

Soviet “Paradise” Revisited: Genocide, Dissent, Memory and Denial

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Remembering Victims of Communism Worldwide

As a part of the September *Heritage Review's* focus on Soviet-era repression, this essay pays a visit to Soviet “paradise” to reflect on a ravaged twentieth century and the German Russians who endured it.

An international event over the summer makes this topic especially significant and timely. On June 12, 2007, the International Memorial to the Victims of Communism was unveiled in Washington, DC. President George W. Bush dedicated the memorial. Representative Tom Lantos, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee and a Hungarian-Jewish Holocaust survivor, gave the keynote address. Congressional leaders, members of the diplomatic corps, ethnic leaders, foreign dignitaries, and memorial supporters also attended the historic commemoration.

Several years in the making, the memorial is a bronze statue replica of the “Goddess of Democracy,” similar to the Statue of Liberty, which thousands of Chinese dissidents erected in mid-1989 at Tiananmen Square in Beijing. It is the brainchild of the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation, a non-profit organization established in December 1993 by the U.S. Congress to build a memorial in the nation’s capital.

Its purposes are manifold: to remember the more than 100 million victims of communism worldwide; to honor those who resisted communist dictatorships and contributed to the end of the Cold War; and to educate present and future generations about this ideology’s crimes against humanity. For the dedication ceremony, the organizers selected the twentieth anniversary of President Ronald Reagan’s famous speech that called on Soviet leader Mikhail

Gorbachev to tear down the Berlin Wall, the great symbol of the Cold War divide.

Communism – An Outdated Relic?

Memorial supporters have conceded that the event went largely unnoticed and that much more work remains necessary to educate the general public. In the minds of many today, the communist ideology and Cold War are simply relics, the preserve now of a small group of historians, with little or no significant bearing on the present or the future. Memorial supporters have long regarded ignorance or denial about communism’s past as a “moral blind spot.” They have argued that free societies must not be content until people recognize that communism has led to terror and oppression. Many people remember the Nazi Holocaust, and rightly so, but only a few fathom the wide extent of communism’s horrors, past and present.

In the West, sincere students and intellectuals still embrace Marxist-inspired ideas and theories, despite empirical evidence to the contrary. Sometimes national pride has also prevented people from coming to terms with the past. In Russia, for example, according to a recent poll, one-third of the populace believed that Stalin “did more good than bad for the country.” Just one day after the dedication, the Chinese government denounced the anti-communist memorial.

A number of critics have asked why such a memorial should be located in a non-communist country like the United States. Over the years, others have voiced similar sentiments on the selection of Washington, DC, for the site of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. For some, the June 12 ceremony also represented only one small step in addressing communism’s crimes worldwide. Certain commentators have noticed the anti-

communist memorial's modesty, regardless of its poignancy and beauty, as well as its less than prominent placement in the city. Although more expensive to realize, a museum for the victims of communism would perhaps one day provide posterity with an even more fitting tribute.

The Fragility of Freedom

Nevertheless, for the more than one billion persons living today under communism around the globe, persecution and repression remain stark realities—a constant reminder that human freedom is fragile. Even after the collapse of communist regimes in parts of the world, bitter memories continue to haunt the survivors, including the ever shrinking number of older members of the Germans from Russia community.¹ In 1997, famed historian and former American Communist, Eugene Genovese, concluded this about the past century: “We ended a seventy-year experiment with socialism with little more to our credit than tens of millions of corpses.”²

Imperfect Democracies and the Limits of “Totalitarianism”

It is often acknowledged in public discourse that no representative democracy is perfect. This general observation certainly holds true for the United States as an acknowledged leader of the “free world,” without either diminishing its many supreme accomplishments or denying some of its real historical shortcomings. After generations of struggle, citizens in relatively free societies such as our own on the whole have come to possess various public and private venues to express their aspirations and list their grievances. Many in the West, who take basic civil liberties for granted, often fail to comprehend what systematic, widespread and at times violent repression entails. All societies rest upon some claim of authority and a certain degree of public pressure and coercion, to be sure, but that epitomizes the human condition and how the real world works.

Countless more people, however, do not recognize that no perfect, all-powerful dictatorship has been established yet either. Arguably, it remains most fortunate for humanity that the dire advanced societies, “dystopias,” or “totalitarian” systems described in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* and George Orwell’s *1984* have not truly materialized in the fullest sense, despite all the best efforts of fascist and communist regimes over the past century.

Some historians and social scientists have considered the Soviet regime under Joseph Stalin during the 1930s to be the embodiment of “totalitarianism,” a term which describes a political system in which power is concentrated at the top and the entire population is mobilized to undertake a sweeping transformation of society.

By definition, this system does not allow for independent political parties, labor organizations or any other viable civic associations, as nothing should stand between the state and the individual. Here the state scrutinizes and monitors both public and private behavior. For its own purposes, the totalitarian state also often makes effective use of police terror to strike at numerous opponents and to terrorize all into submission. Not least of all, it includes the use of propaganda to rally the masses to make vast national sacrifices and to accomplish great national goals. In this scenario, the edifice of the state in effect dwarfs the individual, since each citizen is expected to serve the supposed needs of society and the general will.

Stalin’s Control

Some scholars, however, have been uncertain whether Stalin achieved *total* control over Soviet life. For one thing, Stalin had to rely on subordinates at all levels to realize his ambitious plans. Soviet citizens and even government officials also did not always conform to the system as demanded. Indeed, as powerful as the Stalinist state was, no society or political party stands as a monolith. Yet for many observers, the Stalinist era,

along with the Nazi period in Germany, has provided us with a striking example of a totalitarian system at work in the twentieth century and offers us a warning of potentially even worse future scenarios.³

Nearly two decades after the fall of Soviet Communism and the end of the Cold War, scholars have started to appreciate that even the most repressive political systems at best are flawed in their effectiveness to stifle all dissent and opposition—at least up to now, most fortunately. In an imperfect world, ordinary people, those daring few brave souls, have continued to demonstrate the remarkable human capacity, despite great difficulties, to adapt and find ways of skirting state authority of any political stripe. Even under the most innovative, coercive, and ruthless dictatorships, people have found enough “wiggle room” to perform acts—both great and small—in defiance of the predominating political order. With the fall of the Soviet Union, perhaps it would make more sense now to think of Soviet dissidents as the “Little Davids” versus “Goliath.” For seven decades, the ethnic Germans of the former Soviet Union were no exception.

A Short Soviet History (1917-1991)

From 1917 to 1991, the level of repression emanating from the Kremlin varied. The Soviet Union, despite the continuation of certain ideological underpinnings and political structures, evolved over its seven decades. Of course, it more or less functioned as a police state throughout its existence, but on the whole, the worst phases of Soviet oppression and even genocide occurred under Vladimir Lenin during the era of the Russian Civil War and War Communism (1918-1920) and, most significantly, under Stalin between 1929 and 1953.

Even after the mass terror concluded, longstanding tensions persisted between this repressive regime and those whom it considered to be suspect at best. Nonetheless, Soviet policies fluctuated and covered a wide spectrum, depending on at what lengths the regime was

prepared to go in order to crush real or perceived opposition.

In the early 1920s, for example, the new Bolshevik regime imposed forced grain requisitioning as an emergency war measure, resulting in famine outbreaks across parts of Russia, especially along the Volga. Stalin’s Great Terror included above all the brutal collectivization drives of the early 1930s, the man-made terror famine in Soviet Ukraine (1932-1933), also known as the *Holodomor* (“Famine-Genocide”), as well as the mass political purges of 1937-1938 and the mass deportations of more than a dozen Soviet nationality groups from 1937 to 1951.

“Easing Up” on Soviet Suppression

In general, Soviet authorities eased up on its suppression of the population during the mid-1920s, again from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s, and finally from the late 1980s to the early 1990s. From 1921 to 1928, for instance, Moscow implemented the New Economic Policy (NEP), designed to restore private ownership to small sectors of the economy, especially in agriculture. Over the long term, the regime sought to attain full socialist development, but it realized that at least temporarily, it had to find better ways to rebuild the country’s devastated and backward economy with capitalism after years of war and political turmoil.

