

**‘Is it Genocide or not?’**  
**Some Considerations about the Ethnic Cleansing and**  
**Punishment System in Soviet Union (1930s-1950s)**  
[Fu “genocidio” o no? Alcune considerazioni sulla pulizia etnica e il sistema  
di persecuzione nell’URSS tra gli anni ’30 e gli anni ‘50]

*Iuliia Iashchenko\**, *Andrea Carteny\*\**

*Abstract*

**[En.]** This study examines Stalin-era ethnic cleansing in the Soviet Union, focusing on the mass repression and deportation of groups such as the Volga Germans and Crimean Tatars. It introduces the debate, supported by specific evidence, about the deliberate oppression of ethnic minorities as part of Stalinist Soviet policy, as legitimised by legal measures. Through actions such as forced relocation, executions and cultural suppression, the analysis explores how Soviet policy aimed to dismantle ethnic identities without outright destruction. It situates these actions within genocide studies, drawing on the theories of Raphael Lemkin and UN definitions. Ultimately, it calls for a nuanced view of ethnic persecution in the USSR, emphasising the legal and historical impact of these localised acts of genocide on the communities affected.

**[It.]** Il contributo esamina le dinamiche della pulizia etnica dell’epoca staliniana in Unione Sovietica, concentrandosi sulla repressione di massa e sulla deportazione di gruppi quali i tedeschi del Volga e i tatars di Crimea. Introduce il dibattito, supportato da prove specifiche, sulla soppressione intenzionale delle minoranze etniche come parte della politica sovietica staliniana, come legittimata da misure legislative. Attraverso trasferimenti forzati, esecuzioni e soppressione culturale, l’analisi esplora come le politiche sovietiche mirassero a smantellare le identità etniche senza una vera e propria distruzione. Collocando queste azioni all’interno degli studi sul genocidio, la ricerca si basa sulle teorie di Raphael Lemkin e sulle definizioni delle Nazioni Unite. In ultima analisi, si propone una visione sfumata della persecuzione etnica nell’URSS, sottolineando l’impatto legale e storico di queste azioni genocidarie localizzate sulle comunità colpite.

*Keywords:* Eastern European Studies – Stalinism – History of camps – Genocide Studies – Transitional Justice.

*Parole-chiave:* Studi sull’Europa orientale – Stalinismo – Storia dei campi – Studi sul genocidio – Giustizia di transizione.

---

\* Ph.D. European History, Sapienza University of Rome.

\*\* Associate Professor of History of International Relations, Sapienza University of Rome. The essay was peer-reviewed by the Editorial Board. Members of the Editorial Team who oversaw the essay: Arianna Angeli and Laura A. Nocera.

CONTENTS: 1. Introduction. 2. Intentional Destruction or Random Losses? Historical Perspectives in Legal Context on Ethnic Cleansing Under Stalinism. 3. The Soviet Suppression System and the Discussion of Usage the Framework of Genocide Studies to the Topic.

## 1. Introduction

The suggestion of approaching the delicate and slippery question of whether some historical events and policies can be defined as ‘genocide’ has emerged from the study of various cases, trying to understand the relationship between systematic and exterminatory acts of violence: thus, the analysis of genocides in history and the broad application of this term. In doing so, it is important to understand the processes and patterns that link genocides in history to the present day. Within the references to works of different disciplines (such as history, sociology, psychology, and political science), a comparative approach may seem better able to fit and define various aspects of specific policies and phenomena that happened in the past<sup>1</sup>.

The definition of the term ‘genocide’ must recall the original definition<sup>2</sup> and be contextualized both geographically and historically, linked to complex phenomena (such as the rise of the West, the advent of modernity of the ‘nation-State’ as a homogeneous State-society) and framed within a different principle to realize mass murders, massacres, ethnic cleansing, facilitated during warfare. Different templates of genocide(s) may emerge through the tenet at the origin of the people targeted, based on the *genos*, the *ethnos*, or the *demos* as meaningful concepts to drive violent policies against individuals and groups. Going beyond the concerned definition of United Nations Convention (1948)<sup>3</sup>, a deeper connection between systemic violence, warfare and genocide can be followed among different cases in the search for common factors (primarily the government or the regime of State)

---

<sup>1</sup> M. Levene, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation State* vol. 1 *The Meaning of Genocide*, I.B. Tauris, 2008. See also M. Levene, P. Roberts (Eds.), *The Massacre in History*, Berghahn Books, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> R. Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944.

<sup>3</sup> *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide*, Approved and proposed for signature and ratification or accession by General Assembly resolution 260 A (III) of 9 December 1948 (entry into force: 12 January 1951), [un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.1\\_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.1_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf) (last access: 31<sup>st</sup> October 2024). See particularly Art. II, where “genocide” means the «acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group».

and parameters, such as that is the «perpetrator, not the victim (or bystander) who defines the group»<sup>4</sup> targeted by the genocide's policies<sup>5</sup>.

First examples to be considered are the *Aghet* (or destruction of Ottoman Armenians, 1915-16) and the *Shoah* (1941-45), where the latter shows the characteristics of the «genocide of genocides», a kind of ideal type of a «total genocide»<sup>6</sup>. This 'real' genocide is marked by the *genos*, with a no-exception principle in the fulfillment of the destruction of the target group: defined by religion, extended as a biological term, in Nazi Germany no Jew defined by the Nurnberg laws (1935) can escape – neither by any confessional conversion – from the legal consequences of these acts because of racial (and not religious) target<sup>7</sup>.

The Armenian genocide appears to be a form of genocide, as the Armenian community – targeted largely due to their religious identity and location in a sensitive border region during the conflict with the Russian Empire – was deemed a 'dangerous' group. Under military orders, Armenians were forcibly deported from their ancestral lands because of imperial security reasons, with the deportations carried out through widespread killings and systemic violence. This policy reflects an ethnic cleansing military campaign<sup>8</sup>. However, there were exceptions: individuals, primarily women, who converted to Islam and married Muslims, and who were deemed 'sincerely Muslim' by local authorities, were permitted to retain

---

<sup>4</sup> M. Levene, *The Meaning of Genocide*, cit., 79.

<sup>5</sup> See the website *The Holocaust*: 'holocaust.com.au/the-facts/genocide-and-human-rights/' (last access: 31<sup>st</sup> October 2024), and the references recommended, such as: L. Kuper, *Genocide*, Yale University Press, 1981; E. Staub, *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence*, Cambridge University Press, 1989; C. Tatz, *With Intent to Destroy*, Verso, 2003; B. Wiltshire, *Get 'Em All! Kill 'Em!*, Lexington Books, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> In an overwhelming literature on this issue, see in the website *Holocaust Memorial Day Trust*, Professor David Cesarani's Introduction to the Holocaust – Part One', at the link:

[www.hmd.org.uk/resource/professor-david-cesarani-introduction-to-the-holocaust-part-one/](http://www.hmd.org.uk/resource/professor-david-cesarani-introduction-to-the-holocaust-part-one/) (last access: 31<sup>st</sup> October 2024); R. Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, Yale University Press, 2003<sup>3</sup> (1<sup>st</sup> edition, 1961); Y. Bauer, *A hHistory of the Holocaust*, Franklin Watts, 2001, and also, on the 'final solution' plan, Ch. Gerlach, *The Wannsee Conference, the Fate of German Jews, and Hitler's Decision in Principle to Exterminate All European Jews*, in *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 70, No. (4), 1998, 759-812. METTERE IN ORDINE ALFABETICO

<sup>7</sup> Similar and analogical origin and practice of the genocidal policy and mobilization seems to appear in the Rwandan genocide (1994). See M. Levene, *The Meaning of Genocide*, cit. and also: R. Lemarchand, *Remembering Genocides in Central Africa*, Routledge, 2021; M. Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda*, Princeton University Press, 2020; G. Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis, 1959-1994: History of a Genocide*, Columbia University Press, 1995; F. Reyntjens, *L'Afrique des grands lacs en crise. Rwanda, Burundi, 1988-1994*, Karthala, 1994.

