

Ulrike Goeken-Haidl. *Der Weg zurück: Die Repatriierung sowjetischer Zwangsarbeiter während und nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg.* Essen: Klartext Verlag, 2006. 574 pp. EUR 39.90 (paper), ISBN 978-3-89861-615-7.



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The Origins of the Cold War

The front cover of Ulrike Goeken-Haidl's book is somewhat misleading. It shows happy Soviet citizens returning home after the years of experiencing forced labor, POW, and concentration camps at the hands of the National Socialists. But the story told in this book is anything but happy. It begins with the story of Lieutenant Jakob Dzhughashvili, the son of Josef Stalin from his first marriage, who was captured by Germans in July 1941 and committed suicide in Sachsenhausen concentration camp, knowing that at home in the Soviet Union, he and his comrades in misfortune, Soviet soldiers and officers taken prisoner by the Germans, were classified as "traitors of the Motherland." This striking example opens a very interesting, quite readable study that makes an important contribution to research on the processes that followed World War II, the origins of Cold War, and especially the problem of repatriation, which is still insufficiently studied.

Using Soviet and American records, Goeken-Haidl shows in eight chapters of her voluminous study the origins of the problem of displaced persons and the entire

process of the repatriation of the 2.3 million Soviet citizens who, for various reasons, found themselves outside the borders of the Soviet Union at war's end. This problem dwarfed that of the 360,000 citizens of western Allied countries in similar situations, including some 50,000 British and American soldiers and officers captured by Wehrmacht and Japan strike forces. This huge displacement and its resolution stretched from the years when hostilities in Europe and the Far East were still in progress, through several decades beyond the end of World War II. The author places the repatriation problem in the broader context of the beginning of the Cold War. Paradoxically, the hardline position of the Soviet Union and its insistence upon repatriation of all its citizens outside its borders for any reason actually hindered the growth of the minority problem in Europe, which had been one of the main causes of the outbreak of the war.

In her study, Goeken-Haidl analyzes the reasons behind the decisions of all sides in the repatriation question. The United States adopted a mixed stance in response to the harsh Soviet position, which insisted on the re-

turn of all of its citizens, no matter the reason for their capture—including people with explicit or implicit reasons to avoid repatriation, such as Wehrmacht soldiers who had deserted the Red Army to fight against the Soviet regime or former residents of areas such as the Baltic states, which had been annexed in 1939-40 as a consequence of the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact. (The Soviet Union also insisted that Soviet repatriation personnel be accredited to work in U.S. or British DP camps.) Although the U.S. military had pursued what the author calls an “appeasement” strategy during the war, making every effort to meet Soviet demands and respond to complaints, no matter how absurd, in order not to alienate their Soviet allies, the State Department had advocated a more rigid response to Soviet demands and pretensions right from the start. As Goeken-Haidl shows, the United States and Britain were quite vulnerable, as the Soviets held a number of British and American soldiers who had been held prisoner in German POW camps that were situated in the Soviet theater of war or its later zone of occupation. The USSR did not shrink from using these soldiers as hostages to forward its demands. Thus, although forced repatriation of Soviet or former Soviet citizens and side effects of this process—such as attempted or completed suicides by the affected parties—aroused public protest in both Britain and United States, the practice continued unabated until all of the British and U.S. soldiers in Soviet hands were released. Only afterwards was it revised.

Goeken-Haidl also analyzes the motives that defined the Soviet position on repatriation. According to her, from the very beginning, the Soviets viewed the policies adopted by the western Allies with great suspicion. The decision not to repatriate people from West Byelorussia, Western Ukraine, and the Baltic states, as neither the United States nor Great Britain had ever acknowledged annexation of these territories by the USSR, only enhanced these suspicions. The fact that many Soviet citizens did not rush back to the USSR after the war not only compromised the reputation of the Soviet state, it was also incomprehensible to Soviet authorities. From their point of view, if people did not wish to return to the victorious, “mighty” Soviet Union, their reluctance was attributed to the “intrigues” of the American and British imperialists. Moreover, the Soviet Union wished to conceal as thoroughly as possible the fact that quite a number of its citizens had defected to the enemy, instead of defending their “superior” system. Above all, the tradition of paranoid fear of the West and of its alleged destructive intentions toward the Soviet Union came to expression in the Soviet position.

