



**Harald Stadler, Martin Kofler, Karl C. Berger.** *Flucht in die Hoffnungslosigkeit: Die Kosaken in Osttirol.* Innsbruck: StudienVerlag, 2005. 64 pp. EUR 9.50 (paper), ISBN 978-3-7065-4152-7.



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### **New Perspectives on the “Tragedy on the Drava”**

Although its title translates to “Flight into Hopelessness: The Cossacks in East Tyrol,” the attention of this slim volume of essays is dedicated not to Cossacks who fled, but rather to objects and people who remained in East Tyrol long after some 45,000 Cossacks were forcibly removed from southern Austria by the British in May 1945. The British army’s execution of a command to repatriate all of these Cossacks to the Soviet Union, therefore, forms the backdrop, but not the focus, of the book.[1] Written by and for East Tyroleans, the volume is an introspective piece of scholarship that illuminates local concerns and perspectives on a dreadful episode in the immediate postwar period whose perpetrators and victims were exogenous. While the book’s subject matter will clearly be of great interest to current residents of East Tyrol, who represent the core of the target audience for the exhibition it accompanied, its methodology has the potential to draw wider interest. What can historians learn from the study of material objects, that is, from contemporary archaeology, that they cannot learn from the written record? What are the merits, the problems being obvious, of recollections gathered from eyewitnesses whose memories, motives and biases give every reason

to question their historical accuracy? At the same time, however, the authors seem to fear that some readers may rankle at the notion of encouraging German Austrians to settle into the comfortable position of horrified bystanders to a tragedy for which they bear no direct responsibility. In the interest of using methods that allow them to “nevertheless approach this difficult topic in a neutral fashion” (p. 10), the authors accept that avoiding controversy or conflict must limit the scope of the book. Indeed, certain sections of the book are dedicated to uncovering facets of this story considered “unworthy” of inclusion in the written, or “historical” record (p. 40).

In the first of the book’s three sections, “Historical Context,” historian Martin Kofler provides a brief introduction to the forced extradition of the Cossacks and the social environment of East Tyrol in 1945. Winston Churchill and Josef Stalin agreed at Yalta in February 1945 that the Allies would repatriate one another’s citizens. At the time, Churchill agreed to hand over all Soviet citizens, whether forced laborers, prisoners of war or combatants, because he was eager to protect the lives of British soldiers or POWs who might be detained by

the Soviets. Churchill must have known that this would include even Soviet citizens in German army uniforms who, according to the Geneva and Hague Conventions, should have been treated as German prisoners of war. No evidence suggests, however, that he anticipated the repatriation of thousands of individuals who were, in some cases indisputably and in others arguably, not Soviet citizens at all. The question of moral and legal accountability for the fates of Russians, Germans and Austrians who were not Soviet citizens is fraught with controversy and led in 1989 to a libel suit with one of the highest damage awards in British history.[2]

The British army, which entered Carinthia and East Tyrol in May 1945, found hundreds of thousands of enemy troops, refugees and prisoners of war still there.[3] These included about 25,000 men in the 15th Cossack Cavalry, who, since 1943, had served under General Helmut von Pannwitz as part of a division in the regular German army and had been transformed into a corps in the Waffen SS in 1944.[4] Many of the officers were German and Austrian; all of the men were clearly prisoners of war. The 15th Cossack Cavalry came under the control of the 46th division of the 5 Corps of the British 8th Army, in northeastern Carinthia. In addition, roughly 20,000 men, women and children formed the Kazachi Stan, a civilian group quartered near Lienz that had retreated with the German army when it passed through the Don and Kuban regions after Stalingrad. A civilian militia more than a regular army formation, it included over 4,300 women and children, as well as men too old to fight. After engagements with Italian communist partisans in Northern Italy, the Kazachi Stan made its way into the Valley in East Tyrol at the end of April 1945. Its leaders included Generals Peter Krasnov and Andrei Shkuro, both veterans of the Russian Civil War who had fought against the Red Army and emigrated to western Europe in 1919 or 1920. Encamped in Lienz, the capital of East Tyrol, the Kazachi Stan fell under the purview of the 78th division of the 5 Corps of the British 8th Army.[5] Because the authors are principally concerned with Lienz and its immediate environs, their attention is focused on interactions between German Austrians and the Kazachi Stan.