At about the same time that NEP went into effect, the newly created Soviet state also devised and encouraged the policy of *korenizatsiya* (meaning “nativization” or “indigenization”, or literally “putting down roots”). In the early years of Soviet rule, Lenin and his associates attempted to reconcile two opposing goals: to grant symbolic concessions to and exploit nationalist sentiment in the former tsarist empire and to establish conditions for the formation of a strong and centralized state system. This policy of “Soviet nation-building” granted degrees of territorial and cultural autonomy to the multitude of Soviet nationality groups, so long as the ideological foundations remained socialist and the Communist Party stayed in power—thus the now familiar organizing

principle of “national in form, socialist in content.” During this period, the Volga-German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) and various Soviet-German national districts appeared in other parts of the Soviet Union, especially in Ukraine.

In the 1920s, the Soviet creation of this sophisticated federal arrangement was supposed to represent a “transitional” form of government, one which would supposedly give way to a unitary political organization. Initially, this form of modern assimilation did not necessarily constitute a deliberate Bolshevik attempt to “Russify” the smaller Soviet nationalities, as happened later, but it was designed to remove traditional religious beliefs, class divisions, and social differences that impeded socialist development and the rise of a global working-class consciousness and solidarity. Within the context of Marxist-Leninism, a Soviet nationality group was to be an administrative unit that followed the Party’s political ideology and that comprised one part of the USSR and, ultimately, one part of a global communist society. In 1917, Lenin and his Bolsheviks had hoped that the Bolshevik Revolution would help ignite working-class revolutions across the industrialized-capitalist world, but the anticipated judgment day never arrived. By the early 1920s, the regime realized that the international workers’ revolution would have to wait until a more opportune time.

The “nativization” policy even encouraged local Party leaders of Russian nationality to learn the local languages and cultures—at least that was the ideal. Whether truly intended or not, the policy also promoted a “renaissance” of ethnic culture and educational development among the larger nationalities, including most of all the Ukrainians. By the late 1920s, *korenizatsiya* developed into a highly controversial issue within the Soviet leadership, some of whom feared social divisions arising from growing ethnic nationalism. Consequently, the policy qualified as one of the first victims of Stalin’s power consolidation in the

years after 1929, to the detriment of the smaller nationality groups.⁴

Even the brutal Stalin, however, could restrain governmental policy under certain circumstances. During the “Great Patriotic War” against Nazi Germany (1941-1945), for example, he briefly curtailed the regime’s persecution of the Russian Orthodox Church in an attempt to appeal to Russian nationalism and to win broader public support required for final victory. By early 1946, though, many Soviet citizens, who had sacrificed so much during the war, grew discouraged when Stalin returned to his old totalitarian ways. His death in March 1953 came none too soon amid growing rumors that he was about to launch yet another mass purge, perhaps this time directed against Soviet Jews, among others.⁵

Khrushchev Era

In February 1956, new Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev gave his famous “Secret Speech” to Communist Party leaders, condemning Stalin’s excesses waged against both the Party and the entire country. Some of the first serious fissures in the grand Soviet edifice appeared at this defining moment. He cited to a stunned audience some of Stalin’s crimes, including the nationality groups deported from their ancestral homelands in the North Caucasus and southern Russia to the eastern expanses: the Chechens, Karachays, Kalmyks, Ingush, and Balkars. Yet he passed over a number of nationalities that had endured a similar fate, including the indigenous Crimean Tatars, the Koreans from the Far East, the Meskhetian Turks from the Trans-Caucasus, and the Volga Germans and other German groups from across the USSR.⁶

Intentional or not, his glaring omission of the ethnic Germans concealed the fact that this group at the time represented the largest of the deported peoples and accounted for more than one million out of the 2.75 million “special settlers.”⁷ The thrifty ethnic Germans might have comprised a vital part of his ambitious “Virgin Lands” agricultural project

envisioned for Soviet Siberia, and thus their forced removal under Stalin was downplayed. Or perhaps he dared not identify too much with the plight of “fascist” Germans.

When the “Secret Speech’s” contents soon leaked out to the West, it created quite a public stir on both sides of the political spectrum. Based on his actions and published memoirs, Khrushchev probably suffered nagging guilt about his own direct complicity in the 1930s Great Terror, but he continued to be an ardent and committed Communist to the end. His political “thaw” of the late 1950s and early 1960s sought to introduce a more consistent and pragmatic policy course without making significant fundamental changes to the Soviet system. He assigned the regime’s crimes to Stalin personally, but not to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union as a whole or to the Soviet system itself.⁸ Most in the West, however, are unaware that Khrushchev’s policies of atheism and religious persecution sometimes proved to be as severe and pervasive as at any previous time, even under Stalin. On balance, Khrushchev’s legacy remains mixed.⁹

Like millions of other Soviet citizens released from exile or prison, the German Russians experienced relative improvement in their political status and economic condition under Khrushchev, but the group’s “rehabilitation” under the regime fell short in certain regards. For instance, a December 1955 amnesty decree removed restrictions on the legal status of ethnic Germans in the “special settlements,” and the remaining ethnic-German population was released from confinement. It did not, however, return property confiscated during deportation and exile, nor were ethnic Germans permitted to return to their old homelands and native villages. Moreover, an August 1964 “rehabilitation” decree cleared the guilt accusation made against Volga Germans in 1941. Yet this so-called “partial rehabilitation” did not allow the German Russians to return to their old homelands, nor did it provide for the re-

establishment of a Volga-German republic and other national districts for ethnic Germans. In fact, the 1964 decree was not publicized to a wide Soviet audience for another quarter of a century.¹⁰

Brezhnev Era

In the late 1960s and 1970s, Khrushchev’s protégé and successor, Leonid Brezhnev, began to discredit and reverse modest liberal reforms. He enacted more repressive measures (including forced psychiatric treatment for political prisoners) in order to suppress growing popular dissent, but not nearly to the same extent as Stalin had done. A new generation of Soviet leaders was determined to rule the country in a measured and less than dramatic fashion. Political caution and stability distinguished this period of Soviet rule. Although signifying a more hard-line stance, the status quo under Brezhnev and the Party was not a complete turn of the clock back to Stalinism.

The Brezhnev era also witnessed the regime’s efforts to increase Soviet military and diplomatic legitimacy and prestige abroad, although this policy course ebbed and flowed with efforts to engage in détente (to ease international tensions) and improve diplomatic relations with the West, most notably in connection with West German Chancellor Willy Brandt’s *Ostpolitik* (“Eastern Policy”). Consequently, increased levels of Black Sea German immigration to West Germany took place for most of the 1970s in order to reunite families separated by the war. Stalin’s successors no longer wished to shut themselves off completely from the outside world, but they had to deal with the consequences of an even limited opening up to the West.¹¹

Gorbachev and Perestroika

By the late 1980s, Gorbachev and his Party allies, in desperate efforts to reinvigorate an increasingly ossified Soviet society, unleashed the floodgates of political and economic reforms called *perestroika* (“restructuring”). Some observers have described Gorbachev’s

reforms as a "thaw" and even the "Second NEP." Within six years, *perestroika* had dismantled the failing system, moving far beyond the reformers' original intentions and wildest expectations. Ironically, perhaps Gorbachev's greatest success was his failure to preserve the Soviet Union, something which many proud Russians have resented to this day. Although many have credited Reagan for ending the Cold War, this watershed event could not have taken place without the cooperation of *both* leaders and countries.¹²

Genocide and Repression

For more than seven decades, the USSR made tremendous economic, industrial, educational, scientific, and military advances, moving from a predominantly traditional peasant society to a feared nuclear superpower. It did so, however, with serious political flaws and abuses and at a tremendous moral and human cost. In retrospect, the Soviet contribution to the Allied war effort against Nazism was probably its single greatest achievement, something the West tends to downplay.

In light of Soviet history, the question now turns briefly to the fate of the ethnic Germans of the former USSR, as one among more than 120 recognized nationality groups in the region. Did the Soviet Union wage genocide against them and other peoples, and what was the overall impact of Soviet nationality policies on them?

For years, activists from the various Soviet "repressed peoples," including the German Russians, have maintained that the man-made famines, forced grain requisitions, collectivization drives, mass deportations, and conditions of exile constituted genocide. Recent Soviet archival findings have bolstered their arguments, but setting politics and emotions aside, a more precise definition of genocide remains essential.

