

**General Editor:** Andreas Umland,  
Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies, [andreas.umland@ui.se](mailto:andreas.umland@ui.se)

**Commissioning Editor:** Max Jakob Horstmann,  
London, [mjh@ibidem.eu](mailto:mjh@ibidem.eu)

**EDITORIAL COMMITTEE\***DOMESTIC & COMPARATIVE POLITICS

Prof. **Ellen Bos**, *Andrássy University of Budapest*  
Dr. **Gergana Dimova**, *University of Winchester*  
Dr. **Andrew Kazantsev**, *MGIMO (U) MID RF, Moscow*  
Prof. **Heiko Pleines**, *University of Bremen*  
Prof. **Richard Sakwa**, *University of Kent at Canterbury*  
Dr. **Sarah Whitmore**, *Oxford Brookes University*  
Dr. **Harald Wydra**, *University of Cambridge*

SOCIETY, CLASS & ETHNICITY

Col. **David Glantz**, *"Journal of Slavic Military Studies"*  
Dr. **Marlène Laruelle**, *George Washington University*  
Dr. **Stephen Shulman**, *Southern Illinois University*  
Prof. **Stefan Troebst**, *University of Leipzig*  
POLITICAL ECONOMY & PUBLIC POLICY  
Dr. **Andreas Goldthau**, *Central European University*  
Dr. **Robert Kravchuk**, *University of North Carolina*  
Dr. **David Lane**, *University of Cambridge*  
Dr. **Carol Leonard**, *Higher School of Economics, Moscow*  
Dr. **Maria Popova**, *McGill University, Montreal*

FOREIGN POLICY & INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Dr. **Peter Duncan**, *University College London*  
Prof. **Andreas Heinemann-Grüder**, *University of Bonn*  
Prof. **Gerhard Mangott**, *University of Innsbruck*  
Dr. **Diana Schmidt-Pfister**, *University of Konstanz*  
Dr. **Lisbeth Tarlow**, *Harvard University, Cambridge*  
Dr. **Christian Wipperfürth**, *N-Ost Network, Berlin*  
Dr. **William Zimmerman**, *University of Michigan*  
HISTORY, CULTURE & THOUGHT  
Dr. **Catherine Andreyev**, *University of Oxford*  
Prof. **Mark Bassin**, *Södertörn University*  
Prof. **Karsten Brüggemann**, *Tallinn University*  
Dr. **Alexander Etkind**, *University of Cambridge*  
Dr. **Gasan Guseynov**, *Moscow State University*  
Prof. **Leonid Luks**, *Catholic University of Eichstaett*  
Dr. **Olga Malinova**, *Russian Academy of Sciences*  
Dr. **Richard Mole**, *University College London*  
Prof. **Andrei Rogatchevski**, *University of Tromsø*  
Dr. **Mark Tauger**, *West Virginia University*

**ADVISORY BOARD\***

Prof. **Dominique Arel**, *University of Ottawa*  
Prof. **Jörg Baberowski**, *Humboldt University of Berlin*  
Prof. **Margarita Balmaceda**, *Seton Hall University*  
Dr. **John Barber**, *University of Cambridge*  
Prof. **Timm Beichelt**, *European University Viadrina*  
Dr. **Katrin Boeckh**, *University of Munich*  
Prof. em. **Archie Brown**, *University of Oxford*  
Dr. **Vyacheslav Bryukhovetsky**, *Kyiv-Mohyla Academy*  
Prof. **Timothy Colton**, *Harvard University, Cambridge*  
Prof. **Paul D'Anieri**, *University of Florida*  
Dr. **Heike Dörrenbächer**, *Friedrich Naumann Foundation*  
Dr. **John Dunlop**, *Hoover Institution, Stanford, California*  
Dr. **Sabine Fischer**, *SWP, Berlin*  
Dr. **Geir Flikke**, *NUPI, Oslo*  
Prof. **David Galbreath**, *University of Aberdeen*  
Prof. **Alexander Galkin**, *Russian Academy of Sciences*  
Prof. **Frank Golczewski**, *University of Hamburg*  
Dr. **Nikolas Gvosdev**, *Naval War College, Newport, RI*  
Prof. **Mark von Hagen**, *Arizona State University*  
Dr. **Guido Hausmann**, *University of Munich*  
Prof. **Dale Herspring**, *Kansas State University*  
Dr. **Stefani Hoffman**, *Hebrew University of Jerusalem*  
Prof. **Mikhail Ilyin**, *MGIMO (U) MID RF, Moscow*  
Prof. **Vladimir Kantor**, *Higher School of Economics*  
Dr. **Ivan Katchanovski**, *University of Ottawa*  
Prof. em. **Andrzej Korbonski**, *University of California*  
Dr. **Iris Kemp**, *"Caucasus Analytical Digest"*  
Prof. **Herbert Küpper**, *Institut für Ostrecht Regensburg*  
Dr. **Rainer Lindner**, *CEEER, Berlin*  
Dr. **Vladimir Malakhov**, *Russian Academy of Sciences*