In mid-May 1945, Stalin demanded that all of the Cossacks in both groups, as well as a group of about 4,800 "Caucasians," be handed over to Soviet control. The British faced a two-fold problem. First, none of the Cossacks wanted to go back, rightly assuming that affiliation with the Wehrmacht would not endear them to Soviet authorities. Indeed, after their "evacuation," fifty-

nine "traitors" and "agents of German espionage" were executed on the spot; Generals Krasnov, Shkuro, Timofei Ivanovitch Domanov and Pannwitz were executed after being put on trial; and the remainder of the Cossacks were deported to forced labor camps in Siberia (p. 19). Second, not all of the people in question were actually Soviet citizens. Some were Germans or Austrians, but more, perhaps as many as one-third, were Russian subjects who had fled Russia before the First Congress of Soviets of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics ratified the agreement that established the USSR on December 30, 1922.[6] As May turned to June, the British turned to "trickery and force" to separate the rank and file from their charismatic leaders (p. 16). First they ushered approximately 1,500 Cossack officers, of whom approximately two-thirds were "old émigrés" and not Soviet citizens, to a fictional conference in Spittal. From there, they were taken to Judenburg and forced across the Mur River into the Soviet Zone. When news that all Cossacks would be handed over to the Soviets reached the Cossack settlement back in Lienz, it caused massive panic, hunger strikes and petitions insisting that death was preferable to return to the Soviet Union. On June 1, British soldiers charged with the task of transporting camp residents to the demarcation line were faced with pregnant women, crying children, priests and thousands of unarmed Cossacks singing and praying with arms linked. They could only be moved by force. Many committed suicide. Others were trampled in the general mayhem or fatally wounded by soldiers armed with bayonets, pickaxes and bludgeons. Transports continued throughout the first half of June, but after the first brutal day, resistance broke down.

The aim of this little book, however, is neither to tell the story of those Cossacks nor to weigh in on the debate about British culpability for either the brutality of the so-called evacuation or the initial decision, only reversed on June 4, not to check individual citizenship papers. Readers interested in the fate of the Cossacks will find several monographs in English.[7] These authors, however, are more interested in the bystanders than either the perpetrators or the victims and seek to use archaeological and ethnological methods to illuminate their experiences. This approach results ultimately in a local study of the Drava Valley in East Tyrol that focuses on the effect on the local population of having witnessed this event and, more broadly, of having, however briefly, shared living space with the Cossacks. The authors conclude that, although those few weeks in April, May and June, made "East Tyrol the stage for world history for the first (and

only) time!” from the perspective of the local population, the appearance, temporary settlement and violent removal of the Cossacks represented little more than a “further element of insecurity” alongside other elements of “the whole confusion at the war’s end” (p. 21).

That the authors were only able to publish this book after having secured funding from twenty-two different private and public sponsors, from the City of Lienz to a local carpentry and timber framing company, is both a sad commentary on the state of academic publishing in Austria and a reflection of the target audience. The authors even boast that their research was facilitated by the fact that both lead researchers, Harald Stadler and Karl Berger, “are native East Tyroleans, and thus familiar with the localities, and enjoyed a certain trust bonus among the population from the beginning” (p. 10). Their principle area of investigation was, therefore, not designed to illuminate the controversy over British policy, or culpability for Britain’s “most notorious war crime,” to echo Ian Mitchell. Rather, the authors sought to discover the kinds of material objects left behind, either hidden or utilized for their original or some other purpose. In so doing, they hoped to “trace the daily life of the Cossacks in the camps,” “expose cultural exchange and cultural transfer” and “illuminate memories from the perspective of archaeology and cultural anthropology” (p. 11). The difficulty in finding any way to describe these events “neutrally” can be seen in a comment that Kofler makes while weighing the local population’s emotional response to the Cossacks’ arrival and departure: “In spite of all the tragedy, there was surely also a certain sigh of relief—after all, one had enough problems oneself amidst the chaos at the end of the war” (p. 23).

Kofler notes the influence of years of Nazi propaganda about the “wild hordes” (p. 22) from the East in coloring East Tyroleans’ reactions to the arrival of tens of thousands of Cossack men, women and children along with thousands of horses and even a few camels. A gendarme in Nikolsdorf, about 14 km southeast of Lienz, noted their arrival in the sentry chronicle on 4 May as follows: “Cossack invasion. Cossacks come ... with women and children, in civilian dress and uniform, about 35,000, with horses and wagons, bicycles, motorcycles, trucks and cars, artillery, heavily armed, rifles, pistols, MP., hand grenades, etc., everything formerly belonging to the *Wehrmacht*” (p. 23). He also referred to one of the largest points of friction between the Cossacks and the local population, nothing that “they had about 6,000 horses and these many horses in a short while ate up the meadows to such an extent that the local farmers had

no hay harvest” (p. 23). These horses became such a nuisance that they were slaughtered en masse after the Cossacks’ departure, four kilograms of their meat sold in exchange for a one-fourth kilogram meat ration card (p. 35).

