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“They Categorically Denied *propiska* to Us because We Are Germans”. The Problem of Internal Migration of Soviet Germans in 1955 – 1972

Abstract: This paper is concerned with the problem of residence permits for Soviet Germans in the USSR from 1955 to 1972, during which there were limits for this section of the population after the special settlement period. Soviet Germans had sent many letters to the Supreme Soviet authorities and if we consider these letters, they appeared united by one common problem – all the writers wanted to solve the issues of limitation of their rights. Drawing on archival sources, mostly letters from Germans to the authorities in the middle of the 1960s, I explore issues around their rights as citizens, which were not an empty concept during that period. The context for these discussions is framed by the decree of 1964, according to which Germans were cleared of all charges against them, but the ban on returning to the places from which they were evicted was not lifted. I examine the formation of Soviet German positions through individual appeals against the refusal to provide a residence permit by local bodies of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The content and language of these written appeals reflects how their authors viewed their position in the Soviet community, how they interpreted their nationality and argued their legal status. The supreme state body ultimately had to eliminate the existing restrictions on registration and confirm the equal status of German-citizens of the USSR with that of other peoples within the Soviet Union.

Keywords: Soviet Germans, Soviet nationality policy, citizenship, Soviet history, post-World War II era

Introduction

In 1967, the Head of the Reception Room of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, Mikhail P. Sklyarov, reported to the Chairman, Nikolay V. Podgorny, about the appeals that citizens of German nationality sent to the Presidium. One of the authors of such a letter wrote that his wife, children, and he himself moved to the Crimean region from the Tselinograd district of the Kazakh SSR but were refused registration because his wife was German.¹ According to this and others such letters, Sklyarov highlighted the main problem that the Soviet Germans were facing: “They ask to abolish the existing restrictions on the right to permanent residence in places from where they were evicted during the Great Patriotic War”.² The issue lay with the refusal of local author-

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1 Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii [State Archive of the Russian Federation], Moscow (GARF), f. 7523, op. 83, d. 402, l. 209.

2 Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii [The Russian State Archive of Contemporary History], Moscow (RGANI), f. 5, op. 33, d. 221, l. 201. The ‘Great Patriotic War’ is a term in the USSR and mod-

ities to provide a person with a local residence permit (*propiska*) because he was registered as a German by nationality. This restriction on rights was imposed on Germans in the USSR as a result of their deportation in 1941, shortly after the start of the military conflict between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany.³ Restrictions on returning to the places from which Germans were expelled remained in place even after their release from special settlements at the end of 1955.⁴

Since the inception of Soviet power, a system of ways of interacting with the population was formed: from written appeals to elections to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR.⁵ On the one hand, these communication channels performed the function of monitoring the work of officials at different levels (Soviet citizens could write complaints about the work of local officials). On the other hand, with their help, control over public sentiment was carried out. At the same time, while the inclusion of citizens in such communication practices should have contributed to the formation of a sense of unity. These same practices also shaped Soviet identity, in which the Soviet citizen played an active role. In this process, the state acted as an agent that constantly educated and controlled its citizens.

The civil rights declared and guaranteed by the state were one of the instruments used in the nurturing of individuals. Golfo Alexopoulos suggests that, in the 1920s and 1930s, the policy surrounding the status of citizenship was shaped by the struggle against internal and external enemies, which led to the formation of a hierarchy of civil statuses.⁶ This status itself became an integral attribute for, and a powerful tool in, influencing a person's position. Moreover, the passport system itself served as an instrumental embodiment to manipulation the status of citizenship. Much depended on the fixation of its significant attributes within the system.

ern Russia, as well as foreign post-Soviet states, to describe the Second World War and especially the conflict between the USSR and Nazi Germany from the 22nd June 1941 to the 9th May 1945. Since the discourse about the 'Great Patriotic War' is very significant for society, I use this term when I quote sources. In other cases, I use the term 'Second World War'. To know more about the constructing of the myth of the Second World War in the USSR see Weiner, Amir: *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution*. Princeton 2002.

