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# The Deportation of Germans from Romania to the Soviet Union in 1944–1945

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**Abstract.** The study outlines the capturing of prisoners by the Red Army taking control over Transylvania in the fall of 1944. It presents the second wave of capturing: the deportations in January-February 1945, pronouncedly oriented toward the German community (Transylvanian Saxons and Swabians) primarily living in the Banat. There are described the circumstances of capturing the prisoners, the number of those taken away, the routes of their deportation, the locations and lengths of their captivity, the number of the victims, and the return of the survivors. Finally, the remembrance of the 1945 Soviet deportations, their present social embeddedness is expounded. The source material of the study consists of specialist books, essays, published recollections, and interviews with survivors made by the author and other researchers.

**Keywords:** deportation, lager, captivity, prisoners, trauma, disease, hunger, homesickness, death, survivors

> *'A sacred hatred is burning in our hearts… We have got only one thought: kill the German! Thrust a bayonet into his hoggish belly! Make him shut his greedy eyes! Smash his stupid, angled head. Let the snake perish! A storm is rumbling over the steppes alongside the Don. An infuriated, enraged, unmerciful Russia is moving ahead. A dooming Russia. A vengeful Russia.'*
>
> Ilya Ehrenburg: *The German* (1943)

Seven decades ago, in the fall of 1944, World War II reached the land of Transylvania. The passage of the front lines brought about immeasurable suffering to local people, irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds. But the German population of the region divided between Romania and Hungary at that time was even more exposed to the mercy of the troops moving forward as compared with the other ethnic groups. The switching of Romania to the side of the Allies on the 23rd of August, 1944 made the country turn into a belligerent associate from an enemy. Thus, the Red Army, when liberating the country moving with its

troops towards the West, stepped for the first time on the territory of the enemy in Northern Transylvania. Therefore, it considered the large Saxon and Swabian population living here an enemy. The Red Army, intending to take revenge for the destructions in the Soviet Union, avenged upon the ethnic German civilian population, stigmatized as 'Nazis' and considered a scapegoat.

The most spectacular means of Soviet revenge was the large-scale capturing of civilian prisoners. This occurred in two larger waves in Transylvania: first in October 1944, right after the passage of the front line, when ethnic Hungarians and men thought to be German soldiers, German-looking boys and men, or people with German names were deported. The second wave came a few months later, in January 1945, after the occupation of Northern Transylvania and the eastern parts of Hungary, when the German-speaking civilian population of Banat, Partium and Transylvania was deported. The present study deals with the latter in detail.

The second wave of the Soviet deportations concretely decimated the German population living on the territory of present-day Romania. Decision number 7161 of the Soviet State Defence Committee (Государственный комитет обороны, ГКО, Gosudarstvennyj komitet oborony, GKO) released on the 16th of December, 1944 ordered the beginning of the deportation of Germans (Polian 2004: 250–252). This was supplemented a few days later by the strictly secretive Executive Order 0060 of the Military Council of the Ukrainian Front, released on the 22nd of December, 1944, which ordered the deportation of the population of German origin, capable of work from all over the territory of the Carpathian Basin by the special units of the army (Bognár 2012: 85–86). Order 031, dated on the 6th of January, 1944, addressed to the Romanian Council of Ministers by the Allied Control Commission, was based on these two Soviet directives, prescribing the compulsory mobilization for forced labour of all ethnic German people living in Romania, irrespective of their citizenship (Rusnac 3). According to Order A/192 on the 19th of February, 1945 of General Vinogradov, the deputy leader of the ACC, mixed committees were established in each county, with the task of taking the census of the population of German ethnicity. Besides Soviet officers, these committees included Romanian soldiers, gendarmes, and policemen (Aioanei–Troncotă 1995: 56).

According to the order, German men capable of work had to report compulsorily at the town halls of their places of residence between the 10-20th of January, 1945, and during this 10-day interval all men of German ethnicity between the ages of 17 and 45 capable of work as well as all women between the ages of 18 and 30 had to be mobilized (Polian 2004: 250). Theoretically, mothers of children under 1 year should have been an exception (Baier 1994: 40). But this rule was not respected.