Defining Genocide

The genocide issue never fails to spark debate, disagreement and controversy, but today it is generally defined as the

systematic destruction of a racial, political or cultural group *in whole* or *in part*. The modern idea of genocide originated in the work of the remarkable lawyer, scholar, and political activist Raphael Lemkin of Polish-Jewish background, who defined it in his influential 1944 book, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, at the height of the Nazi Holocaust.¹³

Specifically, Lemkin understood this term to mean the intentional destruction of national groups as viable *cultural* and *physical* entities. His original conception of genocide actually emphasized the destruction of group identity rather than the killing of group members. *Lethal* and *non-lethal* means could constitute genocide, if the intent of such measures is the elimination of a group's ethnic *identity*. That is, not *all* members of an ethnic group have to be physically killed for genocide to occur. Consistent with his original argument, most cases of genocide have employed both lethal and non-lethal means together. Therefore, the annihilation of a group does not have to be immediate or complete in order to be genocide, as often a remnant survives after the worst tribulations.

Steps to Genocide

In recent years, more scholars have come to accept that genocide has occurred throughout human history in one form or another, most notably in the industrial age of the modern nation-state, which holds the necessary resources at its disposal to commit mass murder. The Holocaust under the Nazis was neither the first nor the last, but it best exemplified the phenomenon of systematic mass murder in advanced industrial societies.

No genocide is exactly the same as another, of course; each historical event is unique in its own right and deserving of study in light of historical context. According to more recent academic studies, however, we can discern patterns in the inner-workings of the Nazi Holocaust, Soviet Terror, and other cases. Scholars have found that state-sponsored mass murder does not typically happen

overnight, that there are stages and phases to modern-day genocides.

In general, the modern phenomenon of genocide occurs step by step, drip by drip, with periods of sharp intensity. We can identify in genocidal policies an acceleration process, radical phases, as well as moderate and slowing-down periods. Not least of all, genocidal policies are most often made possible during times of war, under the pretext of national emergency and total state mobilization.

The United Nations Defines Genocide

At about same time that the Soviet mass deportations, repression, and "special settlement" of thirteen nationality groups occurred, the international community, with the USSR as one of the major signatories, formulated the legal definition of genocide. On December 11, 1946, the newly created General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) explicitly condemned the act of genocide. The UN's initial working definition of this crime against humanity was similar to Lemkin's conception, but when the General Assembly passed the "Treaty on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide" on December 9, 1948, a narrower definition prevailed. Forced acculturation and most other *non-lethal* means of group elimination were removed from the new treaty's legal definition. In the final version, as a clear condemnation of Nazi crimes against humanity, the emphasis fell on the *biological* or *physical* elimination of national group members, mostly ignoring the destruction of national cultures as a component of genocide.

To date, the UN treaty contains the only internationally accepted legal definition of genocide. Article II of the treaty reads: "In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, cultural, ethnical, racial or religious group as such: a) Killing members of the group; b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; c) Deliberately inflicting on members of the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical

destruction in whole or in part; d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."¹⁴

Physical and Cultural Destruction

In relating the Stalinist regime's two-sided approach to political terror, namely *physical* and *cultural* destruction, J. Otto Pohl underscored the fact that the UN definition of December 9, 1948, "equates genocide primarily with ethnically motivated mass murder." But he added that "this definition fails to recognize that ethnic mass murder is often only the first phase of destroying national groups. The second phase, which often extends long after the killing has stopped, is the continued destruction of the victim group's cultural identity. Thus the forced assimilation of the survivors is often just as much a part of genocide as mass killings are."¹⁵ Pohl, like other critics of the UN treaty, conceded, however, that it "does provide a useful legal definition for the physical components of genocide."¹⁶

Genocide by the Soviet Regime

Like Pohl, Samuel D. Sinner documented that each and every one of the aforementioned defined acts were committed by the Soviet regime against the ethnic Germans and other groups. According to Sinner's archival findings, the Soviets carried out these actions by the following means: 1) unlawful deportations (declared a "crime against humanity" by the Nuremberg War Crimes Tribunal); 2) deliberate starvation by means of violent grain requisitions and by refusing relief to the starving (deliberate starvation is legally viewed as murder); 3) forcible removal of children from the ethnic group; 4) separation of families to prevent births within the ethnic group; 5) forced labor in Siberian and Central Asian prison camps; and 6) mass executions of the innocent by torture, shooting, and other methods.¹⁷

Between 1915 and 1949, Russian and Soviet authorities were responsible for the murder of about one million ethnic

Germans (Sinner's calculations took into account normal birth and death rates). As the Volhynian-German case of 1915 illustrates, the earliest persecutions and mass deportations of the ethnic group already had begun under the last tsar during World War I. Often it is forgotten that the Volga Germans barely avoided mass deportation under Nicholas II because of the outbreak of the March and November 1917 Revolutions. But Russian national prejudices continued long after the Bolshevik seizure of power.

Based on a detailed investigation of archival evidence, including NKVD (Soviet secret police) records, Sinner calculated the high and low mortality figures among the German Russians. From 1915 to 1916, Russia's deportation policy killed between 63,000 and 100,000. Between 1917 and 1925, deaths from shootings and famine ranged from 360,000 to 365,000. From 1930 to 1937, at the peak of the Stalinist Terror, collectivization drives and famine killed another 270,000 to 300,000. Between 200,000 and 300,000 more perished as a result of the deportations and the Labor Army (*trudarmiya*) in exile from 1941 to 1949. In all, approximately 893,000 to 1,065,000 ethnic Germans died during a 34-year period.¹⁸

Exact numbers will elude us and create differences of opinion, but the larger destructive portrait of the Soviet "social experiment" is now firmly established. During each of these decades—the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s—roughly one-fourth to one-third of ethnic Germans fell victim to the Soviet Terror, or roughly one million souls. This ethnic group reclaimed its pre-World War I population level only in the 1960s.¹⁹ By the mid-1950s, ethnic Germans comprised about 40% of the USSR's 2.75 million resettled into the expanses of Siberia and Central Asia. This ethnic group was the largest group in Soviet exile, with more than one million ethnic Germans living in the so-called "special settlements" (*spetsposelenie/ Sondersiedlungen*).²⁰

Concerning the overall impact of Soviet repression, Pohl similarly concluded that the "[d]eliberate exile [of

nationalities]...to areas with lethal living conditions meets the definition of genocide under current international law."²¹ In order to destroy these peoples, he maintained that the Soviets, especially under Stalin, enforced a two-pronged approach: the forced deportation to "special settlements" (geographical dispersal) and anti-cultural policies (assimilation). In this instance, all publications and education in native languages were liquidated, and these nationality groups were dispersed from their villages and homelands. Thus the Soviets combined physical liquidation through deportation and terror with the forced assimilation of dispersed survivors.²² Irina Mukhina's detailed new research into exile survivors, notably women, emphasized that the deportations served as the defining group experience for all ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union.²³

Defining Genocide-Diverging Opinions

Despite scholars' divergences of opinion on the definition of genocide, two basic competing schools of thought have arisen. Pohl summarized well this divergence: "The first camp consists of those adhering to a definition of genocide similar to Lemkin's original definition. These scholars maintain that genocide is the destruction of a group's ethnic identity and does not require immediately killing all members of the targeted group. The other camp consists of those who believe the term genocide should be reserved only for those cases where the perpetrating state attempts to immediately kill all members of an ethnic group."²⁴ In some academic and political circles, whatever the documentary evidence, it appears that heated disputes on the nature and extent of the Soviet repressions and the related broader theme of genocide will rage for years to come.