<sup>8</sup> In a wide (and controversial) literature, see: V. N. Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasus*, Berghahn Books, 2004<sup>6</sup> (1<sup>st</sup> edition, 1995); T. Akçam, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility*, Metropolitan Books, 2006; G. Lewy, *The Armenian Massacres in Ottoman Turkey: A Disputed Genocide*, University of Utah Press, 2005.

their lives and property. This differentiation, particularly when compared to the Jewish Holocaust, suggests that the *Aghet* may be more accurately described as an ‘ethnocide’, a targeted destruction based on ethnicity rather than total annihilation<sup>9</sup>.

Different from these cases seems to be the Soviet plan of *kulak* murder (1929-33): the target people, in this case, is not made by biological criteria, but it is an organic collectivity perceived as such, politically (and ideologically) *demos*, namely as a group marked off from ‘loyal’ people because ‘dangerous’ to the State and enemy of the nation. The *Holodomor* should be called ‘democide’, because «the targeted group is the product of the perpetrator’s assemblage of social reality»<sup>10</sup>, *i.e.* this group is an ‘aggregate’ population. In the case of *Holodomor*, the overlapping of this target group with Ukrainian villages and communities brings to talk about of a Ukrainian genocide<sup>11</sup>.

This article explores the historical foundations of ethnic cleansing and persecution in the USSR, emphasizing the central role of the RSFSR’s (Soviet Russia) legislative system as the backbone of Soviet legal practices. Although each Soviet Republic nominally maintained its own constitution and penal codes, these were effectively replicas of the RSFSR’s legal framework, underscoring the RSFSR’s legal and political supremacy across the Soviet Union.

Key instruments of repression, such as Article 58 of the RSFSR Criminal Code, were universally applied, enabling NKVD bodies to execute mass persecutions regardless of regional borders. Moreover, the system, instrumental in executing these repressive policies, operated under the direct oversight of NKVD structures and the Kremlin, consolidating control in Moscow. This centralized governance not only institutionalized ethnic and political persecution but also facilitated a uniform

---

<sup>9</sup> Analogue phenomenon of ethnic cleansing appears in many violent campaigns in warfare, such as the ethnic cleansing in Balkans and Yugoslavia, during WW2 and post-Yugoslavian wars (see: P. Mojzes. *Balkan Genocides: Holocaust and Ethnic Cleansing in the Twentieth Century*, Rowman and Littlefield, 2011). Other regions and territories of Eastern Europe interested by military campaigns experienced ethnic cleansing policies and became the theater of “ethnocide” during 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Among many examples, we should mention the case of the Circassian “genocide” (or *Tsitsekun*): Circassians were massacred and deported by Russian Army during 60s and 70s of 19<sup>th</sup> century military campaigns (see: R. Walter, *The Circassian Genocide. Genocide, Political Violence, Human Rights*, Rutgers University Press, 2013; F. L. Grassi, *Una Nuova Patria. L’esodo dei Circassi verso l’Impero Ottomano*, ISI, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> M. Levene, *The Meaning of Genocide*, cit., 88. By the same principle, also the mass killings in Cambodia carried out by Khmer Rouge (1978) is defined a ‘democide’. See K.D. Jackson (Ed.), *Cambodia 1975-1978: Rendezvous with Death*, Princeton university Press, 1989.

<sup>11</sup> See R. Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow. Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*, University of Alberta Press, 1986; R. W. Davies, Stephen S.G. Wheatcroft (Eds.), *The Years of Hunger: Soviet Agriculture, 1931-1933*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004; E. Cinnella, *Ucraina. Il genocidio dimenticato*, Della Porta, 2015; see also further references related to these issues in the following paragraphs.

system of repression, with the RSFSR's laws serving as the legislative foundation across the entire Soviet Union.

Coming to the ethnic cleansing policies during Stalinism, as case study for this article, we should consider the opportunity to define these phenomena in many ways, in the range of the 'genocide' concept. Targeting several communities as 'dangerous' or 'unloyal' by ethnicity, because ethnic origin oriented to be naturally against the Soviet people and the Socialist ideology, the Stalinist practice applies parameters related to the 'democide' with some characteristic (and consequence) of the 'genocide' by race (to be concentrated in labor camps) and to the 'ethnocide' by ethnic cleansing (also out of the wartime). The archival documentation shows through many examples the legal fulfillment of the 'genocide' parameters also according to the UN Convention.

## ***2. Intentional Destruction or Random Losses? Historical Perspectives in Legal Context on Ethnic Cleansing Under Stalinism***

The USSR's approach to national politics stands as a historical case of ethnic cleansing, employing a range of repressive tactics. Soviet leadership directed political persecution at ethnic groups, notably through mass arrests under Article 58 of the RSFSR Criminal Code<sup>12</sup>, which was widely applied against minorities. Entire populations or large segments of ethnic communities faced forced relocation during Stalin's deportations. Economic policies, such as collectivization and dekulakization, further targeted these groups, often leading to economic devastation. Additionally, propaganda and nationalist disinformation were utilized, with State-

---

<sup>12</sup> It is essential to emphasize key historical characteristics of the legislative system's practical implementation in the USSR. While each Soviet Republic, such as the RSFSR (Soviet Russia) and the Ukrainian SSR, had its own constitution and legal framework (e.g., criminal and administrative code), the primary governing legal framework for the entire USSR was rooted in the RSFSR's laws and constitution. The legislative systems of the other 'autonomous' republics were literal replicas of the RSFSR's legal and political structures.

For example, Article 58 of the RSFSR Criminal Code, a cornerstone of political repression, was applied across all Soviet Republics, enabling NKVD and KGB (later NGB) bodies to enforce it uniformly throughout the Union. However, if an individual was prosecuted within the jurisdiction of a specific Republic, the initial legal process adhered to that region's Criminal Code, albeit essentially identical to the RSFSR's framework. For instance, in the Ukrainian SSR, Article 54 of the Criminal Code mirrored Article 58 of the RSFSR Criminal Code. Additionally, once a convict was transferred to GULAG camps or prisons, all documentation and legal proceedings were conducted under the RSFSR's laws and exclusively in Russian. This centralized control underscores the RSFSR's legal dominance throughout the USSR. Understanding the true legislative authority of the RSFSR's laws within the broader Soviet system is thus vital to avoid misinterpretation of their overarching influence. See M. Fainsod, *How Russia is Ruled*, Harvard University Press, 1958; A. Applebaum, *GULAG: A History*, Doubleday, 2003; O. Khlevniuk, *The History of the GULAG: From Collectivization to the Great Terror*, Yale University Press, 2015.

controlled media portraying certain ethnic groups as ‘untrustworthy’ and educational curricula embedding discriminatory narratives<sup>13</sup>. Cultural and linguistic assimilation in the USSR included Russification policies, the suppression of language diversity, and the eradication of traditional customs<sup>14</sup>. The national politics of the USSR also included measures of targeted violence, such as mass executions exemplified by Stalin’s shooting lists, the *Holodomor* in Ukraine, mass shootings during national operations in Ukraine and the Volga region, and military campaigns against ethnic minorities in Ukraine, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan<sup>15</sup>.

The research findings reveal distinct features of ethnic persecution in the Soviet Union during the Stalinist era, particularly in specific regions and against certain ethnic groups. Many persecuted ethnic communities, often subjected to deportation, were not only forcibly removed from their home regions to distant areas or Northern Russia (Urals, Siberia, Far-East regions) but were also frequently resettled in open fields without shelter or basic means of subsistence<sup>16</sup>. The research findings reveal that ethnic minorities under Stalinist persecution were not merely imprisoned in standard prisons and camps but were often sent to specialized GULAG camps designated specifically for managing ethnic groups. Many Russian Germans, Crimean Tatars, Baltic people, and Crimean Italians were assigned to the ‘labor army’, which placed them in these ethnic-specific GULAG camps, where they faced life-threatening conditions and extreme workload<sup>17</sup>. In some of these camps, annual mortality rates reached as high as 74-80% between 1942 and 1945<sup>18</sup>. For ethnic minorities, forced replacements were mainly associated with family separation<sup>19</sup> and sometimes children would be taken from families and put in orphanages in the USSR<sup>20</sup>.

---

<sup>13</sup> V. Tishkov, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict in and after the Soviet Union: The Mind Aflame*, Sage Publications, 1997.

<sup>14</sup> A. Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: A Multi-Ethnic History*, Longman, 1989.