According to Kofler, there were three lingering effects of the Cossacks’ brief stay in East Tyrol. First, not all of the Cossacks left, although most of those who were initially able to hide in the woods and hills seem to have been discovered by the autumn of 1945. Second, the Cossacks were not able to take their goods with them and left behind almost 5,000 horses, as well as mountains of personal possessions. Third, Kofler suggests that the experience of having been “bystanders” rather than “perpetrators” of what was unquestionably a brutal and inhumane operation, combined with reference to Allied bombings of civilian targets, helped the local population distance itself from any sense of responsibility for National Socialist crimes.

In the second section of the book, cultural anthropologist Karl Berger and archaeologist Harald Stadler demonstrate the ways in which their respective disciplines can go beyond the document-based studies on which historians most frequently rely. Berger notes the difficulty in using memory as a source, in this case, accentuated by the fact that the adults interviewed were asked to recall events associated with feelings of fear and danger that they had experienced as children. While historians might be frustrated by difficulties in ascertaining which memories are “real,” for cultural anthropologists the act of remembering, the structure of stories and the variance in perception themselves provide “insight into those spheres that cannot be transmitted through written, visual or material sources” (p. 29). Berger’s students conducted sixty-one interviews with people from East Tyrol and referred to an additional eighteen interviews carried out by the Austrian Contemporary Witness Archive in 2000-01.

Among the objects that East Tyroleans were most eager to show their interviewers were those that represented assistance and grateful exchange, such as a barn where Cossacks were safely hidden and a brooch given to a midwife in thanks for a safe delivery. These objects possess a value far greater than their material worth, since, “to the initiated, they stand symbolically for this time ... and thus act as material [*dingliches*] memory” (p. 30). Berger noted considerable consistencies in both the form and content of stories shared by survivors of the period, which he grouped into four thematic categories: first,

arrival of the Cossacks; second, intercultural contacts; third, horses and fourth, evacuation/assistance with escape/plundering of the camp, a subject many of the interviewees refused to discuss at all. The Cossacks' arrival was greeted with fear not only by gendarmes, but also by the general population. Parents sent children to lock up the animals and windows were covered with black paper, as thousands upon thousands of strangely dressed foreigners came into town in a never-ending column of people, wagons and horses.

Whether positive or negative, most of the contact between Cossacks and East Tyroleans originated in the former's need to secure food for themselves and their horses. This circumstance led to much bartering of rugs, jewelry, clothing, horse collars, harnesses and wagons in exchange for potatoes, fruit, bread and bacon. Where barter failed, coercion might follow, as in the following story recollected by "N.N.": "At our place, we had a beautiful, a big calf for fattening. Later an enormous man, armed to the teeth [came] ... in up at the barn: 'Sell calf. We're not giving away any calf.' Then he stormed out like he'd been singed and came back with three, four men, all similarly armed, with a wagon, the two horses in it, like they were back then. And then they grabbed the calf, threw a handful of marks, like there were back then, which were worthless anyway, in the front door. For us this was a devilish loss back then. Only later, afterwards, we realized that they needed something to eat, too" (p. 33). Only after they had been forcibly removed by the British did the Cossacks become objects of pity and understanding. As long as the East Tyroleans did not know how long they would have to share their meadowlands, crops, produce, livestock and homes with these uninvited visitors, they were more concerned with securing their own belongings than sympathizing with strangers. By minimizing contact with the Cossacks, by refusing to learn their names or think of them as individuals, East Tyroleans were able to maintain an invisible barrier around their community. Even where regular exchange occurred, it occurred with a type, "The Cossack," and not with an individual. One interviewee recalled asking his mother for milk in order to trade it for cookies with a man whom he called only "the Cookie Cossack" (p. 34).

