

2007

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Recommended Citation

Benites, Kirsten (2007) "Repatriation of Ethnic Groups," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 46.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol7/iss1/46>



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Repatriation of Ethnic Groups

Abstract

From 1943 to 1949, almost 1.5 million ethnic minorities were deported from their homes in the southern USSR to Central Asia. Thousands died either during the trip or within the first few years after their arrival. For years, it was as if they had simply disappeared off the face of the earth. It was not until 1956 that the deportations were even acknowledged by the Soviet government, and only recently has repatriation begun. While some groups have had a relatively successful repatriation experience, others have experienced ethnic discrimination, making the return to their homelands difficult and in some cases impossible.

Keywords

Human rights, Russia, Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Ethnic groups

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Repatriation of Ethnic Groups

By Kirsten Benites

From 1943 to 1949, almost 1.5 million ethnic minorities were deported from their homes in the southern USSR to Central Asia. Thousands died either during the trip or within the first few years after their arrival. For years, it was as if they had simply disappeared off the face of the earth. It was not until 1956 that the deportations were even acknowledged by the Soviet government, and only recently has repatriation begun. While some groups have had a relatively successful repatriation experience, others have experienced ethnic discrimination, making the return to their homelands difficult and in some cases impossible.

There were six major groups that were singled out for persecution by the regime of Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin, most of whom were Muslims. For example, the Crimean Tatars are a Muslim Turkic people who settled on the Crimean peninsula, in what is now Ukraine, during the 13th century. When the Red Army recaptured the Crimea from the Germans in April 1944, Tatars who had collaborated with the Germans were killed immediately. On May 18th the remaining Tatars were rounded up to be deported to the Urals, Siberia, and Central Asia, though the majority ended up in Uzbekistan. Estimates of the number of deported Tatars range from 180,000 to 250,000 and it is estimated that between 20 percent and 40 percent of the deportees died en route or within the first year after resettlement. Even Tatars who had served in the Red Army to defend Russia were deported. This experience would be repeated with many other non-Slavic peoples across Russia in the final days of World War II.

The other major groups that were deported were from Southern Russia, between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. The Meskhetians (also known as Meskhetian Turks or Ahiska Turks) originally inhabited Meskhetia, a mountainous area on the Soviet-Turkish border, in what is now Georgia. The Ingush and the Chechens are two related Muslim groups from Southern Russia. They were the largest group of deportees, numbering almost half a million. The Karachays (Karachai, Karachaevtsy) and Balkars are also from Southern Russia and are among the most ancient of Caucasian peoples. The Kalmyks are the only Buddhist ethnic group in Europe, descended from Mongols, and they lived near the Volga River on the banks of the Caspian Sea. Reluctant to assimilate within the Soviet Union they were subject to persecution even before World War II.

There were many other smaller ethnic minorities living in Russia who were also deported at the whim of Stalin, although much less information exists about the experiences of these groups. They include Khemshils, Koreans, Greeks, Bulgarians, Armenians, Daghestanis and Volga Germans.

Beginning an official reconciliation policy, in 1956 Nikita Khrushchev made a secret speech to the 10th Party Congress detailing Stalin's crimes. This was the first official mention of the deportations. In his speech, Khrushchev pardoned the deported Kalmyks, Chechens, Ingush, Karachai and Balkars and paved the way for these peoples to return to their homelands. The Crimean Tatars and Meskhetians who were not mentioned were not allowed to return for several years. Even when the deported peoples did return they faced significant obstacles, many of which still persist.

All these groups were deported at a minute's notice, leaving behind homes, businesses, livestock and nearly all their possessions. They were replaced by ethnic Russians and Ukrainians, who, with

the express permission of the Soviet Government, took their possessions and lands. Now, as these groups try to return, they are also attempting to regain their homes and lands, an action which brings them into conflict with the local population.

In most areas, there was a concerted effort by the government and the populations that replaced the deportees to obliterate all traces of the deportees' culture. Books and manuscripts were burned, monuments, palaces, and mosques were destroyed. The new population also rewrote history in order to erase or change the role of the deported people. For example, the Tatars were made into the villains in many Russian films and stories, and the history of the Chechen/Ingush was changed to conceal the fact that they had inhabited the land before the Ossetians that replaced them.