<sup>15</sup> L.Y. Luciuk, L. Grekul, *Holodomor: Reflections on the Great Famine of 1932-1933 in Soviet Ukraine*, Kashtan Press, 2008.

<sup>16</sup> V. Davoliūtė, T. Balkelis (Eds.), *Narratives of Exile and Identity: Soviet Deportation Memoirs from the Baltic States*, Central European University Press, 2018; O. Gabor, *Re-creation of Normality in the Absurd Space of Deportations to the Siberian GULAG*, Vergentis, 2019, 1-10.

<sup>17</sup> K. Racevskis, *Voices from the GULAG: A review essay*, in *Journal of Baltic Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 3, 1993, 299-306.

<sup>18</sup> With reference to living conditions in ethnic camps of the GULAG system and mortality rate, see T. S. Kisser, *Germans of the Urals: Ethnohistory and Identity*, MAE RAS, 2019, 25-30. P. Polian, *Against Their Will: The History and Geography of Forced Migrations in the USSR*, Central European University Press, 2004.

<sup>19</sup> S. Merl, *Review of the book The Unknown GULAG: The Lost World of Stalin’s Special Settlements*, by L. Viola, in *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas, Neue Folge*, Vol. 57, No. 2, 2009, 297-299. D. Budrytė, *Deportation and GULAG as Gendered Processes*, in *The Routledge Handbook of Gender in Central-Eastern Europe and Eurasia*, Routledge, 2021, 9.

<sup>20</sup> M. Craveri, A. M. Losonczy, *Growing Up in the GULAG: Later Accounts of Deportation to the USSR*, CERCEC – Centre d’études des mondes russe, caucasien et centre-européen, EPHE - École

As it was noted above, during mass deportations and repressions, the victims would be transferred to GULAG facilities which were directed by NKVD bodies located in Moscow. Then, most of the children would end up either in the facilities in the RSFSR or in the autonomous republics where most of the GULAG camps were located (Central Asia). As it was practiced many times in modern and contemporary history, GULAG camps for ethnic and political prisoners were concentration camps as this term describes the concentration of people who belong to the same or close ethnic group<sup>21</sup>, political and social status<sup>22</sup>.

The structure of the GULAG system was established through a series of decrees and organizational changes that defined its various components and functions<sup>23</sup>. These camps, settlements, and prisons were designed to serve the Soviet State's objectives of punishment, control, and economic exploitation.

1. **Labor Army**: Formed during wartime, particularly during World War II, the 'labor army' consisted of forced laborers including ethnic minorities and other groups considered politically unreliable or potentially dangerous. These individuals were conscripted into labor battalions and deployed in construction, forestry, and other labor-intensive sectors.
2. **Filtration Camps**: Established to process, interrogate, and screen individuals returning from areas under German occupation or Soviet citizens repatriated from abroad. Filtration camps aimed to identify potential collaborators and politically suspicious individuals.
3. **Corrective Labor Camps (ITL)**: These camps were formally organized under the OGPU by the decree of the Council of People's Commissars (SNK USSR) adopted on July 11, 1929, «On the Use of Labor of Convicted Criminals». On April 25, 1930, the OGPU issued Order No. 130/63, which led to the establishment of the Administration of Corrective Labor Camps

---

Pratique des Hautes Études, 2014; T. Balkelis, *Ethnicity and Identity in the Memoirs of Lithuanian Children Deported to the GULAG*, in V. Davoliūtė, T. Balkelis (Eds.), *Narratives of Exile and Identity*, cit., 41-64. The tragedy of the separation of family units is also a key narrative in the collective memory of the affected ethnic groups, particularly mentioned in numerous interviews with Russian Germans, Crimean Tatars, Crimean Italians and representatives of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia who faced the Stalinist repressions of 1930-1950. See P. Polian, *Against Their Will: The History and Geography of Forced Migrations in the USSR*, cit., 2004 and E. Dundovich, F. Gori, E. Guercetti, *L'emigrazione italiana in Unione Sovietica e le repressioni politiche dal 1918 al 1953*. Memorial Italia, memorial-italia.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/fonti.pdf.

<sup>21</sup> A. Roginsky, E. Zhemkova, *Mezhdú sochustviem i ravnodushiem – rehabilitatsia zhertv sovetskikh repressii* [Between sympathy and indifference: Rehabilitation of the victims of Soviet repressions], Memorial, 2016. Published in English as *The scale of Soviet political terror on GULAG Online*.

<sup>22</sup> E. Zhemkova, *Masshtaby sovetskogo politicheskogo terora* [The scale of Soviet political terror], Memorial, 2016, memo.ru/media/uploads/2017/08/22/masshtaby-sovetskogo-politicheskogo-terora.pdf.

<sup>23</sup> G. M. Ivanova, *GULAG v sisteme totalitarnogo gosudarstva GULAG* [GULAG in the System of Totalitarian State], Pervyi Pechatnyi Dvor, 1997.

of the OGPU (ULag OGPU) to manage all convicts sentenced to three years or more<sup>24</sup>. By October 1, 1930, the ULag OGPU was transformed into the Main Administration of Corrective Labor Camps of the OGPU (GULAG). In 1934, the GULAG was transferred to the newly formed People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD), which integrated the camp system into its broader security and control apparatus<sup>25</sup>. These camps were primarily used for forced labor, with inmates engaged in construction, mining, forestry, and industrial work.

4. **Special Camps:** Established in the post-war period for high-profile political prisoners, such as former government officials, members of opposition groups, and others considered ideologically deviant or dangerous. Special camps were characterized by stricter controls and harsher conditions.
5. **Special Settlements:** Established under the supervision of the GULAG, OGPU, and later NKVD, these were areas designated for entire deported ethnic groups or individuals forcibly relocated from their places of origin. Special settlements operated with camp-like conditions, with severe control, forced labor, and surveillance over their inhabitants. Rights were heavily restricted, and conditions were harsh.
6. **Corrective Labor Colonies:** Functioned similarly to prisons, these were used to detain individuals sentenced to shorter terms (less than three years). They were smaller scale forced labor sites, focusing on less severe crimes. On October 27, 1934, the GULAG took over all corrective labor institutions from the People's Commissariat of Justice of the RSFSR<sup>26</sup>.
7. **Camps for Wives and Families of Enemies of the People:** Established specifically to detain the spouses and children of those accused of political crimes. These camps operated under harsh conditions, with restricted rights and limited freedoms for the inmates.
8. **Prisons for Minors:** Facilities designed to incarcerate minors, often the children of 'enemies of the people' or those accused of various crimes. These prisons aimed at 'reeducation' through labor and ideological indoctrination, reflecting the regime's desire to control and shape future generations.
9. **Prisons for Court-Accused Inmates:** Used primarily to detain individuals awaiting trial or court verdicts. Many of the inmates were common

---

<sup>24</sup> T.V. Tsarevskaya-Dyakina, *История сталинского ГУЛага. Конец 1920-х – первая половина 1950-х годов: Собрание документов в 7 томах GULAG [History of Stalin's GULAG: Late 1920s to the early 1950s: Collection of documents in 7 volumes]*, ROSSPEN, 2004.

<sup>25</sup> A.N. Yakovlev et al. (Eds.), *Zvenya. GULAG: Main Camp Administration. 1918-1960*, "Materik Publishing, 2002.

<sup>26</sup> M.B. Smirnov, (Ed.), *Sistema ispravitel'no-trudovykh lagerei SSSR [The system of corrective labor camps in the USSR]*, 1998.



criminals, and these prisons were characterized by severe conditions, including overcrowding and inadequate living standards.

Additionally, from 1936 onward, the NKVD expanded its reach by establishing several specialized administrative departments. For example, on January 4, 1936, the Engineering and Construction Department of the NKVD was formed, followed by the creation of the Special Construction Administration on January 15, 1936, and the Main Directorate for Highway Construction (GUSHOSDOR) on March 3, 1936<sup>27</sup>. These departments managed various enterprises, such as the Main Administration for the Construction of Mining and Metallurgical Enterprises and the Main Hydroelectric Construction Administration, which utilized GULAG labor for major infrastructure projects.

When discussing the deportations of the Soviet Union, it is essential to understand that there were several different methods employed. In cases of complete population relocation, various resettlement options were available. Primarily, families and ethnic communities were divided. Individuals from the same village were typically not resettled together, mainly to prevent potential resistance and to consolidate ethnic minorities. Some individuals were sent to labor camps, while others were relocated to special settlements.