Hearing about the abuses, and because of the general fear and uncertainty, a lot of people hid themselves at home or at relatives instead of voluntary reporting. Thus, the number of people was insufficient, which led to new abuses. The Soviets soon deported 16-17-year-old boys and girls, too, indiscriminately,

and even more, in addition to the previously determined age limit, 40-year old women and 50-year old men were also deported (Volume: Erzählungen von Rußlanddeportierten, 1995: 39). Those who did not present themselves were personally taken from their homes or workplaces by the units of the Romanian gendarmerie, on the basis of lists. This – to avoid sensation – mainly happened during the night (Zengea 2001).

The people deported because of their German ethnicity were in a more favourable situation as compared to the Hungarians captured three months earlier insofar as – in accordance with Decision 7161 and Order 0060 referring exclusively to them – they were allowed to take with them warm clothes, spare underwear, bedclothes, cutlery, and food enough for 15 days, a total weight of 200 kilograms per person (Polian 2004: 251, Bognár 2012: 85–86). Thus, their chances for survival were better. But because there were women with weaker physique among the Germans, the rate of their mortality was approximately the same as in the case of Hungarians.

The 10th of January, 1945 was designated as the date when the deportation of Germans was supposed to start (Stark 2006: 75). On that day, in accordance with the regulations, deportations began indeed in the Banat (Timişoara, Arad, Lugoj, Reşiţa), while in the Saxon Land (Braşov, Sibiu, Sighişoara, Mediaş, Rupea, Cisnădie, Agnita) and in the Partium (Satu Mare, Carei, Căpleni) deportations commenced a little bit later as compared to the original schedule, in some places only on the 11th of January (Baier 1994: 71–74). But the end of the deportation was everywhere the 16th of January, 1945 (Baier 1994: 69–70). In the frames of this short, well-organized action, lasting only a few days, the part of the German population from Romania that was capable of work was practically almost entirely gathered and deported to the Soviet Union.

But how many people were in fact captured and how big was the sacrifice paid by the German civilian population from Romania for the crimes and crazy abuses of Nazism? According to the 1941 census, 587,075 ethnic German people lived in Romania (Aioanei–Troncotă 1995: 56) in addition to the 44,000 in Northern Transylvania under Hungarian rule (Ablonczy 2011: 47). In comparison, the registry of the Romanian Statistical Office only included a total number of 469,967 ethnic Germans on 15th of August, 1945 (including Northern Transylvania) (Aioanei–Troncotă 1995: 60). The missing number of people is 162,108. Still, this number includes all the German people who joined the SS, and who died on the frontlines, and also those who had escaped to the West alongside the Wehrmacht in the fall of 1944. For these reasons, the exact number of those deported in January 1945 cannot be determined based on the data of censuses. Yet there are different estimations, according to which 70,000, 75,000, 81,000 (Rusnac 7) or for that matter 97,762 people (*Die Presse* 28.08.1954) were deported to the Soviet Union for forced labour. Among them, there were 35–50,000 Swabian people from

the Banat, 26–27,000 Saxon people from Transylvania, and 5–15,000 prisoners mainly from the Magyarized Swabian people in the region of Satu Mare (volume: Erzählungen von Rußlanddeportierten 1995: 9–10).

Many tried to intervene in order to ease the situation of the captured and deported German young people – firstly, the leaders of the German community themselves, Hans-Otto Roth, Rudolf Brandsch, and Victor Glondys, requesting an audience on the matter from Romanian Prime Minister Nicolae Rădescu. But their attempts were to no avail; the Romanian politician referred to the Soviet order, and said that his government was powerless under the given circumstances (Rusnac 3–4). The intervention of the Romanian organization of the International Red Cross at the Romanian government on the 22nd of January, 1945 was similarly unsuccessful (Baier 1994: 9).

Yet, there were some people who were exempted from deportation. The approximately 12,000 people who succeeded to avoid Soviet deportation were those needed in the country from an economic point of view (rich people, skilled industrial workers, etc.), as well as those incapable of work, or with close relatives of Romanian ethnicity (a Romanian spouse, or children from mixed marriages) (volume: Erzählungen von Rußlanddeportierten 1995: 8.).