Many of these peoples had inhabited Autonomous Republics in the years before World War II and had some degree of national self-rule. Following their deportation, many of the borders of these regions were redrawn to break up populations and make them minorities in regions controlled by others. Now that some of these groups have returned they want to control their own destinies and want their own nations. This is one of the main sources of conflict in Chechnya and the Prigorodnyi region between the Ingush and the Ossetians.

Another source of conflict arose in 1991, when the Soviet Union dissolved. Many of these people were left stateless, as citizens of neither Russia, the states to which they were deported, or the states that emerged in their former homelands. This has been a problem in particular for the Meskhetians, denied citizenship by Russia, Uzbekistan, Turkey and Georgia.

Because of property rights and citizenship issues, there is an increased possibility for abuse by local government and officials. Imposing arbitrary regulations, charging subjective regulatory fees, and denying basic legal rights are all frequent tactics employed by local officials to intimidate and repress these ethnic groups. For example, officials in the Krasnodar region of Russia use Cossack gangs to beat, rob and murder Meskhetians.

The situation of these exiled groups, still largely unresolved 60 years after the deportations, has lead to conflict and war across the former Soviet Union. Current events such as the massacre of children at a school in Beslan, are the result of the involved governments' inability to deal with these forgotten people. Unless mutually acceptable and lasting solutions can be found, the situation will only worsen.

Deportation

1996. [The Ingush-Ossetian Conflict in the Prigorodnyi Region](http://hrw.org/reports/1996/Russia.htm). New York: Human Rights Watch/Helsinki. <http://hrw.org/reports/1996/Russia.htm>.

Annotation: This report, published by Human Rights Watch, details the conflict between Ossetians and Ingush in the Prigorodnyi region of Russia during 1992. The historical background to the conflict is the deportation of the Ingush under Stalin, which allowed many ethnic Ossetians from a neighboring province to claim the possessions and property of the deportees. The report gives a brief background to the conflict and details the events of 1992, as well as more recent developments. The author discusses the human rights abuses committed, the

process of return for those displaced, and the response of the Russian government. The report includes maps.

Comins-Richmond, Walter. 2002. "The Deportation of the Karachays." *Journal of Genocide Research* 4 (3): 9.

Annotation: Author Walter Comins-Richmond is one of the leading authorities on the Karachay; this article is an excellent treatment of the deportations. Unlike many sources, which only briefly mention the Karachay, this article on this minority specifically. It does include some information on the recent repatriation experience, but is primarily concerned with a historical account of the deportations.

Conquest, Robert. 1970. *The Nation Killers: The Soviet Deportation of Nationalities*. Glasgow: Macmillan and Company.

Annotation: This book is a comprehensive survey of the deportations of the Crimean Tatars, Volga German, Meskhetian Turks, Kalmyks, Ingush, Chechens, Karachai and Balkars. It includes an excellent chapter on the territorial modifications and cultural changes that erased these people from history and memory. Though it contains no information on the situation since 1970, it is by far one of the most detailed examinations of the deportations and immediate aftermath.

Fisher, Alan. 1978. Crimean Tatars. Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press.

Annotation: This book provides comprehensive coverage of the Crimean Tatars' history from the 15th century to the 1970s. The first section covers the group's origins and the Crimean Tatar Khanate. Section two details the uneasy relationship between the Tatars and the Russian monarchy. The third section deals with the treatment of the Tatars under communism. It offers a detailed account of the deportation and early struggles for repatriation. It also offers some well-researched theories for the reason behind the deportation.

Kappeler, Andreas, Gerhard Simon, Georg Brunner, and Edward Allworth, eds. 1994. Muslim Communities Reemerge, Central Asia Book Series. Durham: Duke University Press.

Annotation: This is a collection of articles dealing with the current Muslim experience in the former Soviet Union. Because the majority of the deported nations were comprised of Muslim peoples, a fact that may have contributed to their discriminatory treatment, this book examines their experiences from a religious perspective. Of particular note include Azade-Ayse Rorlich's article "One or More Tatar Nations?" as well as Hans Braker's article "Soviet Policy Toward Islam" and Marie Broxup's article "Political Trends in Soviet Islam After the Afghanistan War." The collection also includes some statistical tables and figures.