3 Prezidium Verkhovnogo Soveta SSSR [The Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet]: Ukaz o pereselenii nemtsev, prozhivayushchikh v raionakh Povolzh'ya [The Decree on the Resettlement of Germans Residing in the Volga Region]. 28.08.1941. In: Biblioteka normativno-pravovykh aktov SSSR [Library of normative-legal acts of the USSR]. URL: https://www.libussr.ru/doc_ussr/ussr_4332.htm (23.11.2023).

4 Idem: Ukaz o snyatii ogranichenii v pravovom polozhenii s nemtsev i chlenov ikh semei, nakhodyashchikhsya na spetsposelenii [The Decree on Lifting Restrictions Relative to the Legal Status of Germans and their Family Members Assigned to Special Settlements]. 13.12.1955. In: Biblioteka normativno-pravovykh aktov SSSR [Library of normative-legal acts of the USSR]. URL: https://www.libussr.ru/doc_ussr/ussr_5049.htm (23.11.2023).

5 For instance, Serhy Yekelchuk shows as the participating in political practices (elections, state holidays, parades, mass rallies) forms relationships between the state and its citizens. Cf. Yekelchuk, Serhy: *Stalin's Citizens. Everyday Politics in the Wake of Total War*. Oxford 2014.

6 Cf. Alexopoulos, Golfo: *Soviet Citizenship, More or Less. Rights, Emotions, and States of Civic Belonging*. In: *Kritika. Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 7/3 (2006), 487–528.

Despite the declared freedom of movement within the country, the residence permit (*propiska*), about which a corresponding entry was made in the passport, was an instrument for controlling the movement of the population. This system of internal passports was one of the administrative tools for monitoring the population and influencing its movements, thereby forming a certain territorial classification.⁷ Citizens had to live in the place to which they were assigned:

"Since 1932, the residence permit had a permissive nature, and therefore was already restrictive (in other words, a person could be allowed to register in the place they chose, or they [the authorities] could refuse even without explaining the reasons)".⁸

If the residence permit provided opportunities – including access to medical care, the ability to send children to the nearest school, and job support – being denied this registration meant that the person had to return to the previous place of residence or look for a new place to live. Therefore, the opportunity to register significantly determined the capabilities of Soviet citizens.

Although the use of the construct of hatred towards any enemy lost its significance after Stalin's death and ceased to be employed, the concept of 'enemy of the people' still remained. As Miriam Dobson demonstrated, 'enemies of the people' were present in Soviet culture until the 1950s and, after that, their existence came into question, which disoriented the population.⁹ On the one hand, former prisoners sought rehabilitation, and ordinary citizens aimed to realise the 'fallacy' of their views regarding them. At the same time, certain categories of citizens continued to experience the deprivations imposed during the Stalinist period, which were not automatically lifted after the condemnation of Stalin's policies. One such restriction was the prohibition for Soviet Germans, liberated from special settlements, to resettle in the places where their families lived before deportation.

The purpose of this article is to analyse how the authors of written appeals represented themselves in these letters, how the refusal of registration based on nationality forced them to reflect on their status. I examine the letters of Soviet Germans as a way for them to express their views towards their civil rights, which were limited due to their nationality. To this end, it is necessary to consider the constitutive elements of the public appeals process. As such it is important to understand what demands, or requests, they sent to the institutions of power and what ideas or episodes from their life, they put forward to give credibility to their position.

7 Cf. Garcelon, Mark: Colonizing the Subject. The Genealogy and Legacy of the Soviet Internal Passport. In: Caplan, Jane; Torpey, John (Eds.): Documenting Individual Identity. The Development of State Practices in the Modern World. Princeton 2001, 83–100.

8 Baiburin, Al'bert: Sovetskii passport. Istoriya – struktura – praktiki [The Soviet Passport. The History, Nature and Uses of the Internal Passport in the USSR]. Sankt-Peterburg 2017, 151.