This shows that while the Soviets were not dealing with smaller details, Romanian authorities did have their role in the deportation of the Germans! It is public knowledge that some Romanian politicians openly supported the deportation of German people, while others, like Iuliu Maniu, the leader of the Romanian National Peasant Party, tacitly accepted their deportation on a large scale or at least did not protest against it (Rusnac 5–6). The agitation of the Romanian communists in favour of the deportation of ethnic Germans was spectacular. The communists considered that the German civilian population was simply collectively 'Hitlerite,' and regarding them as a source of danger behind the front line urged the total elimination of this ethnic group (Baier 1994: 7–8).

The deportation of the German people was carried out quite rapidly. Groups of gathered people were taken to the closest railway stations in closed trucks in just one or two days, (volume: Erzählungen von Rußlanddeportierten 1995: 13), then made to start their journey squeezed into cattle-trucks in groups of 30-50 people (Baier 1994: 70, Brenner 2001). Most of them were switched on broad-gauge Soviet railways in Bacău, where approximately 80 people were placed into bigger, Russian cattle wagons (Brandstetter 2001). After that, they were transported across the Soviet border through the town of Iaşi.

Most of the Germans were taken to the camps of Ukraine by a journey lasting from approximately two weeks to a month: Dniprodzerzhynsk, Dnipropetrovsk, Odesa, Mykolaiv, Volodarka, Zaporizhia, Irmino, and Voroshilovgrad (today Luhansk in the Ukraine) (Rusnac 13). A lot of people were deported to the famous coal-mines of Donbass and to the lagers in Dokuchaievsk, Yenakiieve, Elenovka,

Horlivka, Petrovka, Krasnoarmeysk, or Makiivka (Zengea 2001, Brenner 2001). At the same time, part of the deported people ended up in the bigger camps of the Ural Mountains, being swallowed up by the lagers in Chelyabinsk, Ufaley, Kopeysk, and Berezovsk (Rusnac 13). Also, there were people taken to Lenino on the Crimean Peninsula, to the district of Stalingrad (Petrov Val), others to the district of Rostov (Rostov, Belaya Kalitva) or the area of Nizhny Novgorod (Dzerzhinsk), and some people were deported to the region of the Caucasus (Krasnodar) or to even more remote Asian camps (Frunze – today Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan) (Rusnac 13).

As long as the war evolved, the prisoners were not allowed to write and receive letters. Military post did not even start after the war ended; it began to function only from the beginning of 1946 (Zsigmond 2002: 89–90). Apart from the news brought by the sick detainees sent home, the prisoners could only send messages home officially after 1946. In the beginning, they were allowed to write longer texts on the postcards handed out, but later on, in order to ease the work of the censors, they could only write ten lines, or maximum 25 words. Inventive ones wrote the words together, so that their letters could be longer (Papp 2001: 56, 164). Encampment postcards were checked in the centre of censorship in Moscow, before sending them on to the addressees. Similarly, letters written to the prisoners were also checked in Moscow before delivery. The prisoners had to put the Moscow Red Cross as the addressee – this was the organization that oversaw detention camp correspondence. The word 'detention camp' was not permitted to appear on the postcards, 'post office box' was written on them instead, and the number in fact was the number of the prison camp.

Correspondence was random and extremely belated. It happened that prisoners got their first letters from home only in the January of 1948. It is worth quoting the memoirs of Helene Brandstetter from Rupea; she was a prisoner in Donbass and got her first few lines of letter from her family only after three years of imprisonment. 'I got the first letter on the 26th of January, exactly three years after my detention. They even thought I lost my senses… Because we were being given the advance, and the interpreter brought the letters, and he asked: Mrs. Göldner, you did not get a letter so far, did you? And I said: No, I did not. And as he took the letter, I immediately recognized my father's handwriting. Then I said: Oh, my God, that is mine! And he said: Mrs. Göldner, just be calm, everything is all right. Yes, but as I grasped the letter I began to shout till I got to the barrack… And as I was told later, I collapsed near my bed… They called the doctor, who told them to put me in bed, and... that a friend should read me the letter. And she was reading and reading, and I finally got well. Then I read it myself. My father had written about everything: that the children had been with him since the time I left, that they were all fine, and that Hansi had been baptized…' (Brandstetter 2001).

Many of the deported people died in the world of Soviet labour camps. The exact number of the victims still remains unknown today. Even the number

of prisoners remains unknown. Therefore, there are just estimations about the number of ethnic Germans who died in detention, namely 15-20% of those taken away for forced labour (Baier 1994: 13), but at least 10,000 and a maximum of 20,000 people have become the victims of the encampment conditions.