Mirkhanova, Malika. 2006. "People in Exile: The Oral History of Meskhetian Turks (khyskha Turkleri)." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 26 (1): 12.

Annotation: This article focuses on the history and recent experiences of the Meskhetian Turks, the deportation under Stalin, the pogrom to which they were subjected in Uzbekistan, the persecution in Krasnodar, and the subsequent removal of many Meskhetians to the United States as refugees. The author sees the deportees as victims of political and social events outside their control. She also points out their unique status as 'stateless' people, emphasizing that they have been subjected to many more involuntary deportations than many others uprooted under Stalin.

Naimark, Norman M. 2001. Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Annotation: This book covers five different examples of ethnic cleansing in Europe during the twentieth-century. Section three deals with the Soviet deportation of the Crimean Tatars and Chechens-Ingush specifically. While many modern ethnographers and historians do not consider Stalin's deportations within the realm of ethnic cleansing, Naimark believes that this was a concentrated effort, if not to eliminate these peoples, then at least to completely strip them of their ethnic and national identity. Naimark's work is primarily focused on the historical events surrounding the deportations during and after World War II. It provides a concise account of the deportations, and is a good introduction to the topic.

Pohl, J. Otto. 1997. The Stalinist Penal System: A Statistical History of Soviet Repression and Terror, 1930-1953. Jefferson: Mc Farland and Company.

Annotation: This book offers brief accounts of some of the mass deportations, however, it is primarily a statistical record of the penal system under Stalin. It includes over 75 tables of statistics, including numbers and locations of exiles, numbers of deaths and births, and geographic distributions. It is comprised of two sections: incarceration, which primarily deals with individual political dissidents, and exile, which deals with entire exiled populations. The minority groups for which it includes statistics are: Volga Germans, Karachai, Kalmyks, Chechens and Ingush, Balkars, Crimean Tatars, and Khemshils.

_____. 1999. Ethnic Cleansing in the USSR, 1937-1949. Westport: Greenwood Press.

Annotation: Like Pohl's earlier book, The Stalinist Penal System, this book includes a large number of tables detailing the numbers and destination of those exiled. It includes information on all major groups: Crimean Tatars, Germans, Kalmyks, Karachai, Balkars, Meskhetian Turks, Khemshils, Chechens, and Ingush, but also has statistics for smaller deported groups such as

Koreans, Finns, Kurds, and Greeks. The focus of this book is on the events during and immediately following World War II.

_____. 2006. "Socialist Racism: Ethnic Cleansing and Racial Exclusion in the USSR and Israel." *Human Rights Review*, 22.

Annotation: J. Otto Pohl compares the Soviet treatment of minorities to the racism exhibited in Israel. Though not primarily concerned with the deportations and repatriation, it offers some possible explanations and motivations behind the way minorities were treated under Stalin and later Soviet leaders.

Richardson, Curtis. 2002. "Stalinist Terror and the Kalmyks' National Revival: A Cultural and Historical Perspective." *Journal of Genocide Research* 4 (3): 11.

Annotation: This article is a review of the historical aspects of the deportation, as well as a report on the recent cultural renewal among surviving Kalmyks in Kalmykia, and in the Diaspora. It gives a short account of the exile and discusses the fate of those who managed to escape the Soviet Union. It primarily discusses the return of the Kalmyks from a sociological perspective. The author is relatively optimistic about the survival of the Kalmyk culture, though he notes that the language is in many cases being replaced by Russian.

Sheehy, Ann. *The Crimean Tatars, Volga Germans and Meskhetians: Soviet Treatment of Some National Minorities*. London: Minority Rights Group.

Annotation: This report by Minority Rights Group is one of the most thorough sources on the subject of the deportations of the Meskhetian Turks and the Volga Germans, both of which have been somewhat neglected in the literature. It also covers the deportation of the Crimean Tatars. It focuses on these three groups out of the many national minorities that were deported, because at the time it was published, these were the three that had still not received official permission to return to their homelands. The section on each minority provides a historical background, an account of the deportation including statistics, political rehabilitation, and an evaluation of the current situation.

Simon, Gerhard. 1991. *Nationalism and Policy Towards the Nationalities in the Soviet Union: From Totalitarian Dictatorship to Post-Stalinist Society*. Translated by Karen Forster and Oswald Forster. Boulder: Westview Press.