Investigation of the Soviet Regime

In September 1991, the prominent international organization Human Rights Watch referred to the USSR's various deported peoples, including the ethnic

Germans, as “the punished peoples”—to borrow Russian émigré historian Aleksandr Nekrich’s name given to them a generation earlier. At the time, Helsinki Watch stated that the USSR’s “punished peoples” were “also entitled to a full public accounting of everything that can be discovered about what was done to them: why it was done; by whom it was done; how it was done; and at what cost to the victims.”²⁵

The organization called for nothing less than that the Soviet (now Russian) government “should do everything within its power to redress this wrong by creating a more favorable climate for the efforts of the deported peoples in their own behalf and by assisting them in reclaiming their homelands to the extent that this can be done without creating new groups of victims among those who have subsequently settled in these lands.”²⁶

By this time, investigations into the Soviet past were already well under way on both sides of the Atlantic. In April 1988, as Reagan and Gorbachev achieved dramatic diplomatic breakthroughs that ultimately ended the Cold War, the U.S. government completed its own lengthy formal bipartisan investigation of the infamous 1930s Ukrainian famine. In its final report to Congress, the special committee concluded that Stalin and his associates indeed had committed genocide against the population in Ukraine between 1932 and 1933.²⁷

It further reported that “[r]ecently, scholarship in both the West and, to a lesser extent, the Soviet Union has made substantial progress in dealing with the Famine. Although official Soviet historians and spokesmen have never given a fully accurate or adequate account, significant progress has been made in recent months.”²⁸

Actual official statements from the Soviet Union gave more credence to the contention that genocide had been directed against ethnic Germans and others. Between 1989 and 1991, for example, the Soviet Union enacted a series of far-reaching “rehabilitation”

decrees for its ethnic Germans and other persecuted nationality groups. In the spirit of Gorbachev’s *perestroika*, the USSR Supreme Soviet made an official declaration on November 14, 1989, that guaranteed the rights for “repressed and deported peoples.” The declaration referred to the Balkars, Ingush, Kalmycks, Crimean Tatars, Chechens, Meshketians, Greeks, Koreans, Kurds, Karachai, and Germans.

In support of Soviet society’s ongoing “renewal” and “democratization,” this new governmental policy was now to reflect the truth about the past and provide the country with a positive legal precedent. The declaration acknowledged the “bitterness” of the Stalinist era. In particular, the USSR Supreme Soviet criticized the policies of removal and repression. The government guaranteed that such abuses of power would never happen again, and it promised to pass legislation that would reinstate the rights of these national groups.²⁹

Acknowledging the Past

On April 26, 1991, Soviet Russia (the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic or RSFSR, the largest and most dominant of the Soviet republics) went so far as to acknowledge that under Stalin it had waged a policy of “genocide” (*genotsid*) and “slander” (*kleveta*) against the various “repressed and deported peoples,” including the ethnic Germans. The new RSFSR president and Gorbachev’s chief political rival at the time, Boris Yeltsin, signed the law “Concerning the Rehabilitation of the ‘Repressed Peoples,’” in many respects the culmination of previous Soviet rehabilitation resolutions and decrees. Moscow’s pronouncement proved most remarkable, as few modern states in confronting their past have made an open confession on an issue of such a sensitive and tragic nature.

The Kremlin’s new reform-minded outlook probably resulted from several related factors. First, it faced increasing domestic pressure from both political reformers and various ethnic associations

inspired by Gorbachev. Second, it sought diplomatic support from the West; reforms could help improve Russia's standing in the international community. Third, in the case of the large ethnic-German minority at the time, Soviet and Russian officials believed that state efforts to rehabilitate this group and others could encourage a united Germany to provide significant foreign investment and subsidies to a region desperate for material and financial assistance. Ethnic-German activists understood these political possibilities as well.³⁰

The Soviet Union by this time was already in its agonizing death throes, but in no uncertain terms, the Russian Federation as the anchor of the Soviet Union took a significant lead in establishing the legal foundation for subsequent measures toward its repressed and deported nationalities.

The April 26, 1991, law announced generous "rehabilitation" assistance for ethnic Germans and other repressed nationalities.

Appearing at a historic moment of Soviet reform, it opened by stating that the "restoration of Soviet society in the process of its democratization and formation of a legal state demands clearing all victims of social life from the distortion and misrepresentation of human values. It creates favorable conditions for the rehabilitation of the repressed peoples during the years of Soviet power, who were subjected to genocide and slanderous attacks."³¹

Moreover, the law's second article defined the legal concept of "repressed peoples" as well as the legal parameters of their expected "full rehabilitation." The law's second article in particular stated that the "[r]epressed peoples are recognized as those (i.e., nations, nationalities or ethnic groups and other historically formed ethno-cultural communities such as the Cossacks) toward whom, owing to national characteristics or other affiliations, the politics of slander and genocide was conducted at the state level, which accompanied their forced removal, the

abolition of nation-state formations, the remaking of national-territorial borders, and the establishment of a regime of terror and violence in the special settlements."³² Undeniably, the Soviet-Russian government displayed rare moral courage when it announced this dramatic political confession. How the struggling new Russian republic would live up to its promises and provide adequate compensation for these victims, however, remained a different matter altogether, as experience later made clear.

Few in the West have known about Soviet Russia's public admission of guilt about waging genocide against its minority peoples.

It is also important to note that the 1991 decree has more closely followed Lemkin's broader conception of genocide, emphasizing both the *physical* and *cultural* components of Stalinist Terror. The nationalities, which the new Soviet law at the time defined as the "repressed peoples," have also expressed understandings of genocide that conform more with Lemkin's original definition. Yet they have been willing to base their demands on the UN's human rights and genocide declarations set forth in 1948.³³

The Famine of 1932-1933

Perhaps one of the darkest chapters of Stalinism—the Ukrainian Famine of 1932-1933, in which four to seven million men, women and children perished—took much longer to publicize and confront inside the former USSR. By-products of the Soviet past, hard feelings and resentment continued to fester on all sides of this issue.

Eighteen years after the U.S. congressional investigation into the Ukrainian famine, independent Ukraine itself flexed its national muscles in the genocide debate in the immediate aftermath of its dramatic "Orange Revolution" of 2004-2005. Ukrainians have long resented its larger neighbor's domination in the region. This popular democratic uprising had succeeded in resisting Russian political influence in the country after reformer Viktor Yushchenko

won a bitterly contested presidential election against the Russian-backed candidate, former Ukrainian Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich.

In November 2006, Ukraine's national parliament voted in favor of legislation introduced by new President Yushchenko, which recognized the 1932-1933 famine as Soviet genocide. Along with Yanukovich, who again served as Prime Minister, pro-Russian and Communist Ukrainians opposed the legislation, fearing strained relations with Russia and disputing the claim that the famine constituted genocide.

In addition, the head of the Russian parliament's foreign relations committee issued a public statement, stating with some truth that Ukraine's government has "ignored the fact that the victims of the famine and Stalin's other repressions were the entire Soviet people, irrespective of nationality."³⁴ Significantly, Moscow and its Ukrainian supporters have not gone so far as to deny that a terrible famine in fact ever happened, unlike various Soviet leaders and their fellow travelers in the West in the 1930s.

Memory and Dissent

Different forms of dissent, protest, and accommodation in Soviet life appeared over the years, painting a more complicated historical picture than is often assumed. For instance, armed uprisings and demonstrations erupted during the forced grain requisitioning in the early 1920s. During the early phase of the forced collectivization drives in 1929-1930, outraged Soviet peasants again reacted bitterly. Rather than lose them to the collective farms, Soviet peasants slaughtered their valuable farm animals. They also defied the authorities by destroying their seed grain, so that the spring crop might not be planted in 1930. For a brief time, Stalin's regime was forced to put the brakes on collectivization, but it soon resumed it with particular vengeance, breaking the back of the traditional peasantry in the 1930s.

Behind the revolutionary façade, Soviet dissident literature as early as the 1920s also percolated in myriad ways. Even during the relative, but deceptive, calm of the NEP era of the mid-1920s, critics of the Soviet regime, many of them with careers and families to consider, had to cope with and survive within a system that was not going away any time soon. They had to contend with the dilemma of somehow trying to work inside the system in order to change it for the better—and perhaps for no better reason than to stay alive.

During the mid-1920s, various ethnic-German intellectuals and activists comprehended the new Soviet society's inherent contradictions—above all, between the many promises made by Soviet nationality policies and the harsh reality of Soviet political repression, and between the passing of the old, traditional way of life and the rise of a new one. The loss of family and friends during the early 1920s famines had a deeply profound effect on them.

During the brutal Russian Civil War and under the stringencies of War Communism, it was true that the Bolsheviks' initial political promises to the nationalities were quickly abrogated. Yet during the NEP era, the regime revived some of these national rights. Some perceptive minds already saw through these policies, but at least something was there for them to dissect in their body of writings.