Dr. **Luke March**, *University of Edinburgh*  
Prof. **Michael McFaul**, *Stanford University, Palo Alto*  
Prof. **Birgit Menzel**, *University of Mainz-Germersheim*  
Prof. **Valery Mikhailenko**, *The Urals State University*  
Prof. **Emil Pain**, *Higher School of Economics, Moscow*  
Dr. **Oleg Podvintsev**, *Russian Academy of Sciences*  
Prof. **Olga Popova**, *St. Petersburg State University*  
Dr. **Alex Pravda**, *University of Oxford*  
Dr. **Erik van Ree**, *University of Amsterdam*  
Dr. **Joachim Rogall**, *Robert Bosch Foundation Stuttgart*  
Prof. **Peter Rutland**, *Wesleyan University, Middletown*  
Prof. **Marat Salikov**, *The Urals State Law Academy*  
Dr. **Gwendolyn Sasse**, *University of Oxford*  
Prof. **Jutta Scherrer**, *EHESS, Paris*  
Prof. **Robert Service**, *University of Oxford*  
Mr. **James Sherr**, *RIIA Chatham House London*  
Dr. **Oxana Shevel**, *Tufts University, Medford*  
Prof. **Eberhard Schneider**, *University of Siegen*  
Prof. **Olexander Shnyrkov**, *Shevchenko University, Kyiv*  
Prof. **Hans-Henning Schröder**, *SWP, Berlin*  
Prof. **Yuri Shapoval**, *Ukrainian Academy of Sciences*  
Prof. **Viktor Shnirelman**, *Russian Academy of Sciences*  
Dr. **Lisa Sundstrom**, *University of British Columbia*  
Dr. **Philip Walters**, *"Religion, State and Society"*, *Oxford*  
Prof. **Zenon Wasyliv**, *Ithaca College, New York State*  
Dr. **Lucan Way**, *University of Toronto*  
Dr. **Markus Wehner**, *"Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung"*  
Dr. **Andrew Wilson**, *University College London*  
Prof. **Jan Zielonka**, *University of Oxford*  
Prof. **Andrei Zorin**, *University of Oxford*

\* While the Editorial Committee and Advisory Board support the General Editor in the choice and improvement of manuscripts for publication, responsibility for remaining errors and misinterpretations in the series' volumes lies with the books' authors.

# Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society (SPPS)

ISSN 1614-3515

Founded in 2004 and refereed since 2007, SPPS makes available affordable English-, German-, and Russian-language studies on the history of the countries of the former Soviet bloc from the late Tsarist period to today. It publishes between 5 and 20 volumes per year and focuses on issues in transitions to and from democracy such as economic crisis, identity formation, civil society development, and constitutional reform in CEE and the NIS. SPPS also aims to highlight so far understudied themes in East European studies such as right-wing radicalism, religious life, higher education, or human rights protection. The authors and titles of all previously published volumes are listed at the end of this book. For a full description of the series and reviews of its books, see [www.ibidem-verlag.de/red/spps](http://www.ibidem-verlag.de/red/spps).

