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BROKEN DREAMS: THE PERSECUTION OF CZECHOSLOVAK REFUGEES IN THE USSR DURING WWII

Historical research

Similar to other countries of Eastern Bloc in Czechoslovakia it was, for obvious political reasons, not possible to explore the subject of the persecution of Czechoslovak citizens in the Soviet Union until the fall of the Communist regime. The first partial studies, articles and publications on this topic began to appear after 1989, while the beginnings of systematic historical research can be dated to the end of the 90's. Nowadays, two teams of Czech historians focus on similar topics.

Main problem is that the range of preserved archival sources related to the subject of persecutions Czechoslovak citizens and inhabitants of the Czech lands in the USSR is still markedly broad. However, the fact that the basic sources are scattered among Czech and foreign archives remains a problem, as does the fact that researchers' access to archives in post-Soviet countries whose collections contain key documents (in particular to central and regional archives in Russia and in eastern Ukraine) is limited.

Therefore it is necessary to draw important information from the testimonies of witnesses. In the framework of efforts to map the Czechoslovak memory of the Gulag, members of the Oral History Group at the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes (ÚSTR) have recorded more than 40 interviews with former prisoners of Soviet camps and dozens with surviving members of their families, not only in Czech Republic but also in foreign countries – Israel, Austria, US and one also in Lithuania. In addition, tens of written memoirs and thousands of letters, documents and photographs related to the subject have also been preserved in the Oral History Group's archive. Valuable recollections of Czechoslovak prisoners in Soviet camps can also be found in other archives centred on the preservation of oral historical sources.

We have also succeeded with comparing interviews with the materials of the NVKD preserved in Ukrainian archives, which contain many thousands files that the NVKD held on refugees who had crossed the border to the USSR during WWII. We started with our research in State Archives in 2012 and later we have continued in Archives of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) in Lviv and Kiev. Especially representatives of the Central SBU Archive in Kiev are more and more willing to our research after Euromaidan in 2014. Until now we have been going through hundreds of such files from this archives. An analysis of the data provides us with a basic outline of the profile and fates of the refugees to the USSR – primarily important information on individuals or entire groups that were arrested on the territory of the USSR and subsequently sentenced to long terms in corrective labour camps.

The WWII Period

At the start of World War II., hundreds of thousands of refugees from the Nazi-occupied countries of Europe sought shelter in numerous states around the world, encountering varying degrees of understanding and openness on the part of local governments. Refugees met a particular approach in the Soviet Union, where at the turn of the 30s and 40s “spymania” had just reached a peak and society was paralyzed by an atmosphere of fear. Hundreds of thousands of refugees who crossed the Soviet border, some of whom found themselves on territory occupied during the war by the USSR, frequently became the victims of its repressive regime. They were charged by the Soviet security agencies with espionage or illegally crossing the border and became slaves in the Gulag (Chief Administration of Corrective Labour Camps and Colonies) corrective work camps, where many perished. Among the victims were tens of thousands Czechoslovaks.

After the Nazi occupation of Bohemia and Moravia in March 1939, the Hungarian occupation of Carpathian Ruthenia (the most eastern part of pre-war Czechoslovakia) in the same month and the outbreak of WWII in September 1939, more and more Czechoslovak citizens facing the threat of Nazi occupation set off for Soviet territory (which from the middle of September 1939 included part of former eastern Poland). Some of them opted to move to the Soviet Union, while some found themselves on its territory due to the Soviet occupation of Eastern Poland.

Czechoslovak refugees reached Soviet territory in two main waves. In the wake of the annexation of Czechoslovakia in March 1939, the greatest number of refugees headed for Poland, most often to big cities nearest border – Krakow and Katowice, where they attempted

to get visas to the West, in particular to the UK and US. But after the German attack on Poland on 1 September 1939, they moved further east in Poland, most frequently to Lviv, with the aim of reaching the USSR, Romania or other independent states. However, two weeks after the German attack on Poland, the Soviets launched their own occupation of the eastern part of the country. In this way the majority of Czechoslovak refugees found themselves under the administration of Soviet occupiers. Among them were several hundred Czechs and Slovaks and 4 000 or 5 000 of Czechoslovaks Jews seeking protection from racial persecution.