German-Russian Literature

Much like Ronald Vossler's translation of the "Inside-Out Glove" piece featured in this journal issue, German Russian authors in the 1920s and even into the early 1930s used irony, metaphors, symbols, code words, as well as legends, folklore, mythology and nature imagery from world literature, along with other literary devices, to criticize the regime right under the official censors' noses. For example, Volga German intellectual and activist (later Stalin victim) Peter Sinner in some of his writings utilized the Russian writer Pilnyak's "Snowstorm = Revolution"

symbolism to describe the persecution, famine and terror of the early Soviet period. For him, the NEP era represented a "mirage" (*Luftspiegelung*), a literary theme of his that appeared time and again.

Along the same lines, his wife Kamilla Sinner, an accomplished writer in her own right, produced fairy tales as veiled satires of what scholar Samuel Sinner called the "unqualified Soviet proletarian optimism of the mid-1920s."

At other times, the ethnic-German elite of the 1920s expressed ideas in more vivid and direct terms. Writer Rudolf Dirk, for instance, described the Soviet repression of ethnic Germans with destruction themes from world literature and mythology. For all that, Stalin's mass purges in the 1930s nearly decimated the ethnic group's elite. It took decades to begin anything resembling a cultural recovery.³⁵

More than an elite or intellectual preoccupation, a sense of foreboding and apocalyptic imagery also appeared in writing among the ethnic-German peasants and workers during the years of Soviet famine and forced collectivization. For example, Vossler compiled, analyzed, and translated hundreds of famine letters from the Glückstal enclave of German villages in western Ukraine that were sent to family members living abroad. Sometimes the letters even had to be smuggled out of the USSR. As an expression of terror and loss, these letters came from the hell of Soviet "paradise"—documents detailing the destruction of a people and a traditional way of life. Many of these testimonies later appeared in the German-language newspapers *Wishek Nachrichten* (North Dakota), *Eureka Rundschau* (South Dakota), and *Dakota Freie Presse* (Bismarck, North Dakota) between 1925 and 1937. Vossler remarked that

Despite the fact that the Glückstalers were a farming people, and, as has been suggested, not much given to letter writing, there was, particularly at some times, a profusion of letters from Russia to Dakota. Some letter

writers, notably village correspondents, but also some of the elder letter writers, illustrate a facility with the German language that can be, at times, both striking and beautiful. This richly figurative language often involved the religious domain of their lives, describing their travail on "this whirlpool of sorely troubled existence," where the "Death Angel" comes to "call decrepit earth pilgrims" to their "homeland of Heaven." There are also frequent allusions to the belief that they'll again meet their American kin in Heaven, "the homeland above," as well as to references to Biblical characters such as Lot, Job, and Lazarus, and to Biblical situations and concepts, such as Mammon, the Anti-Christ, and also the Egyptian captivity of the children of Israel—all of which were used to illustrate the extremity of their distress....³⁶

Timothy J. Kloberdanz and Rosalinda Kloberdanz made a compelling case that German Russians' efforts toward cultural retention at the grass-roots level, though "muffled," expressed forms of political dissent or resistance to Soviet power. For those who endured first persecution and then exile, they called these voices the "great underground." Indeed, the "muffled" activities of the "special settlers" represented a self-imposed internal exile, a turn inward, the world of the private sphere. Like many Soviet citizens, the German Russians did as best they could to carry on their memories and traditions under the most trying conditions:

Under such circumstances, sheer physical survival was itself difficult and of paramount concern. But psychological survival also was necessary and posed equally difficult challenges....

A whole culture had gone underground in order to save itself. This underground could not be detected or pinpointed on even the most detailed of Soviet maps. Yet the great underground was vast, for it existed within every German-Russian exile who dared to hold on and remember. Within the great underground, songs and stories and poems about one's ancestral village could still be heard, but only faintly. Even sacred events like Easter or Christmas could be remembered but they had to be quietly celebrated, almost always in secret....

...Moreover, the culture of the underground represented a rejection of the emerging "Soviet-German" identity that was being

crafted and shaped by the Communist-controlled, "official" newspapers. In sharp contrast, the culture of the German-Russian underground was "unofficial," in that it operated in secret and without Communist Party supervision. In addition, the great German-Russian underground relied on more traditional sources for inspiration and strength—chief among these were a continuing attachment to the old homeland (from which the people had been expelled) and an unwavering reliance on a God-centered, Christian faith and the spiritual teachings of their ancestors.³⁷

Not until Gorbachev and the collapse of the Soviet Union could "forbidden" poems, songs, memories, and religious and secular traditions become louder and more distinct, and consequently resurface in public.

The Years of the Great Silence

During the long exile or what some German Russians have better described as "the years of the Great Silence" (*die Jahre des grossen Schweigens*), the younger generation's last remaining links with their elders were group memories and the vestiges of German language and culture. For them, the German language took on a much deeper meaning as the last symbol of group identity. The language long served as the exiles' psychological "substitute for home." The German Russians' inability to use the mother-tongue—or even the failure to speak it fluently—long constituted a "painful deficiency" in their ethnic identity.³⁸

Also emerging from this "great underground" were the German Russians' early autonomy and emigration-rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s. In connection with these dissident activities, *samizdatki* (self-publishing materials) came out of the USSR—smuggled political literature, manifestos, and petitions distributed to foreign visitors, reporters, and the underground media and mailed out to Soviet, West German, American, and United Nations leaders. Often couching their arguments in Marxist-Leninist language as weapons to be turned on the Soviet government, these

materials pointed to an increasingly outspoken ethnic-minority group. In fits and starts, the group's historical passivity or submissiveness was declining, and the initial signs of assertiveness were appearing.³⁹ After Gorbachev, it surfaced as a well-organized and government-recognized political association named the "Rebirth" (*Wiedergeburt/Vozrozhdenie*) movement.⁴⁰

Denial and Obscurity

In theory, communism was supposed to liberate the masses, appealing to humanity's better nature. Throughout history, however, the poor and most working people of modest means have simply wanted a fair shake in life. In spite of their deep frustrations with their lot, common people have also often exhibited common sense, showing a rather limited interest in and reluctance to embrace sophisticated ideological solutions, to which many intellectuals have frequently grown quite attached. The tragedy is that communist regimes have ended up hurting or killing the very people who were supposed to be "emancipated" from the yoke of oppression.

Almost from the earliest days of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, it was difficult for idealists, who had never experienced persecution or extreme terror in the West, to see the communist experiment for what it really was. Ever so quick to point out the faults, real or perceived, of Western capitalist society, they were even quicker to embrace radical alternative solutions, including communism. Even when these new progressive solutions later seemed not so enlightened, many hesitated to abandon the cause. Particularly among the educated elite, this inability or even refusal to reconsider their understanding of human nature and practical politics brings to mind the Biblical expression of the "blind guides straining out the gnat and swallowing a camel."

Even today, some Western educators have argued that Marxist ideas never had a real opportunity to be practiced in a proper fashion under Lenin, Stalin, Mao

and others. They have pointed out that foreign as well as domestic opposition, among other factors, hindered the implementation of true socialism. These “social experiments” were therefore merely terrible “aberrations” of socialism. Indeed, bitter resistance to and attacks on socialists and socialist ideas posed grave challenges to political reforms, but perhaps a more convincing argument would be that real people—the supposed “beneficiaries” of “change”—got in the way of “progress.” Despite the advantage of hindsight almost three-quarters of a century later, some intellectuals and activists in particular still have refused to acknowledge the basic flaws and truth of a ravaged century. Perhaps the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

As late as the 1980s, some of the more ardent defenders of the USSR in the West lashed out at “reactionaries” and “right-wingers” who supposedly were influenced by Nazi propaganda. These defenders viewed Soviet crimes as “excesses” or “mistakes.”

Published in Canada in 1987, Douglas Tottle’s infamous book, *Fraud, Famine and Fascism: The Ukrainian Genocide Myth from Hitler to Harvard*, claimed that propaganda campaigns had been carried out against the Soviet Union from its very inception. Although it was true that anti-communist opposition arose starting with the initial “Red Scare” after World War I, Tottle went further, denying that a man-made famine ever took place in Ukraine and describing it as a “political myth.” He tried to place the blame for negative coverage of the event on “Ukrainian Nationalists” with connections to the Nazis, who later spread the deceit to America. He considered the Reagan administration to be an extension of hatred from the anti-communism era of the 1930s and 1950s.