In instances where relocation involved uninhabited areas, individuals were often resettled into undeveloped lands or forests<sup>28</sup>. Prisoners and deportees in the USSR faced the harsh reality of constructing their own shelters upon arrival at their assigned locations, often in desolate and inhospitable areas. Typically, they were brought to barren fields or remote regions devoid of any existing infrastructure or shelter, leaving them exposed to extreme climatic conditions. Before they could inhabit any form of housing, they were tasked with building it themselves, using rudimentary tools provided by the authorities. This process, dictated by survival rather than humane planning, underscored the brutal indifference of Soviet policies towards the well-being of the deportees. The construction of barracks and other dwellings was not only a prerequisite for their habitation but also a method of exerting control and dehumanizing labor over the displaced individuals, forcing

---

<sup>27</sup> By the decree of the Central Executive Committee (CEC) and the Council of People's Commissars (CPC) of the USSR dated October 28, 1935, published in *Pravda* on October 29, 1935, the Central Directorate for Highways and Dirt Roads and Motor Transport (TsUDORTRANS) was transferred to the NKVD of the USSR. Based on Decree No. 424 of the CPC of the USSR dated March 3, 1936, TSUDORTRANS of the NKVD was reorganized into the Main Directorate for Highways (GUSHOSDOR) of the NKVD by NKVD Order No. 0086 of March 4, 1936. Local departments for highways (USHOSDORs) were organized within the NKVD of the Ukrainian SSR, the Transcaucasian SFSR, the Belarusian SSR, the NKVD departments for the Moscow and Leningrad regions, and the Far Eastern Territory. In other republics, territories, and regions, highway departments (OSHOSDORs) were established within the local NKVD departments.

<sup>28</sup> C. Engel, B. Menzel (Eds.), *Russland und/als Eurasien: Kulturelle Konfigurationen*, Frank & Timme, 2018.

them to create the very structures they would struggle to survive in. This practice was not unique to the Soviet Union; it was also utilized in the ALZHIR camp for repressed wives of «the enemies of the people»<sup>29</sup>, the camp was located in Kazakh SSR, Akmola city and it was fully built up by the inmates. Women sent there were often compelled to construct barracks for themselves initially<sup>30</sup>.

Some people were sent to existing camps where they lived in barrack-like conditions<sup>31</sup>. Others were sent to settlements within the corrective labour camps of the GULAG system, where they were sometimes housed in houses, mostly barracks, or forced to build their own dwellings. However, a significant number of people were specifically sent to GULAG camps of a barracks-type nature. For a long time, it was believed that people from ethnic groups, who were often sent to work armies, received special privileges because they were mobilized as workers rather than mere camp inmates. However, this was merely a false assertion, an ideological ploy by the Soviet government, because the living conditions in the labour army, which were particularly emphasized, were critical for ethnically oppressed people. As discussed above, these conditions must be considered life-threatening. In cases where the entire population was not relocated, but mass deportations of certain segments took place, individuals were usually sent exclusively to GULAG camps.

Analysis of camp statistics and interviews have shown that living conditions in both camps and special settlements did indeed result in high mortality. Overall, efforts were made to reduce the number of ethnically oppressed people in the camps, which served the purpose of population control. While direct killings were relatively rare, the mortality rate within the Soviet camps was quite high, especially in the case of executions. However, the motives for these executions were often unclear and unrecorded. Looking at the living conditions, statistically the majority perished, with high mortality rates. It should also be noted that deportations counted families as units rather than individual members. As a result, the statistics are incomplete, and the exact number of victims remains unknown.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, those unable to work, typically infants, children, elderly, and disabled individuals, relied

---

<sup>29</sup> A. S. Mussagaliyeva, R. M. Mussabekova, U. M. Sandybayeva, *Women's Camp in the Steppe as the Soviet Experiment in Kazakhstan*, in *Russkaya Starina*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2018, 190-201; E. Nowicka, *Memory, Politics, and the Construction of a Nation's Identity: Internment Camp for Women (ALZHIR) near Astana (Kazakhstan)*, Collegium Civitas, 2019.

<sup>30</sup> J. Jo, *Memory and History: Korean Women's Experiences of Repression during the Stalin Era*, in M. Ilic (Ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Women and Gender in Twentieth-Century Russia and the Soviet Union*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

<sup>31</sup> U. Sandybayeva, *SEUM 'ALZHIR': Representation of Traumatic Memories of the 'Soviet'*, in *Bulletin d'Eurotalent-FIDJIP*, No. 2, 2016 31-35.

<sup>32</sup> N.A. Morozov, *К вопросу о численности жертв геноцида [On the Question of the Number of Genocide Victims]*, in *Russian Historical and Human Rights Journal 'Karta'*, No. 19-20, 1997. N. Werth, *Cannibal Island: Death in a Siberian GULAG*, Princeton University Press, 2007.

heavily on the labor of other family members for survival, leading to critical consequences within families as the food ration meant to be given only for working individuals.

This system already reflects the formation of institutions that were aimed at working only with ethnic prisoners. In such camps, labor and living conditions were the most catastrophic, especially in the correctional labor camps associated with construction and logging, which fell under the definition of the labor army. In such camps, the annual mortality rate fluctuated between 20% and 44% on average, reaching 64%, 72%, and 86% per year in some cases (the Nyroblag and Usollag logging ITLs)<sup>33</sup>. Such atrocious mortality rates are not observed in general regime camps or in prisons for convicts under the Criminal Code of the RSFSR, which is one of the proofs that the system of persecution of ethnic groups in the USSR was designed and constructed in accordance with a clear desire to deprive human and civil rights and reduce the number of ethnic minorities, based on ideological grounds and legislative framework. The targeted persecution of ethnic groups solely on racial and national grounds makes it possible to understand that, in legal terms, the national policy of Stalinism in theory and in practice implemented a policy of genocide, seeking to destroy the national identity of ethnic minorities, forcibly evicting them from their native territories, and massacring them.

Building on the analysis of the research findings, it is important to emphasise that the interviews have illuminated a critical stage of the deportations and have revealed an important area for scholarly debate: the negligence that led to widespread deaths. Interviewees consistently recall the transport of prisoners and deportees as one of the most traumatic aspects of ethnic cleansing. While the deliberate intent behind these actions remains a matter of open debate, a review of official documents suggests that, at the very least, the authorities did not take responsibility for the high mortality rates, suggesting that the lethal conditions of transport were implicitly sanctioned. Key factors contributing to these deaths included the lack of centralised food provision, which left individuals without daily rations for days or even weeks, and the duration of the journeys, which in some cases lasted more than two months. Prolonged exposure to unsanitary and inhumane conditions led to deaths from dehydration, starvation and the spread of viral and bacterial diseases (with official reports documenting outbreaks of typhoid, cholera and other infections). In addition, mass killings occurred during escape attempts or when prisoners attempted to relieve themselves during stops<sup>34</sup>.

---

<sup>33</sup> Data obtained after statistical analysis of archival documents on functioning of Nyroblag area of GULAG in the USSR at the end of 1930s and the beginning of 1940s. This part of the research was implemented during work on the Ph.D. thesis *Soviet Ethnic Cleansing in the Memory of Ethnic Minorities: Perceptions and Collective Trauma* by Iuliia Iashchenko.

<sup>34</sup> Such situations were recorded in the official internal investigation files of the NKVD and the USSR Ministry of Internal Affairs, and were also mentioned in a number of interviews with victims

An important contribution to the realization of the responsibility of the Soviet regime is the work with those documents that were issued to the victims of mass ethnic repressions in the process of realization of arrests and deportations, as well as the analysis of rehabilitation sessions and certificates of rehabilitation<sup>35</sup>. Both types of documents indicate the reason for persecution: indicating the name of a specific ethnic group/nationality; the wording «recognized as socially dangerous on ethnic grounds»; the phrasing «resettled/registered/transferred in a special settlement as a person of N ethnicity»; or indicating the number and name of a specific Resolution or Decree on the resettlement of peoples or another normative act.

Although there is no single format for indicating reasons for persecution in any document, nor is there a single form, since sometimes it is a printed text and sometimes it is handwritten, they all appeal to only two basic categories: an actual mention of nationality as a motivation for repression or a reference to a document legally authorizing this repression.

