when they arrived.[[25]](#footnote-25) For Koehn, the timely arrival of the German army saved him and his village from certain death.

In Chortitza, the German army’s rapid advance also saved the Zaft family and everyone else in their town from immediate deportation to Siberia. The sounds of the Russian army had already died away as Lilly, then three years old, snuck across the road in the early afternoon to visit a neighbor. While she was still crossing the road, three men approached her, each riding a different colored horse. The scene reminded her of the horsemen in the book of Revelation. The men in civilian clothes were amazed to see a child, thinking that the entire population had left the area when in fact they were in hiding. Speaking in German Lilly stated, “No, not all of us have gone.” The man on the light-colored horse exclaimed, “She speaks German!” Remembering that she was not supposed to talk to anyone, Lilly said no more. Her mother meanwhile had noticed Lilly’s absence and was quietly listening while hiding in the raspberry bushes. After hearing the men speak German, she stood up and said, “Yes, the child speaks German.” The three men were scouts for the approaching German army. Because the Zaft home was located on a hill, the army established their headquarters there. By evening, an entire troop was milling around their house and throughout their garden.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Lilly’s family and the other Germans were very relieved when the German Wehrmacht invaded their area. “Much to Stalin’s distress, the German Army was greeted as the liberators of the oppressed people from Communist tyranny.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Once again, they were able to live in relative safety without fear of deportation to Siberia or the possibility of being killed in the battles in their area. Churches were reopened and once more schools could teach German. Lilly’s father gladly gave the Wehrmacht information concerning the terrain and the number of ethnic Germans in the area while Lilly’s mother showed her German hospitality by making tea for them. [[28]](#footnote-28) The support and information that the Zaft family gladly offered was exactly what the Soviet Union had feared would happen. In their eyes, the Volksdeutsche were traitors.

As long as the Germans maintained a strong position in the territory surrounding Chortitza, the Volksdeutsche there felt safe. However, in 1943 with the retreat of the German army, the ethnic Germans were once again exposed to the wrath of the Soviet Union. Realizing the need to leave their homes behind in order to escape deportation to Siberia, 997 people from Chortitza and the surrounding area readied themselves to board an evacuation train. The rest of those who wished to flee would follow on foot or horse-drawn carts. They were just part of the 350,000 Germans evacuated from the Black Sea region.[[29]](#footnote-29) Many of those who wished to board the coming train were waiting with their luggage at the station. Lilly and her older brother and sister were there delivering breakfast to their servants who had stayed the night watching their luggage. They were all standing there when a Russian plane flew low over them, circled back, and started shooting at the crowd of civilians. While none of the Zaft household was injured, many others were. This was just one more reminder of the hatred that the Soviet Union had for its German residents.[[30]](#footnote-30)

One of the main reasons as to why the Soviet Union considered the ethnic Germans traitors after the war was because they evacuated with the retreating German army in 1943. Even some who did not have ethnic German roots fled because they “had collaborated with German rule.”[[31]](#footnote-31) The numbers relocated, sometimes against their will, were staggering. The Black Sea Germans alone numbered 70,000[[32]](#footnote-32). However, “most refugees, especially the Volksdeutsche, needed no prodding”, glad to be able to escape the oncoming Soviet Army any way they could.[[33]](#footnote-33) However, of the approximately 300,000 Russian Germans that left for the Fatherland, 225,000 “were forcibly repatriated by the advancing Red Army…”[[34]](#footnote-34) The Russian Germans and other Volksdeutsche who evacuated the Ukraine had to once again evacuate in 1945 when the Red army’s advance continued. Failing to board the *Wilhelm Gustloff* whose sinking by Soviet torpedoes has been called the worst maritime disaster, Lilly and her family found themselves once again evacuating by train.[[35]](#footnote-35)

However, of the number that did successfully escape to Germany and German-held territory, only a small percentage were able to evade deportation after World War II was over. With the end of the war, Lilly’s family settled unknowingly one kilometer east of the Berlin Wall. Her family had tried twice already to escape across, but had not succeeded. The close relationship Lilly’s father had with their town’s mayor alerted them to the news that the Soviets had ordered large trucks to be readied for the next week. Believing this to mean that the Soviet Union wanted to deport the majority of the town’s population to Siberia, Lilly’s father knew they had to try once more to escape. Hiding in the trees near the border at two in the morning, Lilly’s father successfully transferred his entire family across the border.[[36]](#footnote-36) While they were distancing themselves from the threat of deportation, one of the main reasons as to why Lilly’s family immigrated to the United States in the fifties “was security - to get away as far as possible [from the Russians].”[[37]](#footnote-37)

However, thousands of other Black Sea Volksdeutsche were not as fortunate. Statistics show that the Soviet Union was able to repatriate two thirds of those who evacuated from the Chortitza settlement.[[38]](#footnote-38) Therefore, Lilly was one of the four thousand that successfully escaped. The Soviet Union succeeded in these repatriations in several ways. First, the Yalta agreement had a direct affect on ethnic Germans. It stipulated that all displaced persons “who have been identified as Soviet Citizens to the satisfaction of the Military Authorities” were to be returned to the Soviet Union, therefore enabling the Soviet Union to decide who were to be considered citizens.[[39]](#footnote-39) A Mennonite lady from Chortitza related how even though her brother evaded capture during the thirties, “[a]fter the war, most of the family made its way to Belgrade, where the Red Army picked them up and sent them into Soviet exile, each family member to a different location.”[[40]](#footnote-40)

A final way that the Soviet Union repatriated many Volksdeutsche was by moving refugee populations to the Soviet zone. While this was partly to help distribute the burden of thousands of displaced people in Germany, it put ethnic Germans back under the control of the Soviet Union. “[T]ransports to the Soviet zone began on April 20 [1947]: 326,956 Germans were taken there up to August 20, 1947…based on the Potsdam decision.”[[41]](#footnote-41) Irina Mukhina author of “‘The Forgotten History’: Ethnic German Women in Soviet Exile, 1941-1955” writes, “This distaste for return ‘home’ was one of the things all ethnic German women had in common.”[[42]](#footnote-42) However, in spite of this, some ethnic German women were deceived into returning to the Soviet Union by promises of being able to reunite with their missing German husbands.[[43]](#footnote-43)

For many Volksdeutsche, their lives ended in a place where they did not feel they belonged. Whether before World War II, during the conflict, or afterward, the Soviet Union viewed the Volksdeutsche as traitors. Branded in part because of their ethnicity, their retention of the German language, and their willingness to aid Germany, the Black Sea Germans found themselves arrested, executed, and sent to Siberia. Many Volksdeutsche believed that the only safe place to flee from the wrath of the Soviet Union was North America. For some like Lilly Zaft, the dream of a home and freedom was realized; however, for many others, it remained only that, a dream.

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