**Editorial correspondence & manuscripts** should be sent to: Dr. Andreas Umland, Department of Political Science, Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, vul. Voloska 8/5, UA-04070 Kyiv, UKRAINE; [andreas.umland@cantab.net](mailto:andreas.umland@cantab.net)

**Business correspondence & review copy requests** should be sent to: *ibidem* Press, Leuschnerstr. 40, 30457 Hannover, Germany; tel.: +49 511 2622200; fax: +49 511 2622201; [spps@ibidem.eu](mailto:spps@ibidem.eu).

**Authors, reviewers, referees, and editors** for (as well as all other persons sympathetic to) SPPS are invited to join its networks at [www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=52638198614](http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=52638198614)  
[www.linkedin.com/groups?about=&gid=103012](http://www.linkedin.com/groups?about=&gid=103012)  
[www.xing.com/net/spps-ibidem-verlag/](http://www.xing.com/net/spps-ibidem-verlag/)

## Recent Volumes

- 229 *Oxana Schmies (Ed.)*  
NATO's Enlargement and Russia  
A Strategic Challenge in the Past and Future  
With a foreword by Vladimir Kara-Murza  
ISBN 978-3-8382-1478-8
- 230 *Christopher Ford*  
UKAPISME—Une Gauche Perdue  
Le marxisme anti-colonial dans la révolution ukrainienne  
1917 - 1925  
Avec une préface de Vincent Prémuey  
ISBN 978-3-8382-0899-2
- 231 *Anna Kutkina*  
Between Lenin and Bandera  
Decommunization and Multivocality in Post-Euromaidan  
Ukraine  
With a foreword by Juri Mykkänen  
ISBN 978-3-8382-1506-8
- 232 *Lincoln E. Flake*  
Defending the Faith  
The Russian Orthodox Church and the Demise of Religious Pluralism  
With a foreword by Peter Martland  
ISBN 978-3-8382-1378-1
- 233 *Nikoloz Samkharadze*  
Russia's Recognition of the Independence of  
Abkhazia and South Ossetia  
Analysis of a Deviant Case in Moscow's Foreign Policy  
Behavior  
With a foreword by Neil MacFarlane  
ISBN 978-3-8382-1414-6
- 234 *Arve Hansen*  
Urban Protest  
A Spatial Perspective on Kyiv, Minsk, and Moscow  
With a foreword by Julie Wilhelmsen  
ISBN 978-3-8382-1495-5
- 235 *Eleonora Narvselius, Julie Fedor (Eds.)*  
Diversity in the East-Central European Borderlands  
Memories, Cityscapes, People  
ISBN 978-3-8382-1523-5
- 236 *Regina Elsner*  
The Russian Orthodox Church and Modernity  
A Historical and Theological Investigation into Eastern  
Christianity between Unity and Plurality  
With a foreword by Mikhail Suslov  
ISBN 978-3-8382-1568-6
- 237 *Bo Petersson*  
The Putin Predicament  
Problems of Legitimacy and Succession in Russia  
With a foreword by J. Paul Goode  
ISBN 978-3-8382-1050-6  
ISBN 978-3-8382-1630-0

Jonathan Otto Pohl

# THE YEARS OF GREAT SILENCE

The Deportation, Special Settlement, and Mobilization into  
the Labor Army of Ethnic Germans in the USSR, 1941–1955

*ibidem*  
Verlag

## **Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek**

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Cover picture: German family in Leningrad, 1934. Source: Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung / Flickr. Licensed under CC BY 2.0 (s. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>)

ISBN-13: 978-3-8382-1630-0

© *ibidem*-Verlag, Stuttgart 2022

Alle Rechte vorbehalten

Das Werk einschließlich aller seiner Teile ist urheberrechtlich geschützt. Jede Verwertung außerhalb der engen Grenzen des Urheberrechtsgesetzes ist ohne Zustimmung des Verlages unzulässig und strafbar. Dies gilt insbesondere für Vervielfältigungen, Übersetzungen, Mikroverfilmungen und elektronische Speicherformen sowie die Einspeicherung und Verarbeitung in elektronischen Systemen.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the publisher. Any person who does any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