9 Cf. Dobson, Miriam: Khrushchev's Cold Summer. Gulag Returnees, Crime, and the Fate of Reform after Stalin. Ithaca-London 2011.

The letters addressed to the Soviet party, divisions and government bodies at various levels, or to the press were accessible and developed a means of communication between the state apparatus and the Soviet society, as evidenced by numerous letters from the Soviet citizens preserved in the archives. This research examines a group of letters from 1965 to 1967 written by Germans ten to twelve years after their release from a special settlement to the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. In addition, I explore the reports of the Letters Department of the Supreme Soviet, which summarise the main topics of such letters and provides information about the practice of granting residence permits to Germans locally.

On the situation of Germans in the Soviet Union

The dismantling of the special settlements began in the middle of March 1953, with the issue of the release of certain categories of special settlers, followed by the lifting of certain restrictions of rights discussed in April 1954.¹⁰ At the beginning, the transformations were of a general nature, in other words decrees and resolutions applied to all special settlers, with only later changes concerning certain categories. According to the first such decree of September 17, 1955, Soviet citizens accused of collaborating with German troops in the occupied territories were amnestied.¹¹ The order was issued in December 1955, in relation to the German population of the USSR, according to which they were released from the administrative supervision of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. However, it remained impossible for them to receive compensation for the property taken away during deportation and to return to the places from where they were evicted. This was not just the case for residents of the former Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Volga Germans (ASSR Volga Germans), but all Germans and their family members who were evicted from the western territories of the country during the Great Patriotic War, fell under the action of these laws.¹²

10 Cf. Sovet ministrov SSSR [The Council of Ministers of the USSR]: Postanovlenie o snyatii nekotorykh ogranicheniy v pravovom polozhenii spetsposelentsev [The Decree on the Removal of Certain Restrictions on the Legal Status of Special Settlers]. 05.06.1954. In: Reabilitatsiya: Kak éto býlo. Dokumenty Prezidiuma CK KPSS i drugie materialy. T. 1: Mart 1953 – fevral' 1956 [Rehabilitation. As it was. Documents of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the CPSU and Other Materials. Vol. 1. March 1953 – February 1956]. Moscow 2000, 158f.

11 Cf. Prezidium Verkhovnogo Soveta SSSR [The Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet]: Ukaz ob amnistii sovetskikh grazhdan, sotrudnichavshikh s okkupantami v period Velikoï Otechestvennoï voiny 1941–1945 gg. [The Decree on Amnesty for Soviet citizens who Collaborated with the Occupiers during the Great Patriotic War]. 17.09.1955. In: Biblioteka normativno-pravovykh aktov SSSR [Library of normative-legal acts of the USSR]. URL: http://www.libussr.ru/doc_ussr/ussr_5035.htm (23.11.2023).

12 The 60,000 Germans expelled from the Crimea were the first, after which it was the turn of the Volga Germans. For a list of regions from which Germans were deported, cf. O pereselenii nemtsev iz rýada oblastei, kraev i respublik Soýuza SSR [On the Resettlement of Germans from a Number of Economic Territories and Republics of the USSR]. 25.12.1941 In: Spravka otdela spetspereselenii NKVD SSSR. Depor-

At the twentieth Congress of the Party, Nikita S. Khrushchëv raised the issue of the "gross violation of the basic Leninist principles of the national policy of the Soviet state".¹³ By this he meant the mass resettlement of peoples and the abolition of their national autonomies. Shortly after that, in 1957, pre-war national rights and autonomies were restored to Chechens, Ingush, Kalmyks, Karachays and Balkars. This list did not include peoples like Crimean Tatars and Germans who were also resettled and deprived of their national autonomies during the war. The text of the report was not published in the press and was distributed only within party cells. However, the information about it spread by word of mouth, and because of this the Central Committee of the CPSU started receiving letters from repressed peoples with requests for the restoration of previously existing national autonomies. The ideas embedded in the renewed Soviet ideology pushed the Soviet Germans to appeal to the highest officials of the USSR and the party elite with a demand for the full restoration of their rights, which they lost because of deportation and did not receive in 1957 along with the rehabilitated peoples.

The decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR from 29 August 1964, according to which the Germans were cleared of complicity with Germany during the war, did not lift the existing ban of return to native places. This was justified with the argument that Germans were now settled in their new places of residence. The decree from August 1964 is perceived as an important catalyst for the organisation of a delegation of Soviet Germans to visit Moscow. This was in order to meet with the highest officials in the country and discuss the possibility of full rehabilitation, which meant the lifting of all restrictions on Germans and the restoration of national autonomy. This group of Soviet Germans arrived in Moscow in January 1965 and received an audience with Anastas I. Mikoyan, who at that time was the Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR.¹⁴

The history of the Soviet German delegations explains the logic of the formation of the archival case, the letters from which form the basis of this article. The meeting in

tacii narodov SSSR (1930–1950). T. 2: Deportaciya nemtsev (sentjabr 1941 – fevral 1942 goda). [Deportations of the Peoples of the USSR (1930s – 1950s). Vol. 2: Deportation of Germans (September 1941 – February 1942)]. Moscow 1995, 47–56.

13 Khrushchëv, Nikita Sergeevich: Doklad na zakrytom zasedanii XX s"ezda KPSS "O kul'te lichnosti i ego posledstviyah" ["On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences". Delivered at a Closed Session of the 20th Congress of the CPSU]. Moscow 1959, 40.

14 Cf. German, Arkadii A.: Istoricheskiĭ put' poslevoennogo natsional'nogo dvizheniya rossiiskikh nemtsev: obshchii analiz [The Historical Path of the Post-War National Movement of Russian Germans: a General Analysis]. In: Rossiiskie nemtsy: 50 let poslevoennomu obshchestvennomu dvizheniiu. Ot pervykh delegatsii v pravitel'stvo cherez "Vozrozhdenie" k sovremennoi sisteme Samoorganizatsii (1964–2014 gg.). Materialy 5-i Mezhdunarodnoi nauchno-prakticheskoi konferentsii, Moskva, 11–16 fevralia 2015 g. [Russian Germans: 50 Years of the Post-War Social Movement. From the First Delegations to the Government through the Renaissance to the Modern System of Self-Organization (1964–2014). Proceedings of 5th International scientific and practical conference, Moscow, February 11–16, 2015]. Moscow 2015, 8–19, here 13f.

January 1965 was a trigger to “get acquainted with the issues of work and life of Soviet citizens of German nationality” and serves here as an entry point.¹⁵ Data was collected from the districts of the Saratov and Volgograd regions, which included the territories of the former ASSR. Statistical information was collected on the number of German citizens living there and was deposited in the collection of documents of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR in a case which focused on the Germans expelled from the Volga region.¹⁶ The case also included individual complaints about problems with registration for 1967 citizens who did not participate in the work of delegations. All these complaints demonstrate that the local body of the Ministry of Internal Affairs refused to register the authors of the letters due to the German nationality indicated in their passports. This practice of prohibition continued to exist until 3 November 1972, when the Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR “On lifting restrictions on the choice of place of certain categories of citizens” was issued.¹⁷

The expansion of civil rights for representatives of former exiled people extended their status of Soviet citizenship, regardless of their past status as ‘enemies of the people’. The national intelligentsia was rethinking the past and striving to expand the boundaries of national self-expression.¹⁸ Writers, teachers, and lecturers sought access to various privileges, in particular, in the formation of the state institutions that would represent their national interests.

Studying appeals to the authorities in the Soviet Union

The allocation of letters to the authorities as a special type of communication between a state and citizens, and as a peculiar type of communication during the Soviet period based on the analysis of letters of the 1920s to early 1950s.¹⁹ Sheila Fitzpatrick, who has

¹⁵ GARF, f. 7523, op. 83. d. 423. l. 134.

¹⁶ GARF, f. 7523, op. 83. d. 423.