Annotation: Originally published in Germany in 1989, this book was published in the United States in 1991. It details official policy towards ethnic minorities in the Soviet Union. This book includes information on all the major deported groups, but also some information on more obscure minorities.

Repatriation

1996. *The Ingush-Ossetian Conflict in the Prigorodnyi Region*. New York: Human Rights Watch/Helsinki. <http://hrw.org/reports/1996/Russia.htm>.

Annotation: This report, published by Human Rights Watch, details the conflict between Ossetians and Ingush in the Prigorodnyi region of Russia during 1992. The historical background to the conflict is the deportation of the Ingush under Stalin, which allowed many ethnic Ossetians from a neighboring province to claim the possessions and property of the deportees. The report gives a brief overview of the background of the conflict. It details the events of 1992, as well as the human rights abuses committed, the process of return for those displaced, and the response of the Russian government. The report includes maps.

1998. *Russian Federation: Ethnic Discrimination in Southern Russia*. New York: Human Rights Watch. <http://www.hrw.org/reports98/russia/>

Annotation: Ethnic discrimination in the Russian Federation has persisted and perhaps even worsened since the break-up of the Soviet Union. The government has failed to combat discrimination, and is in many ways responsible for perpetuating discriminatory practices. While this is evident in much of Russia, it is striking in Stavropol and Krasnodar, two provinces in southern Russia that make up part of the North Caucasus region. A common form of state-sponsored discrimination in these provinces is police harassment of ethnic Caucasians through selective enforcement of residence requirements (*propiska*) and mandatory registration of visitors. Police selectively enforce these rules, sometimes together with Cossack units—paramilitary organizations composed of ethnic Slavs that in southern Russia operate with government sanction—through arbitrary identity checks on the street, on highways, and in homes, during which victims are often forced to pay bribes and sometimes are beaten and detained.

2003. “Documenty?” *Discrimination on Grounds of Race in the Russian Federation*. London: Amnesty International.

Annotation: This Amnesty International report focuses on the rights of minorities in Russia, and mentions a few deported groups, such as Chechens and Meskhetians. The current situation in Chechnya, including human rights issues stemming from the WWII era deportations is covered, as well as the situation of minorities living outside of their homeland, such as in Moscow. It also addresses the struggle of the Meskhetians for citizenship, including violence by Cossack gangs in Krasnodar, and a hunger strike conducted in 2002. The report gives recommendations for the redress of these problems, including better education for law enforcement, and the prevention of torture.

Allworth, Edward A., ed. 1998. *The Tatars of Crimea: Return to the Homeland*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Annotation: A collection of writings about the Crimean Tatars and their repatriation, this book includes articles by American, British, Russian and Tatar authors. The articles are grouped into three sections: Forming a Modern Identity, The Ordeal of Forced Exile, and Returning to Crimea. This book also includes translations of several official documents about the Tatars, as well as an extensive bibliography of English-language sources about the Crimean Tatars.

Aydingun, Aysegul. 2002. "Ahiska (Meskhetian) Turks: Source of Conflict in the Caucasus?" *International Journal of Human Rights* 6 (2): 16.

Annotation: This article addresses the national and transnational effects of the Meskhetian problem in the Southern Caucasus. The author argues that due to the failures of the Russian and Georgian governments, the struggle of the Meskhetians began to have global effects, necessitating the intervention of uninvolved governments, such as the United States, which has allowed many Meskhetians to enter the U.S. as refugees. It documents the current situation of the Meskhetians, and is an excellent resource on the political machinations and negotiations involved.

Blacklock, Denika. 2005. Finding Durable Solutions for the Meskhetians: A Presentation of Preliminary Findings and a Roundtable Discussion with Government and Civil Society Actors in Georgia. *Report on the Joint Conference Organized by the ECMI and the State Minister of Georgia on Conflict Resolution Issues*. Tbilisi, Georgia: European Centre for Minority Issues.

Annotation: A source for up-to-date statistics and information on the Meskhetians, this report is the result of a conference held in Tbilisi which involved the Georgian government, the European Centre for Minority Issues, and several civil society groups, as well as the international community. It covers the current situation of the Meskhetians and the problems facing them upon return.