He wrote that “[t]hroughout the famine-genocide campaign however, the factors of drought and sabotage have been ignored, denied, downplayed or distorted. Soviet excesses and mistakes, in contrast, are emphasized, given an ‘anti-Ukrainian’ motivation, described as

consciously planned, and the results exaggerated in depictions of starvation deaths in the multi-millions.”⁴¹

Murder by Quotas

Especially in the West, the apparent confusion about the Soviet Terror’s true nature has resulted in part from Stalinism’s irrationality and, perhaps most of all, from its “egalitarian social cleansing and flushing.” The sheer magnitude of the event has also boggled the imagination. Not one to mince words, R.J. Rummel offered a morsel of clarity to the fundamental problem of accounting for the extent and nature of the genocidal actions of the “Soviet Gulag State.” He recognized that the Soviet state’s systematic attack of defined special groups, whether social classes or nationalities, comprised one part of a more comprehensive, more complex, and at times even more incomprehensible process of “death by government,” to borrow one of his phrases:

Probably almost 62 million people, nearly 54,800,000 of them citizens [these figures appear too high, as mainstream estimates range between 20 and 30 million], were murdered by the Communist Party—the government—of the Soviet Union under Stalin. Old and young, healthy and sick, men and women, even infants and the infirm, were killed in cold blood.... Indeed, nearly all were guilty of nothing.

Some were from the wrong class.... Some were from the wrong nation or race.... Some were from the wrong political faction.... Some were just their sons and daughters, wives and husbands, or mothers and fathers. Some were in the lands occupied by the Red Army.... Then some were considered in the way of social progress, like the mass of peasants or religious believers. And some were eliminated because of their potential opposition...even high or low Communist Party members themselves.

In fact, we have witnessed in the Soviet Union a true egalitarian social cleansing and flushing: no group or class escaped, for everyone and anyone could have had counterrevolutionary ancestors, class lineage, or counterrevolutionary ideas or thoughts, or be susceptible to them. And thus, almost anyone was arrested, interrogated, tortured, and after a forced confession of a plot to blow

up the Kremlin, or some such, shot or sentenced to the “dry guillotine”—slow death by exposure, malnutrition, and overwork in a forced labor camp.

Part of this mass killing was genocide in the sense of targeting intentionally defined victims...[e.g., Don Cossacks in 1919, the Ukrainian peasants in 1932-1933].

Part was mass murder...[e.g., the extermination of “kulaks” from 1930 to 1937, the purge of the Party in 1937-1938].

And part of the killing was so random and idiosyncratic that journalists and social scientists have no concept for it, as in hundreds of thousands of people being executed according to preset government quotas....

We [in the West] lack a concept for murder by quotas because we—including the journalist, historian, and political scientist—have never before confronted the fact that a government can and has killed its own people for apparently no reason.⁴²

Ignoring Communism’s Crimes?

Over the decades, several overlapping factors have accounted for the more benign attitude toward the Soviet Union and communism in general. Part of the apparent lack of attention devoted to communism’s crimes could be attributed to the Nazi Holocaust itself.

To a certain extent, the international community has placed greater emphasis on the Jewish people’s historical sufferings, above all under the Nazis, because they represent an ancient and Biblical community and therefore hold a special place in the eyes of many. This group had played a vital role in the early development of fundamental conceptions about monotheistic religion and ethics, thus establishing many of the modern foundations of Western civilization (the Judeo-Christian world).⁴³

Immediately following World War I, the Soviet Union ranked as a pariah among nations as the first communist country in history. In time, however, Soviet Communism’s fortunes improved. In 1988, the U.S. special committee investigating the Ukrainian famine determined that “[d]uring the Famine, certain members of the American press corps cooperated with the Soviet

government to deny the existence of the Ukrainian Famine.”⁴⁴ The still controversial case of *New York Times* journalist Walter Duranty in Ukraine comes to mind.

The investigation also concluded that “[t]he American government had ample and timely information about the Famine, but failed to take any steps which might have ameliorated the situation. Instead, the [Franklin Roosevelt] Administration extended diplomatic recognition to the Soviet government in November 1933, immediately after the Famine.”⁴⁵ The American political left and Soviet sympathizers certainly welcomed President Roosevelt’s decision, but it holds equally true that influential business interests also pressured the administration to open up trade relations with this developing economic power.

In addition, the Soviet Union gained even greater legitimacy and respectability, because it displayed tremendous courage and made enormous sacrifices in the Allied crusade against Nazism. Besides Poland, no other country suffered as much as Soviet Russia, Hitler’s archrival in Europe. That is why for the Russians World War II has always been known as the “Great Patriotic War,” almost making it exclusively a titanic struggle between fascists and Russians.

In 1945, the Soviet Union emerged as a global superpower and leading rival to the United States. For a brief time, however, the war raised Stalin’s and his country’s international standing and popularity to unprecedented levels, reinvigorating communism into the next generation and spreading its hold beyond the Soviet Union’s borders across Eastern Europe and into Asia.

In the West, another important factor in assigning greater significance to the Holocaust than to the Soviet Terror was that the international community had to crush Nazism at its zenith during World War II.

By contrast, Soviet Communism rotted from within over the course of decades, although this internal decay was at first not so readily apparent to the outside

world. By the 1970s and 1980s, global communism began to lose relevance as a guiding ideological force, although China, North Korea and Cuba remained communist holdovers after the Cold War.

The disparities between Nazism's short lifespan and violent demise and Soviet Communism's gradual implosion therefore influenced the way we have perceived historical struggles. Unlike the Nazis, most communist leaders, long since passed away or retired, never had to face punishment or arrest, unless Stalin in his lifetime targeted the unlucky ones.

In addition, it took the West much longer—until after the late 1980s—to secure greater accessibility into the inner-workings of the Soviet state, although much evidence was already made available outside the USSR as early as the 1920s and 1930s, thanks to famine letters, smuggled political literature, and the testimony of political refugees and other observers.

On this matter of denial and obscurity, other complicated issues might be at play in the West as well. Perhaps people grew more horrified of Nazism, because the world had expected more from the great German people. Germany stood at the heart of civilized Europe as one of the most advanced societies of its time. The world viewed Germany, despite its authoritarian tendencies, as the romantic land of poets and composers. Russia, by contrast, represented something "less civilized" in Western eyes. Russia, too, was the home of great poets and writers, but the West perhaps regarded Soviet Communism as less of an aberration in Russian history, because Russia rested on Europe's "periphery." For the West, including the Nazis, Russia was almost "Asiatic," in other words one of the "backwaters" of the world.⁴⁶

Not least of all, the unfortunate reality is that people forget the past in the course of generations. It is human nature to do so, and reclaiming the past is slow and arduous. Over time, many in the Germans from Russia diaspora community "found it more bearable to push out of their minds the many horrors that befell their loved

loves. A selective memory furnished some of them with a survival strategy and coping mechanism."⁴⁷

Taking communism to task all these years later will continue to face an uphill battle. Martin Malia observed with critical clarity that "such an effort at retrospective justice will always encounter one intractable obstacle. Any realistic accounting of Communist crime would effectively shut the door on Utopia; and too many good souls in this unjust world cannot abandon hope for an absolute end to inequality.... And so, all comrade-questers after historical truth should gird their loins for a very Long March indeed before Communism is accorded its fair share of absolute evil."⁴⁸

Final Reflections

Only several years ago it would have been almost unimaginable that the Germans from Russia diaspora community would start to shed so much more light on that black period of the Lenin-Stalin years and beyond. Many Soviet citizens of German nationality decades ago must have despaired that the outside world would soon forget their terrible plight—that their cries and whispers in those bleak prisons and torture cellars and in the remote wildernesses of exile would fall dead silent. Yet here we are now resurrecting their stories for posterity.

After decades of struggle, events after the late 1980s took a most surprising turn, as the atrophy of the Soviet system became readily apparent. Ethnic-German activists and their supporters had shone like a small, but defiant, flame before the grand Soviet edifice and the looming shadows of Lenin and Stalin, perhaps with the grim expectation only to go down fighting and burn out slowly in the historical abyss.

Indeed, the frustrated national longings of German Russians represented but one tragic chapter in a larger Soviet history. Long ago, the first cracks began to appear in the Soviet "paradise," and in time its walls and foundations crumbled. Today, we are still picking up the pieces.