Printed in the EU

# Contents

1	Introduction.....	7
2	Sources .....	11
3	Literature Review and Historiography .....	19
4	The Origins of German Settlements in the Russian Empire ..	39
5	Ethnic Germans in the Early USSR .....	55
6	The Deportation.....	77
7	Arrival in Exile in Siberia and Kazakhstan .....	121
8	Fishing in the Far North.....	149
9	The Labor Army.....	155
10	The Special Settlement Regime.....	213
11	Repatriated Germans .....	233
12	Local Germans .....	241
13	Number of Excess Deaths 1941–1948.....	249
14	End of the Special Settlement Regime for Germans .....	253
15	The Post-Stalin Era .....	259
16	Conclusion.....	273
	Bibliography.....	275



# 1 Introduction

The title of this book is an English translation of the German phrase *die Jahre des grossen Schweigens*. The time period of the deportation, special settlement restrictions, and mobilization into the labor army is referred to as The Years of Great Silence because of the severe restrictions that existed on speaking or writing about the subject for most of the Soviet era. Except for a few activists like Dominik Hollmann and others these restrictions prevented the ethnic German population in the USSR from researching, writing about, or even speaking openly about their experience during the 14 years between 1941 and 1955. The end of this silence only came in the late 1980s during the era of Glasnost and Perestroika under Gorbachev.

Among the many peoples deliberately victimized in toto by totalitarian regimes during World War II were the ethnic Germans in the USSR. Dating back to 1763 the German settlements of the Volga, Black Sea, Caucasus, and other regions of the western part of the Russian Empire were one of the many groups of Germans ethnically cleansed by the Allied forces in the 1940s. German minorities in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Estonia, and Latvia were largely erased as well as much of the German community of Hungary. These minorities totaled over four million people. The eastern territories of Germany itself including East Prussia, Silesia, and Pomerania were also ethnically cleansed of their former German inhabitants. The German inhabitants of areas of eastern Germany annexed to Poland and the USSR numbered another eight million plus people.<sup>1</sup> This large scale violent eviction of

---

1 The best short summary of this history covering all of these regions is the anthology by Steffen Prauser and Arfon Rees, ed. *The Expulsion of the 'German' Communities from Eastern Europe at the End of the Second World War*. Florence, Italy: European University Institute, 2004. Most works limit themselves to just eastern Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and sometimes Hungary. The 1940 evacuations from Estonia and Latvia as well as the flight and emigration out of Yugoslavia in the 1940s and 1950s are generally not covered. Prauser and Rees also include a piece on Germans in Romania.

millions of ethnic German civilians from their homelands is largely unknown in the English speaking world.<sup>2</sup> The uprooting and dispersal of over one million ethnic Germans from the western USSR to Siberia and Kazakhstan is even less well known than the larger expulsions of Germans from what is now Poland and the Czech Republic.<sup>3</sup> Close to a quarter of a million of the Russian Germans died prematurely as a direct result of the brutal treatment they received from the Soviet government during 1941 to 1948.<sup>4</sup>

The Second World War represented the nadir of the historical existence of the Russian Germans. The 1941 deportations, imposition of special settlement restrictions, and mobilization into the labor army took an enormous toll on the population. After 177 years of existence the German settlements in the Volga came to a violent end at the beginning of World War II. The Stalin regime forcibly dispersed the numerous German populations in the European areas of the USSR across the vastness of Siberia and Kazakhstan. The Soviet government thus permanently erased most of the former German colonies established in the Russian Empire.