The prisoners considered as free workforce were exposed to excessive physical burden, they were constantly excessively pushed to work, pressed to accomplish impossible norms. But en masse death was also caused by the rough, extreme weather, the extremely cold Russian winters – during which the deported people were forced to carry on working. The most difficult winter was the first one, of the year 1945. The leaders of the camps were not aware yet of the working capacity of the prisoners, and the deported were not used to the conditions of the camps either, to the cold temperature that sometimes went under –40$^0$C. And if the accomplishment of the norm was not achieved severe punishments followed, and the lack of proper medical assistance became the reason of the death of the detained (Rieder 2001: 60). At the same time, irregular and permanently unsatisfactory nutrition resulted in feeble organism and the appearance of contagious diseases in every case. Deadly, often unstoppable epidemics sometimes caused the death of almost all members of the camps. Among the most frequent diseases, infectious diarrhoea, dysentery with chronic gastritis, exanthematic typhus, malaria, inflammation of heart valves, meningitis, effusive pleurisy, dystrophy, and marasmus can be mentioned (Szabó 1994: 68, 73; Papp 2001: 41). The latter had several stages; those in the fourth, fifth and sixth stage could not be saved (Papp 2001: 54). In addition to all these diseases, the prisoners suffered of parasites like lice and bedbugs, both in the summer and in the winter, and they frequently got scabies (Csetri 2004). No wonder that under these conditions many of them committed suicide (Brenner 2001).

The cruel world of detention camps mainly had intellectual victims. Because of the disappearance of the best part of middle-class intellectuals, the German society of Romania became more exposed to and more defenceless later on against primitive communist ideology.

The much awaited moment of release came in 1947-1948 for the majority of the prisoners (Szabó 1994: 125–127). German people born before 1916 could go home at this time (Zengea 2001.). The last larger transports of prisoners arrived home in October 1949 (Papp 2001: 148, 156, 161). The Germans born after 1916 came home with this transport. The prisoners still remaining there could only return home much later, between 1950 and 1953. The returning route was varying. The first station for some was the transit camp in Focşani, while for others the distribution camp in Râmnicu Sărat, where the Red Cross from Bacău and Buzău attended home-comers. In the distribution camps, prisoners were taken over by the Romanian Army. They remained in quarantine for two weeks, and then they were released home.

The sufferings left permanent marks in the hearts and the memories of survivors. Many of them became physically so weak that they died shortly after coming home. Others, who could somehow recover of the spiritual and physical torments, found a world around themselves that had changed totally. They could not fit easily into the peaceful, civilian life. In the difficult situation after the war and the political atmosphere loaded with prejudices concerning the past of the prisoners, many of the intellectuals could only live by teaching the Russian language they had learnt in the camps. The political leadership ordained the compulsory teaching of the Russian language from elementary school to university, and there was a huge shortage of Russian language teachers at that time.

The calvary of these innocent people that had been through hell was a taboo topic for a long time. During the four decades of communism, Soviet labour camps and deported people simply did not exist. The political leadership even ignored home-coming prisoners. It was not possible to speak, write about, or remember the unlawful deportation or the sufferings endured. Moreover, it was forbidden even to make mention of these events. Despite of this, the relationship between survivors lasted, and the common memories about the years spent in detention camps survived as an underground river. The former deported people kept count and continue to keep count of one another. Yet, their continually decreasing number urges the historian to track down still surviving eyewitnesses of the labour camps, even if in the twenty-fourth hour, and by recording their recollections to save a valuable resource material for a future comprehensive scientific exploration.

The survivors dared to write down their recollections only after 1989, and the first memoires could only appear after the change of the political system. A few but valuable creations appeared in the last two decades. In addition, a widening series of interview volumes (Betea et al. 2012) and scientific treatises (Weber 1995, Stark 2006) evoke the stories that had caused such collective traumas.

Reaching the 70$^{th}$ anniversary of the end of World War II in Transylvania, I feel that it is high time for a worthy commemoration of the ethnic German people deported to the Soviet Union for forced labour. That is also the reason why an international conference with this topic was organized in October 2014 in Cluj, in the new premises of the Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania.

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