Obsessive fear of the West was also expressed in the treatment of repatriates transferred to the Soviets. Throughout eastern Germany, the Soviet authorities established a complete system of gathering and filtration camps, at which returnees were to be checked for political reliability. Everyone who came in contact with the “capitalist world” in any way was seen with suspicion. Goeken-Haidl tells stories of humiliation, verbal and physical violence, and economic exploitation, all of which were prevalent in these camps. People who had been released from forced labor or liberated from POW or concentration camps only a short time before were now denigrated as “German lackeys” and “Nazi whores” by the personnel of the repatriation camps, most of whom had been recruited from the NKVD. In the absence of effective control from above, inmates of these camps were at the mercy of camp guards. The camps also possessed wide networks of spies, who came from the ranks of potential repatriates and had been promised advantages such as an acceleration of the repatriation process. Spies were supposed to uncover active Nazi collaborators and anyone critical of Soviet rule. Inhumane treatment of inmates led to a wave of escape attempts (many of them successful) and of suicides. On average, two repatriates escaped from each camp per week. Even for those who survived this process and returned home, reintegration into Soviet society was not easy. Many former forced laborers were dispatched immediately to various construction projects. Those who returned to their home villages and cities suffered from suspicious attitudes on the part of both local authorities and neighbors. Such attitudes lasted many years; in some cases, even to the present.

Goeken-Haidl has written a fascinating book, though the account sometimes sacrifices precision and thoroughness. For instance, she mentions only briefly the loophole created by the U.S. decision not to transfer persons from eastern Poland and the Baltic states, and mentions only one or two of the most spectacular cases of war criminals from among Nazi collaborators who exploited this decision to pose as anti-Soviet fighters and escape justice. I mentioned an example of this pattern in a recent article on the 30th Waffen-Grenadier Division of the SS, or “1st Byelorussian,” many of whose members had been auxiliary policemen before entry into the SS, and had participated actively in the genocide of Byelorussian Jewry and in the so-called anti-partisan warfare, in course of which thousands of innocents were killed. After the bulk of this division’s soldiers found themselves in DP camps in the American zone, they posed as Poles, escaped transfer to the Soviet authorities, and were able to live in the coun-

tries against which they had fought during the closing stages of the World War II.[1]. At the same time, while depicting at length the hardline position of Soviets in questions of repatriation, Goeken-Haidl either omits or ignores the fact that during the Cold War, U.S. military intelligence did not hesitate to exploit the anti-Soviet sentiments of DPs and later, of non-repatriated immigrants, for strategic purposes, especially in view of the possibility of the transition from a “cold” war to a hot one. In such efforts, the authorities often ignored the problematic past of such people.[2] At the same time, while criticizing the study of Nikolaj Tolstoj, whose main focus falls upon the forced repatriation of Soviet citizens, Goeken-Haidl can be seen as moving too far in the opposite direction by focusing on unwilling returnees. A stronger treatment of voluntary repatriation might have created a more balanced picture.

Finally, Goeken-Haidl’s study is not free of some technical problems, inaccuracies, and omissions. Thus, for example, the Byelorussian city of Slonim is termed a village (p. 381), though during the Nazi occupation, it was large enough to be a center of German civil area administration (*Gebietskommissariat*). On the same page, she also mentions the activities of the infamous Latvian Arajs Kommando as a guard unit of Salaspils concentra-

tion camp near Riga, but omits mention of the role played by the same group in the extermination of the Latvian Jews. KonrÅds KalÅjs, a member of this commando, was accused not only of maltreatment of Salaspils’s inmates, but explicitly of participation in the execution of the “Final Solution.” It would have been appropriate, moreover, to include at least an index of names or locations in order to facilitate navigation through such a long book, and lengthy footnotes occasionally disturb the smooth reading of the book.

Notes

[1]. Leonid Rein, “Untermenschen in SS Uniforms: 30th Waffen-Grenadier Division of Waffen SS,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* (April 2007): 329-345.

[2] Thus, for example, Stanislav Stankevich, who occupied the post of mayor of Borisov during the Nazi occupation of Byelorussia and was directly involved in the murder of 7,000 Borisov Jews in October 1941, served for many years after the war in the Byelorussian service of Radio Free Europe and was never prosecuted for his wartime activities. The postwar fates of Stankevich and many other Byelorussian collaborators are tracked in John Loftus’s controversial study, *The Belarus Secret* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982).

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