Nadezhda Mandelstam, the wife of renowned Russian-Jewish poet and late 1930s Stalin victim Osip Mandelstam (who once had met leading Volga German intellectual Peter Sinner in St. Petersburg), expressed the need for human memory and truth to bear witness to and triumph over the Soviet Union's repressive legacy. Her haunting prose still speaks eloquently on behalf of the many ethnic-German and other nationality victims, survivors, dissidents, and activists who endured a century of profound change and sometimes intense heartbreak under the Soviet "social experiment."

She wrote that "[l]ater I often wondered whether it is right to scream when you are being beaten and trampled underfoot. Isn't it better to face one's tormentors in a stance of satanic pride, answering them with contemptuous silence? I decided that it is better to scream. This pitiful sound, which sometimes, goodness knows how, reaches into the remotest prison cell, is a concentrated expression of the last vestige of human dignity. It is a man's way of leaving a trace, of telling people how he lived and died. By his screams he asserts his right to live, sends a message to the outside world demanding help and calling for resistance. If nothing else is left, one must scream. Silence is the real crime against humanity."⁴⁹

Beginning in the 1920s, the USSR's dissidents and activists expressed this defiance, subtle or otherwise, sometimes speaking out when it was almost suicidal to do so. Mandelstam did not intend the "death howl" to be a romantic or heroic notion as such, but rather the manifestation or expression of the basic human yearning for personal dignity and authenticity. These almost ordinary, basic human desires can become quite exceptional under the most extraordinary circumstances.

The "death scream" was an act of resistance, self-assertion, and protest—an honest choice to transcend simple despair and eternal loss. It concerned the courage to face truth and death in all their forms, even under the most shameful and

terrible conditions. It meant leaving behind a trace in the world—about how one lived, and died—as individuals, or as a culture. Humans have possessed the fundamental desire to be remembered, to leave a record, to believe that their lives have had purpose and meaning.

Gorbachev's new and unexpected policy direction fanned the flames of dissident activism bright hot, melting Lenin and Stalin's ice-cold grip on the state and its people. Like other Soviet repressed peoples, the German Russians, too, seized the day and tried to reverse almost overnight the dark legacy of more than seventy years of Soviet Communism.

Dissidents and activists had tried to break the "Great Silence" (*Grosses Schweigen*) of exile, whatever the odds. In the end, this ethnicity did not experience the kind of cultural and political "rebirth" that it had hoped for in the political spring of Khrushchev's and Gorbachev's "thaws." Particularly after the Cold War, however, two generations of activists, with the assistance of descendants of the worldwide diaspora ethnic community and sympathetic colleagues from various nationalities worldwide, have enjoyed the opportunity to set into motion the systematic documentation of and research into much of the group's experience for posterity's benefit and education.

They have refused to be silent until the outside world heard them, acting as the group's voice of conscience.⁵⁰ It must have been a bitter-sweet victory for communist survivors. Many tasks lie ahead for us, but the "death scream" will not soon be forgotten, as so many German Russians had feared during the hard times of the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s and beyond.

It was perhaps only appropriate that the defiant "death scream" outlived Stalin himself, melting the ruins and snow in the springtime of reform. It will not reverse the actual damage that was done, to be sure.

Nonetheless, it always has proved essential for us to remember and, if possible, to rectify past wrongs, as the

International Memorial to the Victims of Communism now strives to do. It has also remained equally important for us to live in the imperfect present and strive for a brighter tomorrow, without losing sight of our human weaknesses. The “death scream” has carried with it the burdens of the past and hopes for the future. The challenge for us at this moment is to make sense of things.

In this regard, longtime journalist Leon Wieseltier enunciated the fine line that formerly oppressed individuals and groups must walk between a proper remembrance and a debilitating victimology that is so much in vogue in some quarters today. He observed that “[i]n the memory of oppression, oppression perpetuates itself. The scar does the work of the wound. That is the real tragedy: that injustice retains the power to distort long after it has ceased to be real. It is a posthumous victory for the oppressors, when pain becomes a tradition. This is the unfairly difficult dilemma of the newly emancipated and the newly enfranchised: an honorable life is not possible if they remember too little, and a normal life is not possible if they remember too much.”⁵¹

All the peoples of the former Soviet Union face this profound dilemma concerning historical witness and denial. Survivors stride two worlds, those of past and future, and thus build bridges spanning the generations. Especially once the last survivors of the Lenin-Stalin years pass away, their children and grandchildren and others must discover for themselves this careful balance between memory, justice, and reconciliation. For many in the former USSR, the monumental effort has only just begun. Everything else pales in comparison with this universal human mastery over the past. After all, only this affirmative step leads to a true “victory” over Lenin, Stalin and Soviet Communism in general.

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Endnotes

1) The Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation website is <<http://www.victimsofcommunism.org>>. For additional background on twentieth-century communism and genocide, also consult: Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror—Famine* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Conquest, *Reflections on a Ravaged Century* (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Co., 2000); Stéphane Courtois, ed., et al., *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression*, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Mark Kramer (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1999 [1997]); and Eric D. Weitz, *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

2) Cited in Thomas E. Woods, Jr., “From Communism to Catholicism,” *Sursum Corda!* (Fall 1997): p. 6.

3) Many scholars regard Hannah Arendt's book, *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), as the definitive study of totalitarianism. Arendt published it only six years after Hitler's death and while Stalin still held power. Early on, she regarded Nazism and Soviet Communism as two sides of the same coin rather than as rival ideologies.

4) For an excellent overview of NEP and *korenizatsiya*, consult Rex A. Wade, ed., *Documents of Soviet History: Volume 1: The Triumph of Bolshevism, 1917-1919* (Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic International Press, 1991); Wade, ed., *Documents of Soviet History: Volume 2: Triumph and Retreat, 1920-1922* (Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic International Press, 1993); and Wade, ed., *Documents of Soviet History: Volume 3: Lenin's Heirs, 1923-1925* (Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic International Press, 1995). For the Stalin era that followed, see Robert Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolution from Above, 1928-1941* (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Co., 1990).

5) Dmitri Volkogonov, *Stalin: Triumph and Tragedy*, trans. Harold Shukman (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991).

6) Nikita S. Khrushchev, [Speech delivered to the closed session of the 20th Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, 24-25 Feb. 1956. Text released by the U.S. Department of State

on 4 June 1956], *Anatomy of Terror*, intro. by Nathaniel Weyl (Washington, DC: Public Affairs Press, 1956). See also Conquest, *The Nation Killers: The Soviet Deportation of Nationalities* (London: Macmillan, 1970 [1960]).

7) Nicolas Werth in Courtois, ed., et al., p. 255.

8) Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, trans. Strobe Talbott (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1970). From the time he lost power in 1964 and until his death in 1971, Khrushchev lived under virtual house arrest. During this time, he dictated his memoirs, offering a rare glimpse into the Soviet Union at the height of the Cold War. He smuggled his memoirs to the West, where it was published in 1970. After its publication, the KGB interrogated Khrushchev about it. As a loyal Communist Party member, he claimed that he did not write it, but its authenticity has since been verified.

9) Erik Kulavig, *Dissent in the Years of Khrushchev: Nine Stories about Disobedient Russians* (London: Palgrave, 2003).

10) "Ukaz Prezidiuma Verkhovnogo Soveta SSSR: O snyatii ogranicheniy v pravovom polozhenii s nemtsev i chlenov ikh semey, nakhodyashchikhsya na spetsposelenii [13 Dec. 1955]" and "Ukaz Prezidiuma Verkhovnogo Soveta SSSR o vnesenii izmeneniy v Ukaz Prezidiuma Verkhovnogo Soveta SSSR ot 28 avgusta 1941 goda 'O pereselenii nemtsev, prozhivayushchikh v rayonakh Povolzh'ya' [29 Aug. 1964]," in Vladimir A. Aumann and Valentina G. Chebotareva, eds., *Istoriya rossiyskikh nemtsev v dokumentakh (1763-1992 gg.)* (Moscow: MIGUP, 1993), pp. 177-179.

11) For an excellent overview of Brezhnev, consult Joan Frances Crowley and Dan Vaillancourt, *Lenin to Gorbachev: Three Generations of Soviet Communists* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1994 [1989]), pp. 157-177.