The second wave of refugees came from the most easterly part of pre-war Czechoslovakia: Carpathian Ruthenia. It was occupied by the Hungarian Army on the same day (15th of March 1939) that the occupation of Bohemia and Moravia began. Repression of the local population, growing anti-Semitism and conscription to Hungarian Army work units led to a wave of emigration by thousands (estimated today to have numbered 6, 000 – 8, 000) inhabitants of Czechoslovak Ruthenia, predominantly young people, to the Soviet Union.

A specific group of Czechoslovak Jews persecuted in the USSR consists of prisoners from the first Nazi-organised deportation transports of European Jews in the history of the Holocaust, which were dispatched by the Nazis to Nisko region in the eastern part of occupied Poland. According to Nazis there should come into being Jewish reservation. The fates of thousands Jews who were deported at the end of October 1939 from Ostrava (Czechoslovakia), Katowice (Poland) and Vienna (Austria) to Nisko were particularly bitter. Although a decision had been taken to halt “Operation Nisko” before it had even begun, only selected prisoners arrived at an unfinished camp by the village of Zarzecze; the majority of them (over 4,000) were expelled after arrival to Nisko by the Nazis to Lublin in the north or to the nearby new German-Soviet border (demarcation line), which they were forced to cross.

The strict punishment of illegal crossing of the Soviet state border combined with the introduction of Soviet administration in annexed territories resulted in the mass arrest of “spies” and other “persons hostile to the state” in 1939-1941. The majority of czechoslovak refugees were also arrested and charged with illegally crossing the border, being in the Soviet Union illegally or espionage, either immediately after setting foot on Soviet territory or during NKVD raids on “unreliable elements” in the western part of soviet territory (recently polish territory) in the course of 1940–1941. They subsequently faced being sentenced to most frequently three to five (in serious cases to eight) years of forced labour and being sent to Gulag labour camps (in the Pechora, Kolyma, Norilsk, Karaganda oblasts and elsewhere) or

without judgment to work on kolkhozes in Siberia. Living conditions were there very hard and many of them died sooner or later during their imprisonment.

Hope shone for prisoned Czechoslovaks at the start of 1942 when the Soviet government committed to granting them a general amnesty if they signed up to the nascent Czechoslovak military unit in the USSR. However, the amnesty did not concern “persons suspected of espionage against the USSR”, so many imprisoned Czechoslovaks were not freed and they had to stay in camps until their sentences finished and sometimes longer (because their sentence were prolonged).

The majority of the prisoners released from Gulag or NKVD prisons (at first this chiefly concerned Czechoslovak Jews, though following certain complications many Ruthenians were also granted liberty) signed up as volunteers to a eastern Czechoslovak military unit formed in the city of Buzuluk. In the remainder of the war they took part in battles on the Eastern Front, therefore contributing significantly to the defeat of Nazi Germany and the liberation of Czechoslovakia. However, many who had survived the hardships of the Gulag died on the field of battle. Of course people who survived couldn't speak about their experiences with soviet reality in postwar Czechoslovakia which ended in the Soviet sphere of political influence.

Conclusion

A rough estimate puts the total number of Czechoslovak citizens persecuted in the Soviet Union during WWII between 11, 000 - 15, 000. That is more than some thousands fewer than was believed until quite recently – previous estimate 20, 000 - 25, 000. The reduced figure is the result of detailed research carried out in the Ukrainian archives of the NKVD, especially according to which the number of persecuted citizens of Carpathian Ruthenia was significantly lower than original estimates suggested. We are hopeful of more specified estimates in the near future.