The document presented below is a copy of the rehabilitation certificate issued in the mid-1990s to Zinaida Iks, who was repressed and deported from the Volga German Republic along with her family in 1941. The certificate was issued by the Department of Internal Affairs for the Volgograd region of Russia and was based on archives from the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB, previously NKVD archives). The document specifies the date of deportation and the legislative act that mandated the deportation: 1941, in accordance with the Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet dated August 28, 1941<sup>36</sup> (the deportations from the Volga region were determined by a series of legal documents concerning the eviction of the Volga Germans and their internment in the GULAG camps under the framework of the labor army).

---

of repression who survived imprisonment in the GULAG camps; Interview with Lidiya N., March 2019, Perm – author’s archive (collected upon the field research carried out within 2018-2020); Overview Report on Archival Investigative Case No. 7148 regarding charges against employees of the Zaporizhzhia City Department of the NKVD for violating socialist legality and looting during the 1937-1938 repressions, dated March 5, 1956, prepared by Assistant Military Prosecutor, Major of Justice Rybachok.

<sup>35</sup> See the following documents on next page.

<sup>36</sup> Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, No. 21/160, dated August 28, 1941, Source: Bulletin of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, No. 38 (153), September 2, 1941, 4.



Figure 1. Photocopy of the Original Rehabilitation Certificate Dated February 12, 1996, in the Name of Zinaida Karlovna Iks. Document retrieved from personal collection and family archives of Vladimir Sh. From Perm City in December 2019 during field research related to the ongoing project on studying collective memory of Russian Germans during Stalinism. The Photocopy is preserved in the author's archive – Iuliia Iashchenko.

In line 9 of this document, it should state ‘grounds for repression on political motives’, citing the following: *Recognized as socially dangerous based on nationality*. This document primarily demonstrates that repressions against ethnic minorities were conducted on national grounds. Additionally, even in Soviet documents from the period of rehabilitation of victims of mass repressions under Stalinism, there was a substitution of concepts that influenced both the study of this field and the formation of historiography: the term ‘political repressions’<sup>37</sup> was used to replace what were, in fact, ethnic cleansings.

Archival documents and personal testimonies were analyzed in this research, including NKVD in-office records and correspondence between Soviet leader I. Stalin and members of the *nomenklatura*, such as L. Beria, G. Yagoda, and N. Yezhov – who served as heads of the NKVD at different times – providing compelling evidence that multiple ethnic groups were systematically persecuted

<sup>37</sup> A. Getty, O. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939*, Yale University Press, 1999; N. Werth, *Cannibal Island: Death in a Siberian GULAG*, Princeton University Press, 2007.

during Stalinism solely based on their ethnicity<sup>38</sup>. These records not only outline the operational framework of repressive measures but also reveal the ideological and legal framing that targeted specific ethnic groups under the guise of political motives. For instance, NKVD documents often explicitly cite «grounds for repression on political motives», clarifying with phrases such as «recognized as socially dangerous based on nationality», or, sometimes, the documents would site just a nationality in the line for the «grounds of accusations» which underscores the ethnic foundation of these campaigns.

Such documentation aligns with a defining characteristic of ethnic cleansing as a genocidal act: the deliberate persecution of groups identified by ethnic, religious, social, or other unifying factors. The correspondence between Stalin and NKVD leaders frequently used disparaging language to refer to certain ethnic minorities, further reinforcing the systemic nature of these repressions. Moreover, Soviet policies meticulously legalized each stage of these operations, from planning national campaigns to implementing repressive acts<sup>39</sup>. Even during the post-Stalin era of victim rehabilitation, there was a deliberate substitution of terminology, as ‘political repressions’ was used to obscure what were, in fact, ethnic cleansings, influencing the historiography and study of these events. These findings contribute to understanding ethnic cleansing within Stalinist policies as a form of genocide.

### ***3. The Soviet Suppression System and the Discussion of Use the Framework of Genocide Studies to the Topic***

Most of the time, the persecution of an ethnic group extended across time and geographic regions, targeting people associated with that group on a state-wide scale. However, the most pronounced examples of genocidal acts with critical impacts on the survival of an ethnic group were often localized. For instance, the persecution of Ukrainians was concentrated in the *Holodomor* (1932-1934), which primarily targeted people in the Eastern and Central regions<sup>40</sup>. And mass-deportations of Western-Ukrainians in 1938-1939 and post-war period were focused particularly on the occupied region of Western Ukraine at the dawn of the Soviet-Polish war in 1939. But in both cases any representative of Ukraine would be affected by these measures entering the area, having ties to the people from the area, having any political statement against it, and so on. Also, these persecutions had the frequency pattern as post-war period showed repeatable deportations of Ukrainians in 1944-1945, and at the end of 1940s as well.

---

<sup>38</sup> T. Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*, Cornell University Press, 2001; N. Naimark, *Stalin's Genocides*, Princeton University Press, 2010.

<sup>39</sup> R. Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment*, Oxford University Press, 1990.

<sup>40</sup> A. Applebaum, *Red famine: Stalin's war on Ukraine*, Doubleday, 2017.

It is crucial to notice that *Holodomor* many times was referred to as democide relying on the explanatory model of a State assaulting its own people. However, this case is an example of ethnocide since this politics had been mainly focusing ‘donor regions’, *i.e.* national regions considered by the Soviet leadership as main food supplies providers<sup>41</sup> such as Ukraine, Kuban region, Central Asia countries<sup>42</sup>, especially, Kazakhstan<sup>43</sup> and Volga region. All the above regions had one characteristic in common, they were not Russian regions, but they had been representatives of local people of Central Asia<sup>44</sup>, Ukrainians both in Ukraine and Kuban regions, as well as ethnicities of Crimea Republic and Germans and Tatars in the Volga Region<sup>45</sup>. For the targeting of individual regions, a characteristic aspect was not just the allocation of residents of the territory, but also the targeting of specific ethnic groups, which were fixed by normative and legal documents<sup>46</sup>. In other words, the proceeded agriculture, economical politics, accompanied by

---

<sup>41</sup> V. Kondrashin (Ed.), *Golod v SSSR. 1929-1934 [Famine in the USSR. 1929-1934]*, Vol. 1 1929-July 1932, MFD, 2011.

<sup>42</sup> K.S. Aldazhumanov, M.K. Kairgaliev, V.P. Osipov, Yu.I. Romanov, *Nasil'stvennaya kollektivizatsiya i golod v Kazakhstane, 1931-1933 gg.: Sbornik dokumentov i materialov* [Forced Collectivization and Famine in Kazakhstan, 1931-1933: Collection of Documents and Materials], M.K. Kozybaev, Ch. Ch. Valikhanov Institute of History and Ethnology, Archive of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 1998, 5-19, 30-35; T.B. Balakaev, K.S. Aldazhumanov, *Istoriografiya Kazakhstana perioda Velikoy Otechestvennoy voyny* [Historiography of Kazakhstan during the Great Patriotic War], in *Aktual'nye problemy istorii Sovetskogo Kazakhstana* [Current Problems of the History of Soviet Kazakhstan], Almaty, 1980, 113-124.

<sup>43</sup> A.B. Tursunbaev, *Kollektivizatsiya sel'skogo khozyaystva Kazakhstana (1926 - Iyun' 1941 gg.): Dokumenty i materialy* [Collectivization of agriculture in Kazakhstan (1926 - June 1941): Documents and materials], Vol. 1, 1967.

<sup>44</sup> M.B. Olcott, *The Kazakhs*. Stanford University Press, 1987.

<sup>45</sup> *3 Kollektivizatsiya I Raskulachivanie. Dokumenty I Materialy* [The Tragedy of the Soviet Village. Collectivization and Dispossession Documents and Materials] Vol. 2. November 1929 – December 1930, ROSSPEN, 2000, 163-167.