12) Significantly, the Soviet peoples, including the German Russians, almost never referred to *glasnost* in their political literature during this period, but only to *perestroika*. The primary meaning of *glasnost*, according to the *Oxford Russian Dictionary*, is not "openness" (as Western media and commentators have done), but "publicity" (as in a public relations campaign). Inspired by the changes in the Soviet Communist Party under Gorbachev, the West was quick to embrace the notion that *glasnost* was "openness." In reality, the Soviet regime sought to create this impression abroad, and at home it tried to advocate reforms within the framework of the existing Communist Party. At that time, "openness" in a true political sense did not yet exist. *Glasnost* applied specifically to the publicity of government-led reforms at home and abroad. For Soviet nationalities like the Germans, *perestroika* (or "restructuring" of Soviet society) in everyday affairs had more practical significance than *glasnost*, and thus the more

frequent references to this important political concept.

13) Steven L. Jacobs, "Lemkin, Raphael," in Israel W. Charny, ed., *Encyclopedia of Genocide: Volume II (I-Y)* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1999), pp. 402-404.

14) The UN genocide definition is cited in J. Otto Pohl, "Stalin's Genocide against the 'Repressed Peoples,'" *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (June 2000): p. 270.

15) Ibid.

16) Ibid.

17) Samuel D. Sinner, *The Open Wound: The Genocide of German Ethnic Minorities in Russia and the Soviet Union, 1915-1949/Der Genozid an Russlanddeutschen 1915-1949* (Fargo, ND: Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, North Dakota State University Libraries, 2000).

18) Sinner, *The Open Wound*, p. 106 (in German sec.).

19) Sinner, *The Open Wound*. See also Pohl, *Ethnic Cleansing in the USSR, 1937-1949*, Contributions to the Study of World History, No. 65 (Westport, CT, and London: Greenwood Press, 1999); Pohl, *The Stalinist Penal System: A Statistical History of Soviet Repression and Terror, 1930-1953* (Jefferson, NC, and London: McFarland and Co., Inc., Publishers, 1997).

20) Werth, p. 255.

21) Pohl, "The 1944 Deportation and Genocide of Ahiska Turks," manuscript, e-mail to Eric J. Schmaltz, 8 Jan. 2001.

22) Pohl, "Stalin's Genocide against the 'Repressed Peoples,'" pp. 267-293.

23) For an in-depth analysis of ethnic-German experiences in Soviet exile, particularly those of women, see Irina Mukhina, "The Forgotten History": Ethnic German Women in Soviet Exile, 1941-1955," *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 57, No. 5 (July 2005): pp. 729-752; Mukhina, *The Germans of the Soviet Union* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).

24) Pohl, "Stalin's Genocide against the 'Repressed Peoples,'" p. 271.

25) "Punished Peoples" of the Soviet Union: *The Continuing Legacy of Stalin's Deportations: A Helsinki Watch Report, Sept. 1991* (United States: Human Rights Watch, Sept. 1991), p. 6.

26) Ibid.

27) *Investigation of the Ukrainian Famine, 1932-1933: Report to Congress: Commission on the Ukrainian Famine* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1988), p. vii. For other academic studies, investigations by other governments, eyewitness reports, and documentary resources on the Ukrainian famine-genocide, see also the online site: <<http://www.preventgenocide.org/edu/pastgenocide/s/soviet/ukraine/resources/>>.

28) *Investigation of the Ukrainian Famine*, p. viii.

29) "Deklaration des Obersten Sowjets der Union der Union der Sozialistischen Sowjetrepublik: Über die Qualifizierung der Repressalien gegenüber den gewaltsam ausgesiedelten Völkern als gesetzwidrig und verbrecherisch sowie über die Gewährleistung ihrer Rechte [14 Nov. 1989]," *Neues Leben* (Moscow), No. 49 (29 Nov. 1989): p. 2.

30) Ample evidence indicates a close correlation between the former USSR's passage of rehabilitation measures for German minorities and the procurement of diplomatic and financial support from Germany. For instance, see Eric J. Schmaltz, "Reform, 'Rebirth,' and Regret: The Early Autonomy Movement of Ethnic Germans in the USSR, 1955-1989," Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of History, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2002.

31) "Zakon Rossiyskoy Sovetskoy Federativnoy Sotsialisticheskoy Respubliki 'O reabilitatsii repressirovannykh narodov' [26 Apr. 1991]," *Sovetskaya Rossiya* (Moscow), No. 90 (7 May 1991): p. 3.

32) Ibid.

33) Refer to Heinrich Groth, Yuri Haar, and Hugo Wormsbecher, "'Die Wiedergeburt': 'Die Wiedergeburt' schrieb an den UN-Generalsekretär Perez de Cuellar," 17 Jan. 1990 letter, *Volk auf dem Weg*, No. 3 (Mar. 1990): p. 5.

34) See the online article "Ukraine's Parliament Recognising 1930s Famine as Soviet Genocide" at <<http://www.russianspy.org/2006/11/29/ukraines-parliament-recognising-1930s-famine-as-soviet-genocide/>>.

35) Sinner, *Autumn Thoughts—Under Ruins and Snow: An Experiment in Ethnic Anthology, Two Centuries of German-Russian Poetry, Short Stories, and Essays* (Fargo, ND: Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, North Dakota State University Librarians, 2003), pp. xvii-xxi, 20-23. See also Sinner, "'Mein Teil ist, ganz in Asche aufzugehen': Johann Peter Sinner (Petr Ivanovich Zinner, 1879-1935): Russlanddeutscher Autor und Stalinopfer: Sein Werk und Schicksal," Ph.D. Dissertation, Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2002.

36) Ronald J. Vossler, "*We'll Meet Again in Heaven*": *Germans in the Soviet Union Write Their Relatives, 1925-1937* (Fargo, ND: Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, North Dakota State University Libraries, 2001), p. xvii. See also Vossler, *The Old God Still Lives: Ethnic Germans in Czarist and Soviet Ukraine Write Their American Relatives, 1915-1924* (Fargo, ND: Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, North Dakota State University Libraries, 2005).

37) Timothy J. Kloberdanz and Rosalinda Kloberdanz, "Muffled Voices from the Great Underground: Understanding the Vagaries of Soviet German Folklore and Poetry," *Journal of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Summer 2001): pp. 16-17.

38) Peter Rosenberg, "New Research on the Status of the German Language in the Soviet Union," trans. Christine Clayton, *Journal of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (Spring 1995): pp. 15, 21.

39) See, for example, Stephen F. Cohen, ed., *An End to Silence: Uncensored Opinion in the Soviet Union: From Roy Medvedev's Underground Magazine "Political Diary,"* trans. George Saunders (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Co., 1982).

40) Schmaltz, "Reform, 'Rebirth,' and Regret: The Rise and Decline of the Ethnic-German Nationalist *Wiedergeburt* Movement in the USSR and CIS, 1987-1993," *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (June 1998): pp. 215-247.

41) Douglas Tottle, *Fraud, Famine and Fascism: The Ukrainian Genocide Myth from Hitler to Harvard* (Toronto: Progress Books, 1987), p. 2.

42) R. J. Rummel, "Soviet Union, Genocide In: The Soviet Gulag State," in Charny, ed., *Encyclopedia of Genocide*, pp. 520-521. Cf. Rummel, *Death by Government* (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Transaction Publishers, 1994).

43) This point first appeared in Schmaltz, "Preface," in Sinner, *Letters from Hell: An Index to Volga-German Famine Letters Published in "Die Welt-Post" (1920-1925; 1930-1934)* (Lincoln, NE: American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, 2000), p. vi.

44) *Investigation of the Ukrainian Famine*, p. viii.

45) Ibid.

46) Martin Malia, "Foreword," in Courtois, ed., et al., pp. xii-xiii.

47) Schmaltz, "Preface," p. iv.

48) Malia, p. xx.

49) Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope: A Memoir*, trans. Max Hayward (New York: Atheneum, 1980), pp. 42-43.

50) To be fair, some current and former members of the political left have also participated in and contributed much to this effort to reclaim the past concerning the Soviet Union and communism in general. For example, famed historian Robert Conquest, the dean of academic scholarship on the Soviet deportation of nationalities and the Stalinist Terror, is a former British Communist from the 1930s. Conquest has coined the term "the good left" to describe those who will not sacrifice truth to ideology.

51) Leon Wieseltier, "Scar Tissue," *The New Republic*, Vol. 200, No. 23 (5 June 1989): p. 20.