This book deals primarily with the experience of the ethnic Germans in the USSR from 1941 to 1955. It emphasizes the 1941 internal deportations from the Volga region and other areas of the Soviet Union west of the Urals to Siberia and Kazakhstan. The main focus is on the uprooting of the German communities in European areas of the USSR, their material and legal conditions as

- 
- 2 The first English language book to deal with the subject of the mass expulsion of Germans from eastern Germany and Central Europe was Alfred-Maurice de Zayas, *Nemesis at Potsdam: The Anglo-Americans and the Expulsion of the Germans: Background, Execution, Consequences*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977.
  - 3 This number includes not only the initial nearly 800,000 ethnic Germans deported from European areas of the USSR in fall of 1941 to Siberia and Kazakhstan but, also the more than 200,000 repatriated back to Soviet control in 1945-1946 that had initially avoided deportation due to the Nazi capture of large parts of Ukraine and western Russia. The chapters on the deportation and repatriation include thorough discussions of the numbers involved.
  - 4 The statistical data on mortality during deportation, confinement as special settlers, and mobilization in the labor army is grossly incomplete. Estimates range from a low of 150,000 to a high of 400,000. My own estimate is near 245,000 and is dealt with in detail in its own chapter.

special settlers east of the Urals, their mobilization into the labor army, and their release from the special settlement restrictions in 1955. It starts with a short introduction of the history of the ethnic Germans in the Russian Empire beginning with the 22 July 1763 Manifesto by Empress Catherine II and ends with the group's mass emigration out of the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, and Central Asia. These other portions of the book are meant largely to introduce and put the experience of the 1940s and 1950s in context. They are thus shorter and less detailed. They are also much less heavily dependent upon primary source material, especially archives from GARF (State Archives of the Russian Federation) in Moscow. Thus the very rich history of ethnic Germans in the Russian Empire and the USSR before 1941 is dealt with rather cursorily in this book.

While the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a number of horrible events befall the ethnic Germans in the Russian Empire and the USSR, none of them had the same long term negative effects as the events of the Second World War which led to the violent end of their numerous communities in the Volga, Ukraine, Caucasus, and other regions. Other traumatic events experienced by the ethnic Germans in the Russian Empire and USSR included the internal deportation of 200,000 Volhynian Germans and others near the western borders during World War One, the Civil War, the 1921–1922 famine, the uprooting of 60,000 German “kulaks” in 1930–1931, the 1932–1933 famine, and the shooting of 46,000 Germans during the Great Terror of 1937–1938. In terms of total losses of life these cumulative events claimed more people than the events of 1941–1955. The two famines may have claimed 200,000 Russian German lives each for a total of 400,000 premature deaths.<sup>5</sup> In contrast the annihila-

---

5 The statistical data on premature deaths due to famine and repression is as noted earlier incomplete as well as often highly speculative. A.A. German and A.N. Kurochin, *Nemtsy SSSR v trudovoi armii (1941–1945)*, Moscow: Gotika, 1998, pp. 21–23 give figures of 150,000 German famine deaths for the Volga region alone for 1920–1922 and 200,000 for Germans in the whole of the USSR during 1932–1933. However, even the lowest estimates place the total at over 480,000 premature deaths from famine and repression of which 100,000 were the 1932–1933 famine and over 180,000 the 1918–1922 Civil War and famine.

tion of the German settlements in 1941 and subsequent repression at the hands of the Soviet regime during the next 14 years claimed about 245,000 lives. In total from 1918 to 1948, Soviet repression and famine led to around 700,000 premature deaths among the Russian Germans.

This book concentrates on the 14 years that the majority of ethnic German citizens in the Soviet Union spent living under special settlement restrictions for a number of reasons. The primary one is that it was the most traumatic period in their short history. It permanently destroyed most of their traditional communities that had existed since 1764. Their physical dispersal across the vast expanse of Siberia and Kazakhstan greatly altered their path of historical development. Already a diaspora their multiple displacement during the 1940s through internal deportation and then mobilization in the labor army led ultimately to most of their descendants leaving the territory of the USSR and immigrating to Germany. This had deep multi-generational psychological, cultural, and other effects on the group.

Symbolically the deportation and subsequent 14 years has become extremely important to the descendants of the survivors. The anniversary of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet Ukaz of 28 August 1941 has been an official day of mourning and commemoration in the Federal Republic of Germany since 1982. It is heavily represented in their art and literature. The recent collective narrative of the group has been one of seeking redemption from the victimization of these years.