¹⁷ Cf. Prezidium Verkhovnogo Soveta SSSR [The Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet]: Ukaz o snýatii ogranicheniya v výbore mesta otdelnykh kategoriï grazhdan [The Decree on Lifting of Restrictions on the Choice of Place of Certain Categories of Citizens]. 03.11.1972. In: Auman, Vladimir A.; Chebotareva, Valentina G. (Eds.): Istorîya rossiyskikh nemtsev v dokumentakh. T. 1: 1763–1992 gg. [The History of Russian Germans in Documents. Vol. 1: 1763–1992]. Moscow 1993, 178 f.

¹⁸ Cf. Kozlov, Deniz; Gilburd, Eleonory: The Thaw as an Event in Russian History. In: Idem (Eds.): The Thaw. Soviet Society and Culture during the 1950s and 1960s. Toronto 2013, 18–83, here 32.

¹⁹ A number of collections with archival documents have been published. Cf. Gorskaya, Galina V.; Asakhova, Marina S.; Dönninghaus, Victor; Kirillova, E. E.; Kochetova, Anna (Eds.): Poslednie pis'ma Stalînu, 1952–1953. Rekonstrukciya dokumental'nogo kompleksa [The Last Letters to Stalin, 1952–1953. Reconstruction of the Documentary Complex]. Moscow 2015; Shishkin, Vladislav I. (Ed.): Pis'ma vo vlast' v epohu revoliutsii i grazhdanskoï voïnÿ (mart 1917 – noyabr' 1919 g.). Sbornik dokumentov [Letters to the Authorities in the Era of Revolution and Civil War (March 1917 – November 1919). A Collection of Documents]. Novosibirsk 2014; Kodin, Evgenii V. (Ed.): “Proverkaï zayavleniya ustanovleno...”. Povsednevnyaya

made a significant contribution to such research, examined the written appeals of peasants in the 1930s to various authorities, based on the concept of 'everyday resistance' by James Scott. According to Fitzpatrick, the peasants' letters were a reaction to collectivisation, in which they sought to defend themselves:²⁰

"It was one of the best functioning channels of communication between citizens and the state, offering ordinary people without official connections one of the few available ways of redressing a wrong or provoking official action on the writer's behalf."²¹

According to Miriam Dobson, the period of de-Stalinisation is characterised by a radical reassessment of the status of the enemy through letters. Enemies were present in Soviet culture until the 1950s and, after the release of many convicts from the camps, the questioning of their existence disoriented the population. Such ambiguity became the reason for the new appeals to the authorities of both citizens who did not have the status of an enemy, and those who were released and reported their unfair treatment as enemies and sought to convince the addressee otherwise.²²

Elena Bogdanova considers citizens' complaints to the authorities from the 1960s to the 1980s as an experience of defending their interests in the field of consumption. The focus of her attention is on the legal relations that arose based on these appeals.²³ Like Fitzpatrick, she proceeds from a certain position of power whereby the state expresses its patronage towards the population.

In his research into the practices of the workers of the 1930s within the framework of the new Soviet industrial city of Magnitogorsk, Stephen Kotkin concluded that, for the Soviet worker, an important way to talk about self was that of the 'labour autobiography', which helped determine his place among others. As a consequence, the Soviet worker was required to have a 'labour biography' that reflected his activity in politically significant categories. This statement is also true for other citizens. With the help of written appeals to the authorities, and directly through the writing of such letters, Soviet citizens learned the official language – the language of the regime, which implied

zhizn' lyudei v pis'makh i obrashcheniyakh k vlasti. 1930-e gody ["Verification of the Application Established ...". The Daily Life of People in Letters and Appeals to the Authorities. The 1930s]. Smolensk 2013; Livshin, Aleksandr J. (Ed.): *Pis'ma vo vlast'. Zayavleniya, zhaloby, donosy, pis'ma v gosudarstvennye struktury i bol'shevist (sovetskimi) vozhdyam* [Letters to the Authorities. Statements, Complaints, Denunciations, Letters to State Structures and Bolshevik (Soviet) Leaders]. 2 vol. Moscow 1998/2002.