Stadler provides a brief introduction to the distinctive methods of contemporary archaeology (*Neuzeitarchäologie*), and to the particular challenges faced by its practitioners. Since this branch of historical archaeology is concerned with material evidence in the twentieth century, when historical, or document-

based, evidence, is also readily available, its usefulness for the study of European history has been challenged by some skeptics. Part of Stadler's goal, therefore, is to demonstrate what the field of contemporary archaeology can add to the understanding of the Second World War that emerges from the written record. Even in such a recent era, "broad fields of human nature and activity ... were not considered worthy of transmission" (p. 40). Stadler's ambitious project, which seeks to identify and excavate any location where Cossack artifacts might be found, including campsites, irregular burial places and hiding spots in low and high mountain ranges, was far from complete at the book's publication in 2005. His team had, however, collected approximately 200 examples of goods acquired by East Tyroleans as presents, or through barter, sale, loot or plunder. These goods included weapons and accessories worn in military full dress, jewelry, household objects like pots and canisters, clothing, Panje wagons and horse trappings. Stadler's estimate that 25,000 people would have had approximately 2.5 million objects with them suggests that many more similar objects still lie forgotten or buried in East Tyrol.

In the third section, referred to as an appendix, readers are presented with the voices of three Cossacks. The first comes in the form of excerpts from the diary of Ivan Nikolaevich Cherenkov, a Don Cossack, which have been translated into German. The diary covers the period from June 22, 1941, to January 2, 1945, and stops five months before the British entered the region. On occasion it is unclear whether Cherenkov is describing events that actually occurred on the day of his entry, or events that occurred on that date in an earlier year. For example, the editors tell us that Cherenkov has two daughters. Cherenkov mentions them as four-year-old Rosa and seven-year-old Tamara in his entry of October 14, 1941. On November 30, 1944, Cherenkov notes: "daughter was born at 7 o'clock" (p. 61). Is this a third daughter? Or a recollection of the birth of either Rosa in 1936 or Tamara in 1933?

Sonja Walder and Michael R., who were left behind by departing or murdered Cossacks in 1945 and grew up in East Tyrol, are given the last word. Their brief comments, describing childhoods spent as "feral children" trailed by epithets like "Russian child," "Cossack brat" or "another mouth to feed" (p. 63), raise questions about the decision to forego "consciously the qualitative questioning of surviving Cossacks" and instead to concentrate "on the different perceptions in the East Tyrolean population as well as on the history of the researched objects" (p. 10). Given that an influential local politician,

who later became a representative in the Austrian parliament, referred to the Cossacks as a “plague of devastating locusts” (p. 25), there is a danger that a study of “cultural exchange and cultural transfer” (p. 11) based on material objects, while interesting, may itself contribute to the erasure of the human experience of Cossacks in the Drava Valley. This is certainly not the intention of the authors. It is nevertheless striking that, although the exchange of property may have been welcome, the exchange of human beings does not appear to have been welcome at all. The process by which East Tyroleans found new uses for Cossack objects, successfully integrating them into their daily lives by, in some cases, radically altering their purpose, for example, reincarnating Cossack cauldrons as Lienzer flower pots, can be described neutrally. But it is difficult to remain unmoved by the juxtaposition of this material “transfer” and the story of surviving Cossack children’s “desperate efforts to integrate” (p. 63) into a society that refused to accept them as its own.

#### Notes

[1]. The term “repatriate” is used here only for lack of a better substitute. Its strict definition to the contrary, in this context “repatriation” does not indicate that all of the human beings who were sent to the Soviet Union were being returned to a state in which they held active citizenship or in which they were born.

[2]. For an account of the trial, see Ian Mitchell,

*The Cost of a Reputation: The Controversial Account of Britain’s Most Notorious War Crime and its Legal Aftermath* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1988), p. 6.

[3]. East Tyrol is geographically contiguous with Carinthia and separated from Northern Tyrol by the Italian province of Alto Adige, formerly part of South Tyrol. From 1938 until 1947, East Tyrol was administratively part of Carinthia.

[4]. As many as 250,000 Cossacks “fought for or worked for the Germans” between 1941 and 1945 (Richard Overy, *Russia’s War: A History of the Soviet War Effort, 1941-1945* [New York: Penguin, 1997], p. 347, n. 6).

[5]. More information on the organization of British forces in Southern Austria in May and June 1945 can be found in Mitchell, pp. 14-23.

[6]. Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism, 1917-1923*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 275.

[7]. Nikolai Tolstoy, *Victims of Yalta*, revised and updated edition (London: Corgi, 1979; originally published by Hodder and Stoughton in 1977); Ian Mitchell, *The Cost of a Reputation*; Nicholas Bethell, *The Last Secret: Forcible Repatriation to Russia, 1944-1947* (Sevenoaks: Coronet, 1987); Christopher Booker, *A Looking-Glass Tragedy: The Controversy over the Repatriations from Austria in 1945* (London: Duckworth, 1997).

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