<sup>46</sup> The message of I.L. Serov to L. Beria. June 28, 1944: «On June 27, 1944, an operation was carried out to evict Greeks, Bulgarians, Armenians, as well as other foreign nationalities. Today, June 28, at 10 o'clock it is finished. A total of 41,854 people were evicted (...)», from the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), Fund. R-9479, Part 1, Case 179, Page 227; On July 4, 1944, the State Defense Committee reported to Stalin: «The NKVD of the USSR reported that the eviction from the Crimea of special settlers – Tatars, Bulgarians, Greeks, Armenians – was completed. In total 225,009 people were evicted, including Tatars – 183,155, Bulgarians – 12,422, Greeks – 15,040, Armenians – 9,621, Germans – 1119, as well as aliens – 3,652 (...)», from the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), Fund R-9401, Part 2, Case 65, Page 275; July 1, 1944 from the Department of Special Settlements of the NKVD of the USSR on the composition and number of special settlers (Tatars, Greeks, Bulgarians, Armenians, Germans, Italians, Romanians and subjects of other States) evicted from the territory of Crimea as of June 28, 1944. State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), Fund P-9479. Part 1. Case 141. Pages 78-79. Original document.

politics of russification were not an example of solely democide, but ethnic-focused policy of State-control of national minorities.

The use of the term ‘genocide’ cannot define the research, and the aim of this study is not the theorization of the crimes committed by the regime but uncovering the hidden truth through the personal testimonies and official documents that is mainly why the analyzed narratives contextualized in the framework on ethnic cleansing. Genocide studies provide a comprehensive theoretical framework that serves as an effective explanatory tool for analyzing the collected data on ethnic cleansing under the national-communist regime of the USSR. This framework is particularly relevant when examining instances of Soviet genocidal acts that have been recognized either nationally or internationally, such as the *Holodomor* in Ukraine and the systematic persecutions in the Baltic States<sup>47</sup>.

Raphael Lemkin, a Polish-Jewish lawyer who coined the term genocide in 1944, defined it as «*a coordinated plan of actions aimed at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national, racial, religious, or ethnic groups*»<sup>48</sup>. Lemkin’s definition focuses on a broad range of actions beyond just mass killings<sup>49</sup>. At the same time, The United Nations defined genocide in the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (1948) states that «*genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such*»<sup>50</sup>:

- a) Killing members of the group;
- b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about their 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».

This discussion of genocide is not merely a reiteration of sources presented in the research or historiographical developments. Instead, it underscores the importance of employing the framework of genocide studies within Transitional

---

<sup>47</sup> A. Applebaum, *Red Famine: Stalin’s War on Ukraine*, cit.; M. Mälksoo, *Soviet Genocide? Communist Mass Deportations in the Baltic States and International Law*, in *Baltic Yearbook of International Law Online*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2006, 97-120.

<sup>48</sup> R. Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, cit. Italics added by the author.

<sup>49</sup> According to Lemkin: Genocide means the destruction of a nation or an ethnic group. It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves. The objectives of such a plan would be the disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of the personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of the individuals belonging to such groups. See R. Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, cit., 79.

<sup>50</sup> [un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.1\\_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.1_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf) (last access: 31<sup>st</sup> October 2024).



Justice processes<sup>51</sup>. Genocide studies provide a critical lens for examining systematic acts of persecution, enabling societies to navigate the complex interplay between history and justice. Transitional Justice processes, by their very nature, aim to confront past atrocities, restore historical truth, and deliver justice for victims by prosecuting unlawful perpetrators<sup>52</sup>. These processes often rely on historical and moral commissions, as seen in countries such as Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and several nations in Western Europe<sup>53</sup>. Similar efforts in post-conflict Africa, such as South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, further demonstrate the global relevance of these mechanisms<sup>54</sup>.

The incorporation of the concept of genocide in historical discussions is often viewed as politically sensitive. However, its use within the framework of Transitional Justice should not be seen as contributing to conflicting narratives but as focusing on the pursuit of historical justice, and this process was mainly lacking in post-communist region, especially, in post-Soviet Russian and Central Asia and while researchers were uncovering the crimes committed by Soviet regime<sup>55</sup>, nowadays political actors were not supporting the tendencies. Hence, this pursuit is not purely a demand of academia or political actors, but a deeply rooted necessity voiced by the actual victims of totalitarian regimes. For these individuals and communities, recognizing and addressing the genocidal nature of past atrocities is essential for healing and ensuring accountability. Historical commissions, such as those established in Eastern Europe after the fall of the USSR, have played a vital role in fulfilling these objectives. These commissions, tasked with documenting atrocities and clarifying historical truths, provide the foundation for legal and moral reckoning.

The Soviet national politics actions in the Baltic States, Ukraine, Crimea<sup>56</sup>, and the Volga Region<sup>57</sup> should be characterized as genocidal under both Lemkin's conceptualization and the UN Genocide Convention<sup>58</sup>. These actions involved a systematic and coordinated plan aimed at the destruction of the essential foundations of the life of the national groups inhabiting these regions.

---

<sup>51</sup> R.G. Teitel, *Transitional Justice*, Oxford University Press, 2000.

<sup>52</sup> B. Leebaw, *Judging State-Sponsored Violence, Imagining Political Change*, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

<sup>53</sup> L. Stan (Ed.), *Transitional Justice in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union: Reckoning with the Communist Past*, Routledge, 2009.

<sup>54</sup> D. Posel, G. Simpson (Eds.), *Commissioning the Past: Understanding South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Witwatersrand University Press, 2001.

<sup>55</sup> T. Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, Basic Books, 2010.

<sup>56</sup> J. Klesner, *Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in Soviet History: The Case of the Baltic States*, Cambridge University Press, 2021.

<sup>57</sup> J.M. Pohl, *Ethnic Cleansing in the USSR, 1945-1953*, Routledge, 2017.

<sup>58</sup> S. Totten, W.S. Parsons, *The United Nations and the Genocide Convention: The Problem of Definition* in *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 2018, 335-350; W.A. Schabas, *Genocide in International Law: The Crime of Crimes*, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

1. *Destruction of Political and Social Institutions:* The Soviet policies of collectivization and deportation dismantled the traditional economic and cultural institutions of the ethnic minorities (between late 1920s and during 1930s). For instance, in Ukraine and the Volga Region, forced collectivization disrupted traditional agricultural practices and led to widespread famine, which contributed to the physical destruction of these communities.

2. *Cultural and Religious Suppression:* The Soviet regime systematically targeted the cultural and religious practices of these groups (it was a part of Soviet national politics since late 1920s until late 1960s). In Crimea, the forced deportations of Crimean Tatars were accompanied by efforts to erase their cultural heritage, including restrictions on the use of their native language and suppression of religious practices. Similarly, in the Baltic States, the Soviet government imposed Russian language and culture, severely limiting the ability of the local populations to maintain their cultural identity.

3. *Forced Deportations and Physical Destruction:* The policy of forced deportations resulted in the mass displacement of ethnic groups, leading to the physical and psychological harm of individuals (especially, during 1930s – 1950s). The deportations were designed to eradicate the presence of these groups from their ancestral lands, which aligns with Article II(c) of the UN Genocide Convention that defines genocide as the deliberate infliction of conditions calculated to bring about physical destruction.

4. *Political Repression and Language Suppression:* In regions like Ukraine and Crimea, the Soviet regime's political repression, including imprisonment and execution of perceived enemies, was coupled with aggressive Russification policies (the most visible implementation was between 1930s and 1960s). The imposition of the Russian language and the suppression of native languages, as seen in the case of the Volga Germans and Crimean Tatars, aimed to assimilate and ultimately eradicate the distinctiveness of these ethnic groups.

5. *Destruction of Family and Social Bonds:* The forced relocations and imprisonment severed family ties and disrupted social cohesion (it was a common practice during mass deportations of 1930s and 1940s). For example, deportations led to the fragmentation of families and the loss of connections between parents and children, which undermined the social fabric of these communities.

6. *Indoctrination and Assimilation:* The Soviet regime's policies led to the assimilation of new generations into the dominant Soviet person identity, the concept was based and processed throughout total russification. Ethnic minorities' children were educated in Russian, given Russian names, and exposed to Soviet ideology, contributing to the erasure of their ethnic identity and cultural heritage.

7. *Mass Killings and Repressions:* Mass executions and repressive measures, such as those implemented during the Great Terror, further exemplify genocidal acts (since the beginning of 1930s and until the mid-1940s). These acts align with

Article II(a) of the Genocide Convention, which defines genocide as the killing of members of a group.