²⁰ Cf. Fitzpatrick, Sheila: *Stalin's Peasants. Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization*. Oxford-New York 1994, 4–16.

²¹ Eadem: *Everyday Stalinism. Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s*. New York 1999, 175.

²² Cf. Dobson, Miriam: *Khrushchev's Cold Summer. Gulag Returnees, Crime, and the Fate of Reform after Stalin*. Ithaca-London 2009, 13f.

²³ Cf. Bogdanova, Elena: *Complaints to the Authorities in Russia. A Trap between Tradition and Legal Modernization*. London-New York 2021.

certain rules of the game: citizens understood which facts of their biography should be included, and which information should be avoided.²⁴

Thus, in exploring these letters to the authorities, the researcher needs to consider not only the author's strategy throughout the letter but also the role the addressee and his or her value systems play in the writing process.²⁵ Since the relationship between a citizen and the state is realised in written appeals to the authorities, the act of writing a letter can be considered as an attempt to establish and try to consolidate the legal status of a citizen, inscribing himself into the existing political system.²⁶ In her research Christa Goff considers petitions from representatives of ethnic minorities in the North Caucasus in similar ways.²⁷ The Georgian-Ingilo who were living in the territory of the Azerbaijani SSR and the Lezgins who were living in the Georgian SSR complained in their letters to Khrushchëv about their legal situation and sought to realise the rights attributed to any Soviet people, especially rights to education in their native language. The petitions of Georgian-Ingilo were a tool for challenging the borders of citizenship in terms of everyday practice, opportunities for negotiations, and disputes with officials regarding their rights.²⁸ The general atmosphere of the thaw, which is characterised as an atmosphere of invigorating optimism, inspired Soviet citizens to have a more open and direct interaction with the state as a whole.²⁹

The language of appeals

A new stage in the legal status of Germans in the USSR was marked by the Decree of 1964. According to this decree, Soviet Germans were cleared of the charges of sabotage and espionage, said to be made in favour of Germany, that were put forward in 1941. As can be seen from the text of the decree, Germans earned this decision with their conscientious work and significant participation in the socio-political life of Soviet society. According to the same decree, Germans were recognised as equals with Soviet citizens, i. e., there are no legal restrictions on them. However, letters from the German population about problems with registration provoked a discussion of their legal status.

In the final report, compiled in the February of 1965, the deputy Head of the Reception of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, Alexey N. Kopenkin, estab-

24 Cf. Kotkin, Stephen: *Magnetic Mountain. Stalinism as a Civilization*. Berkeley 1995, 198–237.

25 Cf. Utekhin, Il'ya: *Iz nablyudenii nad poetikoï zhaloby* [From Observations on the Poetics of Complaint]. In: *Studia Ethnologica. Trudy fakul'teta etnologii* 2 (2004), 274–306, here 278.

26 Cf. Dobson, Miriam: *Letters*. In: Eadem; Ziemann, Benjamin (Eds.): *Reading Primary Sources. The Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century History*. London 2008, 57–73, here 64.

27 Cf. Goff, Krista A.: "Why Not Love Our Language and Our Culture?" *National Rights and Citizenship in Khrushchev's Soviet Union*. In: *Nationalities Papers. The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 43/1 (2015), 27–44, here 28 f.

28 Cf. *ibid.*

29 Cf. Kozlov/Gilburd, *The Thaw as an Event in Russian History* (cf. n. 18), 32.

lished several elements in the processing of Germans' registration in the Saratov and Volgograd regions. Firstly, that the peak of migration from Siberia and the Urals to these areas occurred in 1956–1959 and that the beginning of this period coincides with the liberation of Germans from special settlements. Secondly, statistics were provided on the applications received for registration and on the solution of this issue: "According to incomplete data from the Department of Public Order Protection of the Saratov Regional Executive Committee, 897 applications were received in the period from 1956 to 1965," of which 419 citizens received a positive response.³⁰ Kopenkin added that due to the increase in the number of Germans coming into these areas, restrictions on registration were strengthened. Germans, in turn, wrote in their letters of complaint that the refusal of their registrations was motivated by the Decree of 13 December 1955.³¹ Another characteristic of the registration process highlighted by Kopenkin was that Germans' inability to register in the Volgograd region could turn into an opportunity to register in the Saratov region and vice versa.³² This was an indicator that "the restrictions provided for by the Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR of 13 December 1955, [were] only partially effective".³³

