

A Repression of Czechoslovak Citizens in the USSR

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Abstract. Around 30,000 citizens of pre-war Czechoslovakia were persecuted in the Soviet Union, at least 5,000 originated from Czech lands. One of the groups consist of the people who in the period of 1939–1942 sought refuge in the USSR from German or Hungarian Nazism, or who wanted to actively fight against it. They ended up in the Gulag, from which they were freed during an amnesty linked to the creation of a Czechoslovak unit in the USSR. Many were Czechoslovak Jews, including those who escaped from the Nazi concentration camp in Poland, Nisko, while thousands were inhabitants of Carpathian Ruthenia.

Keywords: repression, persecutions, refugees, Czechoslovak citizens, Czechoslovak Jews, SMERSH, NKVD, forced labour, victims, witnesses

Introduction

The research in the Czech Republic concerning our citizens persecuted in the Gulag started only after the fall of communism in the 90s. The reason is obvious: it was a taboo, just as in other countries of the communistic bloc. Therefore, it is rather late to start such research, especially when you are trying to find living witnesses to map their stories.

Another obstacle is still a limited access to archives today, mainly in Russia, but we had some success in Ukraine in recent years. Because of this limitation, all the numbers about persecuted Czechoslovak citizens are only estimates, and probably will remain estimates for many years to come. However, our group of oral history in *The Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes of Prague* (www.ustrcr.cz) is trying to fill this gap in the Czech history. We are trying to find the last living witnesses and record their memories or their relatives, and we have collected about 40 interviews with survivors so far, more then 20 with their family members and thousands of documents and photographs from the NKVD files. In regard to the archives, we were successful especially in Lviv and Uzhorod in the recent years.

The Main Groups of Persecuted Czechoslovak Citizens

The main groups of persecuted people can be divided by the period of WWII. Before WWII, it was the legionnaires and captives of WWI, emigrants to USSR and members of Czech minorities. The most tragic periods included the start of the 1920s, when the Bolshevik regime was consolidating its power, followed by the turn of the 1920s and the 1930s, when farmers and intellectuals were persecuted, and in particular the Great Terror (end of 1936 – August 1938), when the number of Czechoslovak victims of persecution reached a peak. The number of Czechoslovaks persecuted in the inter-war period is put at around 1,000, of whom 700 died.

During the war, it was the group of people escaping from occupied territories, the Czech legion in Poland forming there in 1939, Jews from the transport to Nisko and victims of Katyn.

The third period of repression began almost immediately after the liberation in May 1945. From then until the start of the 1950s, hundreds of innocent people of interest to the Soviet regime were conveyed to Soviet territory by members of special units of the SMERSH military counter-intelligence and the NKVD. Alongside collaborators, they mainly comprised members of the pre-war Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian exile communities.

A number of Czechs, who had in the past ‘allegedly’ committed offences against the Soviet regime, were also subject to rendition. The majority were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment (10–25 years). Estimates put the number of persons subject to rendition from the territory of today’s Czech Republic at around 500 (of which 300 met their deaths), while the figure for Slovakia was 6,000 with at least 2,000 dead.

The largest increase in the number of victims of the Soviet forces of repression occurred in the period of WWII, more precisely in the years between 1939 and 1941. Czechoslovak citizens threatened by Nazism, by the new Slovakian puppet regime, or by the result of Hungarian annexation opted to move to the Soviet Union, while some found themselves on its territory due to the Soviet occupation of Eastern Poland.

The majority were arrested and charged with illegally crossing the border, being in the Soviet Union illegally, or with espionage, either immediately after setting foot on Soviet territory or during NKVD raids on ‘unreliable elements’. They subsequently faced being sentenced to – most frequently – three to five years of forced labour and being sent to Gulag labour camps (in the Pechora, Kolyma, Norilsk, Karaganda oblasts and elsewhere).