Overall, the Soviet Union's actions in these regions reflect a pattern of genocide characterized by the destruction of ethnic groups' cultural, social, and economic structures, alongside physical and psychological harm<sup>59</sup>. Hence, when trying to understand the origin of the national politics aimed at persecuting ethnic minorities, the first thing that comes to mind is to investigate the ideological motivation and justification of this persecution, which is enshrined in a whole legislative complex. Thus, researchers today have at their disposal not only specific decrees on conducting 'national operations' (localized cleansing of ethnic minorities such as German Operation in the mid-1930s in Ukraine, Polish Operation in Ukraine, Western-Ukraine Operation, etc.), and decrees on total eviction of peoples (decree on the eviction of the Volga Germans, decree on the eviction of the peoples of the Caucasus, etc.)<sup>60</sup>, which give an unambiguous interpretation of these political decisions, but also indirect evidence of the authorized persecution of ethnic minorities in the USSR. The existence of documents that declared the need to persecute specific ethnic groups through deportations or 'combat against dissent' or 'combating anti-revolutionary actions' gives these events a clear legal framework, affirming the thesis that the national politics of the USSR purposefully and methodically created the semantic grounds for institutionalized ethnic violence.

A comparative analysis of the political and legislative motivations behind the measures taken by the Soviet regime, as well as the outcomes of these actions, reveals that certain cases expose characteristics typical of genocidal acts. However, it is essential to establish a definition grounded in the legal boundaries of various understandings of genocide. The genocidal acts described above, perpetrated against ethnic minorities, share a common characteristic: they exist in between two definitions of genocide-democide and ethnocide. These actions were executed by the political regime against the inhabitants of the State, primarily targeting ethnic minorities. In contrast, political repression against the titular nation (Russians) tended to be more personalized in nature.

The dual nature of the ethnic purges in the USSR complicates their classification within a single definition of genocide. Consequently, this study aims to contribute

---

<sup>59</sup> The national politics of the USSR were rooted in the concept of total Russification, with Soviet Russia as the dominant force ideologically, legally, and culturally. The Russian language served as the unifying means of communication, and the legislation of the RSFSR formed the legal foundation for the entire Soviet Union. Post-Soviet Russia, as the legal successor to the USSR, continues to embody many of these structures. Consequently, the terms USSR and RSFSR are often used interchangeably in this study, reflecting the RSFSR's central role in shaping Soviet national policies, with a clear emphasis on advancing Russian nationalism. To see more on the Russian nationalism in the USSR, see D. R. Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States*, Oxford University Press, 1998.

<sup>60</sup> To examine the documents, see Appendix 1-3.

to the theoretical discourse on genocide by proposing the concept of repetitive genocidal acts. Furthermore, in relation to specific ethnic groups, it introduces the notion of localized genocidal acts. The experience of the Volga Germans exemplifies a case of localized genocide.

In the history of the Soviet Union, there are several ethnic groups that faced exceptionally brutal ethnically motivated purges repeatedly<sup>61</sup>. However, what distinguishes the Soviet perspective from other examples is the persecution of a specific ethnic group not across the entire State but within the boundaries of a specific region. These boundaries might be defined by historical and cultural background (for example, Ukrainians mostly lived in Ukraine), legal-political peculiarities (such as the persecution of Volga Germans and Crimean Tatars within their autonomous republics), or even specific decisions by the OGPU or Soviet political elites (such as a series of resolutions by the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (B)<sup>62</sup> on carrying out national operations or mass deportations of specific ethnic groups from regions specified in the documents). Based on academic works on the genocide carried out by the Soviet Union in Ukraine<sup>63</sup> and the Baltic States<sup>64</sup>, it is important to recognize this characteristic. This recognition does not negate the legal and humanitarian acknowledgment of these acts of brutality as examples of genocide, but rather emphasizes that almost always had a specific localization.

A ‘localized genocidal act’ refers to genocide occurring in a specific geographic area within a defined time frame, as opposed to genocide that affects entire ethnic groups across a country or multiple countries. These acts are perpetrated against a particular ethnic, racial, religious, or social group within a specific region or community<sup>65</sup>. While localized genocides may be less recognized than larger-scale events like the *Holocaust* or the Rwandan genocide, they still involve heinous crimes against ethnic groups in confined areas, such as the genocide of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire.

---

<sup>61</sup> A. Yakovlev, *A Century of Violence in Soviet Russia*, Yale University Press, 2002.

<sup>62</sup> All-Union Communist Party (B) – All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks (VKP(b)).

<sup>63</sup> D. R. Marples, *Heroes and Villains: Creating National History in Contemporary Ukraine*, Central European University Press, 2007.

<sup>64</sup> K. Gerner, K.S. Hedlund, *The Baltic States and the End of the Soviet Empire*, Routledge, 1993.

<sup>65</sup> The term was developed as part of a Ph.D. research project by Iuliia Iashchenko to address the insufficient understanding of national politics and its effects on ethnic minorities in the USSR. This framework provides a means to analyze the political actions taken by the USSR toward specific ethnic minorities during the 1930s-1950s. It seeks to present these historical events in a more deliberate and equitable manner, responding to calls for historical justice from those impacted by these policies. While the term may have limited applicability in broader academic fields, as it primarily focuses on the unique experiences of certain ethnic groups under Stalinism, it offers a valuable contribution to the global discourse on understanding genocidal acts, particularly in more localized contexts.

The main aspects of localized genocidal acts include the complete and total persecution of ethnic minorities within a specific area, where victims face ethnically driven persecution regardless of their political or social adjustments. The nature of this persecution often leaves victims with no means of escape, as there are no options for evading violence through cultural, career, or political changes. This highlights the extreme and totalizing nature of such acts, where the identity of the group alone makes them targets.

Within the framework of Genocide Studies<sup>66</sup>, the concept of localized genocidal acts focuses on the targeted persecution of specific groups within a defined geographical area and time period. This understanding draws from Raphael Lemkin's foundational work on genocide<sup>67</sup>, as well as Mark Levene's critical contributions to differentiating the nature of genocidal acts<sup>68</sup>, while highlighting the key features that define local genocides:

- 'defining the area' of total persecution of ethnic minorities,
- emphasizing 'ethnically based persecution',
- highlighting the 'impossibility for victims to avoid persecution' through political, career, or cultural adjustments.

Examining the cases of the Volga Germans (and Soviet Germans more broadly), Crimean Tatars, and Ukrainians within the Ukrainian SSR reveals the inescapability of ethnic purges orchestrated by Soviet leadership. Avoidance, when it occurred, was typically limited to individuals with connections to the Soviet *nomenklatura*, the ideological and political elite of the national-communist regime. Objective data shows that the majority of victims of these persecutions either did not speak Russian or had a low level of proficiency, a fact that was difficult to change or conceal in a short time. Furthermore, several persecuted groups revealed racial differences from the titular Russian population (Slavic group predominantly residing in the RSFSR)<sup>69</sup>, Tatars, Kazakhs, and many ethnic groups from Central Asia, indigenous

---

<sup>66</sup> Some examples of studies on local genocidal acts: T. Judah, *The Serbs: History, Myth, and the Destruction of Yugoslavia*, Yale University Press, 2000; S.L. Burg, P.S. Shoup, *The War in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Ethnic Conflict and International Intervention*, M.E. Sharpe, 2000.

<sup>67</sup> M. Levene, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation State: The Meaning of Genocide*, I.B. Tauris, 2005.

<sup>68</sup> According to M. Levene, genocide is characterized by 1) Intentionality: Genocide involves deliberate and purposeful acts aimed at the destruction of a specific group, whether through direct violence or more insidious means. 2) Targeting Groups: The destruction is aimed at specific groups based on their ethnicity, nationality, religion, or other defining characteristics. 3) Systematic Nature: Genocide is systematic and organized, often involving State or State-like apparatuses that facilitate or execute the genocidal acts. 4) Impact on Identity: Beyond physical destruction, genocide aims to obliterate the identity, culture, and social structures of the targeted group, impacting their historical and cultural memory, etc.