Burke, Justin. 1998. Meskhetian Turks: Solutions and Human Security. Open Society Institute. <http://www.osi.hu/fmp/html/meskpreface.html>.

Annotation: This report, published by George Soros's Open Society Institute is an excellent overall introduction to the situation of the Meskhetian Turks, including both the historical background and current information.

Comins-Richmond, Walter. 2002. "The Karachay Struggle after the Deportation." *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 22 (1): 17.

Annotation: This article is a comprehensive review of the deportation of the Karachays, their treatment under the Soviets, and their current struggle for an independent state. As opposed to the author's other article cited above, "The Deportation of the Karachays," this article focuses primarily on nationalist movements among the Karachay during the last fifty years.

Gorenburg, Dimitry P. 2003. Minority Ethnic Mobilization in the Russian Federation. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Annotation: This book does not exclusively deal with the nationalist struggles of those ethnic groups deported under Stalin, but places them in the context of a broader struggle between the state and minority groups in the ethnically diverse Russian Federation. In particular, it mentions the Balkars, Chechens, Ingush, Kalmyks and Crimean Tatars, as groups that have defined part of their repatriation experience in terms of a search for a nationalist identity.

Pentikainen, Oskari, and Tom Trier. 2004. Between Integration and Resettlement: The Meskhetian Turks. Flensburg: European Centre for Minority Issues.

Annotation: This is a report by the European Centre for Minority Issues on the current situation of the Meskhetian Turks. It includes social and demographic information from eight countries in Europe and Eurasia where Meskhetians currently live, covers Meskhetian advocacy groups, and addresses the continuing political negotiations between several countries as well as international organizations. The report also contains a review of current literature on the Meskhetians, and highlights areas for further study.

Ray, Kakoli. 2000. "Repatriation and De-Territorialization: Meskhetian Turks' Conception of Home." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 13 (4): 23.

Annotation: This article examines Meskhetian Turk refugees' ideas of home as a way of investigating repatriation. The author considers repatriation as a preferable solution, but concludes that there is some disconnect between the Meskhetian's concept of home, and the conventional view of home. The article also addresses the ability of the international refugee system to protect refugee rights.

Tishkov, Valery. 1997. *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and after the Soviet Union*. London: Sage.

Annotation: This book offers a detailed examination of the subject of ethnicity and nationalism in the post-Soviet era. Tishkov gives the context surrounding many of the current nationalist conflicts in Russia and the CIS. Though the author mentions the Kalmyks, Karachai and Meskhetians, it is primarily a resource about the Ingush and Chechens. The Ingush-Ossetian conflict and the war in Chechnya are both covered in detail, giving an excellent (though slightly dated) picture of conditions in those regions.

Uehling, Greta Lynn. 2004. *Beyond Memory: The Crimean Tatars Deportation and Return*. New York: Palgrave.

Annotation: Beyond Memory presents an ethnographic study of the Crimean Tatars' deportation and repatriation. It has less of a focus on the actual deportation; it focuses on personal accounts and interviews with both Tatars and members of the Russian community. It is primarily an exploration of the repatriation experience, and details the struggles of this group for the national collectivity. It is an excellent source of information about the ways in which the Tatars kept their identity during the deportation through collective memory and storytelling, as well as how Russian views on the Tatars changed over time. The book includes maps and photos.

van Tongeren, Paul, Hans van de Veen, and Juliette Verhoeven, eds. 2002. *Searching for Peace in Europe and Eurasia: An Overview of Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding Activities*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2002.

Annotation: This edited book is a collection of studies about ethnic conflict across Europe and Eurasia. It includes up-to-date information on several deported minorities. In part one, Valery Tishikov's essay "History and Legacies of the USSR" examines the results of the "multiethnic experiment" that was the Soviet Union. In part two of the book Anna Matveeva has a section on the Russian Federation, with emphases on the conflicts in Chechnya, Dagestan and North Ossetia/Ingushetia. There is also an overview of the Southern Caucasus by Jonathan Cohen and Anna Matveeva, which addresses the mass return of displaced persons in a regional light, examining the economic, social and political consequences. Finally, the section on Central Asia briefly mentions the current conditions of those deported who have not yet been able to return to their homelands. Part three is a directory of human rights and peacebuilding organizations for every country in Europe and Eurasia, providing a helpful starting point for further research.