Czech researchers have also concentrated on the group of Czechoslovak Jews from Nisko transports. From the 5,000 deported Jews in autumn 1939, around 1,500 were Czechoslovak citizens and approximately 700 of them were sentenced

to the Gulag. We know that 300 appeared alive in Buzuluk to join the Svoboda army, which was forming there.

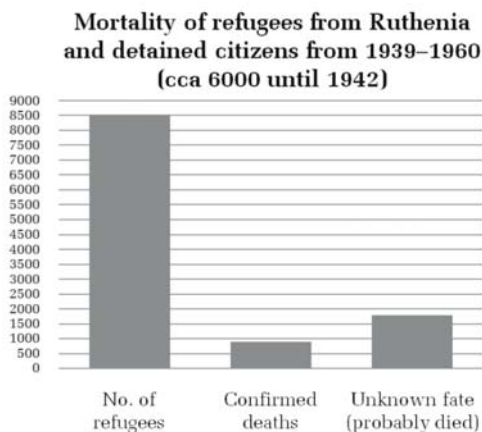
After the amnesty of 1942 declared by the Soviet leadership, thousands of Czechoslovaks were released from camps and prisons. The majority of the released signed up as volunteers to a Czechoslovak military unit in the city of Buzuluk. However, the amnesty did not concern 'persons suspected of espionage against the USSR'.

If it is possible to make a generalization at all from the stories we know from the war period, Czechoslovak citizens were escaping Nazism looking for refuge in the USSR, but they were arrested by communists and sent to the Gulag instead. If they survived, they tried to reach Buzuluk after the amnesty. They were free now, but they had to fight their way back home. They took part in various battles on the Eastern Front. Many perished on the battlefields, of course.

Ruthenia

After the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1939, the biggest group which ended in the Gulag came from Ruthenia. The numbers from different sources are between few thousands to 15,000 thousand. We know that in years 1942-43 around 3,000 made it to Buzuluk after they had been released from the Gulag.

What we know from Ukrainian sources is that around 8,500 citizens from Ruthenia and people who were trying to escape through this territory ended up in the Gulag camps (this number does not include Hungarians and Germans detained after the war). Approximately 6,000 people from this group ended up in the hands of the NKVD before 1942.



Source: *The Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes*

Figure 1.

The Story of Václav Djačuk

Václav Djačuk was born on 10 September 1920 in Rachov, Ruthenia. With the aim of avoiding conscription to the Hungarian Army, he and one his friends entered the territory occupied by the USSR in July 1940. However, they were arrested shortly afterwards, having to spend several months behind bars in Nadvirne, Stanislavov, and Starobilsk. In their case, a sentence of three years' forced labour was handed down for illegally crossing the border. In July 1941, they were deported to the infamous camp of Kolyma in north-eastern Siberia, where prisoners worked in extremely difficult living conditions in gold- and coal-mines. In the spring of 1943, Djačuk was released on amnesty for Czechoslovak citizens. He set off on a difficult journey lasting many weeks to the Czechoslovak unit in Buzuluk, arriving there at the start of August 1943. After successfully undergoing training at an aviation school, he was transferred to the 1st Czechoslovak Fighter Air Regiment. As part of the regiment, he took part in the Ostrava Operation during the liberation of Czechoslovakia. Following WWII, he became an experienced pilot in the air force. However, in 1949, he was dismissed from the army without explanation and was allowed to take only labouring jobs. Following 1989, he was rehabilitated and his military rank reinstated. In October 2011, President Václav Klaus presented him with the Order of the White Lion. Today, Djačuk lives in Prague.

Summary

A rough estimate puts the total number of Czechoslovak citizens persecuted in the Soviet Union under 30,000. That is fewer than it was believed until quite recently. The reduced figure is the result of detailed research carried out in the Ukrainian archives of the NKVD, according to which the number of persecuted citizens of Ruthenia was significantly lower than originally estimated. The overwhelming majority of these persons passed through Gulag camps, though the overall estimate also includes those who were executed or displaced. The number of people persecuted with a direct connection to today's Czech Republic stands at 4,150, of whom around 2,150 died as a result of their persecution.

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