<sup>69</sup> It is crucial to underline that Russian people were primarily rising within the RSFSR before the 1930s and began actively settling in 'ethnic territories', such as Ukraine and the Baltic States, in the second half of the 1930s and 1940s. This settlement process was closely linked to the Soviet policy of massive deportations of ethnic populations from these regions. The resettlement of Russians into

Siberians and Far Eastern peoples, native Ural populations, and migrants from China and Korea, among others. These minorities often retained their ethnic names and were geographically localized in their cultural and historical regions. Even those who attempted to assimilate through name changes, language adoption, or demonstrated loyalty to the regime could not escape persecution. By 1940, many Volga Germans, Soviet Germans, and Crimean Tatars who had served on the front lines of the Red Army, from privates to officers, were arrested by the military command and deported to labor armies in Siberia, Kazakhstan, or the Urals. Soldiers who had been awarded distinctions like the ‘Medal for Courage’ or the ‘Zvezda’ for their bravery and injuries were arrested in hospitals and sent to camps. Thus, even demonstrable loyalty to the Soviet regime was insufficient to protect these individuals from ethnic purges, imprisonment, and deportation.

In the case of the atrocities committed against Volga Germans and Soviet Germans by the Soviet leadership, a ‘Localized Genocidal Act’ framework becomes relevant for legal classification within historical discussions and transitional justice theories. This framework underscores the need for historical responsibility and justice to address the victims’ quest not only for rehabilitation but also for legal accountability. The term encapsulates the systematic destruction of ethnic and national identities, loss of native language, and forced assimilation into the dominant culture, resulting in the critical decrease of the population and the loss of cultural and historical homeland.

By focusing on the specific geographic area and the targeted persecution of a distinct ethnic group within it, a Localized Genocidal Act framework provides a nuanced understanding of genocidal acts that occur within limited contexts, distinct from broader genocides affecting entire nations or peoples which is a needed tool for working in the field of Transitional Justice addressing dramatic parts of history of totalitarianism.

In conclusion, while the Soviet Union’s national policies were colonial and involved economic and linguistic suppression, they did not amount to a broad genocide of Soviet peoples during the Stalinist era. However, specific instances of ethnic cleansing, marked by systematic planning and intent to dismantle the cultural and, at times, physical existence of certain communities, can be seen as localized genocidal acts. These actions were regionally confined and targeted, avoiding complete eradication nationwide. For instance, during the *Holodomor*, Ukrainians outside Ukraine faced less severe persecution, and some Soviet Germans continued

---

these territories served as a means of altering the ethnic composition, contributing to what can be classified as ethnic cleansing. This policy led to a critical reduction of the indigenous ethnic populations in these regions by 20-40% over the subsequent two decades. See more N. Werth, ‘*Mass Deportations, Ethnic Cleansing, and Genocidal Politics in the Later Russian Empire and the USSR*,’ in D. Bloxham, A.D. Moses (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies*, Oxford University Press, 2010, [prb.org/resources/the-baltics-demographic-challenges-and-independence/](http://prb.org/resources/the-baltics-demographic-challenges-and-independence/).

to live relatively unscathed in particular regions. This localized approach enabled selective violence and suppression, as seen in the cases of the Volga Germans and Crimean Tatars, presenting a nuanced understanding of Soviet repression distinct from broad, country-wide genocidal actions.

**Appendix 1. *A special message about deportation of German and Finish people from Leningrad area, 1941***

№ 3.24

**СПЕЦСООБЩЕНИЕ УПОЛНОМОЧЕННЫХ ГКО  
В.М. МОЛОТОВА, Г.М. МАЛЕНКОВА И А.Н. КОСЫГИНА  
И СЕКРЕТАРЯ ЛЕНИНГРАДСКОГО ОБКОМА ВКП(б) А.А. ЖДАНОВА  
О ВЫСЕЛЕНИИ ИЗ ПРИГОРОДОВ ЛЕНИНГРАДА НАСЕЛЕНИЯ  
НЕМЕЦКОЙ И ФИНСКОЙ НАЦИОНАЛЬНОСТЕЙ**

29 августа 1941 г.

*Совершенно секретно  
Передано по ВЧ 29.VIII в 10 ч.*

Сообщаем, что нами принято решение о немедленном переселении из пригородов Ленинграда немецкого и финского населения в количестве 96 000 человек. Предлагаем выселение произвести: в Казахстан — 15 000 человек, в Красноярский край — 24 000 человек, в Новосибирскую область — 24 000 человек, Алтайский край — 12 000 человек и Омскую область — 21 000 человек. Организацию переселения возложить на НКВД. Просим утвердить это предложение.

**МОЛОТОВ  
МАЛЕНКОВ  
КОСЫГИН  
ЖДАНОВ**

АПРФ. Ф. 3. Оп. 50. Д. 426. Л. 48. Копия.

*Special message from GKO commissioners V.M. Molotov, G.M. Malenkov and A.N. Kosygin and A.A. Zhdanov, secretary of the Leningrad regional committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks (b), on the eviction of the population of German and Finnish nationalities from the suburbs of Leningrad. August 29, 1941 // APRF. F. 3. Book 50. File 426. Page 48, Copy.*



Appendix 2. *Memo of the NKVD of the USSR No. 55/B*

№ 1889  
ЗАПИСКА НКВД СССР № 55/Б В ГКО  
О ЦЕЛЕСООБРАЗНОСТИ ВЫСЕЛЕНИЯ С ТЕРРИТОРИИ  
КРЫМА БОЛГАР, ГРЕКОВ И АРМЯН<sup>1</sup>

29 мая 1944 г.

После выселения крымских татар, в Крыму продолжается работа по выявлению и изъятию органами НКВД–НКГБ антисоветского элемента, проверка и проческа населенных пунктов и лесных районов в целях задержания возможно укрывшихся от выселения крымских татар, а также дезертиров и бандитского элемента.

На территории Крыма учтено проживающих в настоящее время болгар — 12 075 человек, греков — 14 300 и армян — 9919 человек.

Болгарское население проживает большей частью в населенных пунктах района между Симферополем и Феодосией, а также в районе Джанкоя. Имеется до 10 сельсоветов с населением в каждом от 80 до 100 жителей болгар. Кроме того, болгары проживают небольшими группами в русских и украинских селах.

В период немецкой оккупации значительная часть болгарского населения активно участвовала в проводимых немцами мероприятиях по заготовке хлеба и продуктов питания для германской армии, содействова-

<sup>1</sup> На документе имеется помета: «Т-щу Берия. Согласен. Организуйте выселение болгар, греков, армян. И. Сталин».

которые, кроме религиозных и политических вопросов, занимались организацией среди армян торговли и мелкой промышленности. Эти организации оказывали немцам помощь, особенно путем сбора средств «на военные нужды Германии».

Армянскими организациями был сформирован так называемый «армянский легион», который содержался за счет средств армянских общин.

НКВД СССР считает целесообразным провести выселение с территории Крыма всех болгар, греков, армян.

Народный комиссар внутренних дел  
Союза ССР

Берия

*Memo of the NKVD of the USSR No. 55/B to the GKO on the expediency of evicting Bulgarians, Greeks and Armenians from the territory of Crimea. May 29, 1944 // AP RF. Found 3. Book 58. File 178. Pp. 126-128.*

### Appendix 3. *Deportations of Polish and German Families from Western Ukraine*

№ 1.19  
ДОНЕСЕНИЕ ЗАМ. НАЧАЛЬНИКА ГУЛАГа И.И. ПЛИНЕРА  
НАРКОМУ НКВД Г.Г. ЯГОДЕ О ХОДЕ ПЕРЕСЕЛЕНИЯ ПОЛЬСКИХ  
И НЕМЕЦКИХ СЕМЕЙ С ЗАПАДНОЙ УКРАИНЫ В СЕВЕРНЫЙ КАЗАХСТАН  
26 сентября 1936 г.  
Народному комиссару внутренних дел Союза ССР  
генеральному комиссару государственной безопасности  
тов. ЯГОДА

Из числа 15 000 польских и немецких семей, переселяемых из Западной Украины в Северный Казахстан, в июле месяце с.г. переселено 5535 семей — 26 778 человек, в сентябре месяце отправлено 7440 семей — 32 740 человек, всего 12 975 семей — 59 518 человек.

*Report of I.I. Pliner, deputy chief of the GULAG, to the People's Commissar of the NKVD G.G. Yagoda on the progress of resettlement of Polish and German families from Western Ukraine to Northern Kazakhstan. September 26, 1936 // GARF. F. R-9479. Book 1. File 36. P. 19.*