The issue of registration of Germans caused two polarised points of view among the representatives of the local governing bodies of the Saratov and Volgograd regions. The overwhelming majority believed that restrictive measures had outlived their usefulness, and that Germans should be registered on a regular basis. However, some of the authorities feared the mass return of Germans to their former places of settlement, suspecting that this would cause them to raise the issue of restoring autonomy.³⁴ Despite these concerns, Kopenkin suggested that the restrictions on the registration of Germans in the Saratov and Volgograd regions should be completely lifted, arguing that "the absolute majority of Soviet citizens of German nationality are conscientious about work, the preservation of socialist property and the observance of public order [and their] political mood is quite healthy".³⁵

In 1967, following on from a new report on the letters sent by Germans, the refusal of registration in the Saratov and Volgograd as well as in Crimea regions was still regarded as a problem. This is because the public law enforcement agencies of the Saratov and Volgograd regions only granted registration in isolated cases when they received appeals from German nationals to the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR.³⁶ Sklyarov, Head of the Reception Office of the Presidium, who provided

³⁰ GARF, f. 7523, op. 83, d. 423, l. 137.

³¹ Cf. *ibid.*

³² Cf. *ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.* l. 143.

³⁴ Cf. *ibid.* l. 144.

³⁵ *Ibid.* l. 143.

³⁶ GARF, f. 7523, op. 83, d. 402, l. 201.

this report, indicated that it was clear that Germans were being denied registration because of their nationality.³⁷

The Sklyarov's report was accompanied by five letters from Soviet Germans, in which they wrote about their problems in obtaining a resident permit. The example below dates from May 1967:

"I am asking you, Comrade Podgorny to explain to me my question, which is given below.

I am Koch E. E. and I was born in 1932 in Saratov region in a family of Volga Germans [the under-scores here and further are made by a person reading the letter in the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR]. In 1941, my family was evacuated to Siberia. In 1942, my father was taken to the labor army, where he died, my mother remained with five children. My mother died in 1956. From an early age, we were working and living in difficult conditions. In 1958, I came from the collective farm to the Forestry industry, where I work now. I have a wife and two children. I am a member of the Communist Labor Brigade [brigada kommunisticheskogo truda]. You can find out about my characteristic in the Household plot of Kezhimskiy LPH. And certainly, my health has failed and it is desirable to move to a place where climatic conditions will support my health. We turned to the Crimean region. Krasnoperekopsky district to the police chief about registration. They answered us that they don't make a residence permit for our nationality. There are no words to express what a deep wound lay on my heart. What is the reason? Why do I not have all Soviet citizen's rights? From an early age, I gave my life to work and honesty, and I never suspected that I differed in rights in some way from others. If someone is guilty of something, then not everyone should answer. And our children? They were born here. It's a shame to move this wound. Many Germans live here, most of them are hard workers [*stachanovcy*] and deputies of local councils, they are trusted. So, what is the difference between these people and those who live there? Please explain to me the reason and tell me if it is possible by any method to achieve being on the common rights of the citizens of the Soviet Union. I must, as a father, worry about the future of my children."³⁸

Addressing this letter to the Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, E. E. Koch seeks to set out his case almost from the outset. His self-description, in this case, is based on the details of his biography: date and place of birth; situation during the war; circumstances that emphasise the severity of the situation (death of parents and the need to work from an early age); professional career; family composition; socially significant status (member of the Communist Labour Brigade). What, then, can this tell us about the author of the letter?

At the time of writing this letter Koch was 35 years old, he was married and had two children. Participation in the Second World War is not used by the author of the letter as an argument in his favour. This is dictated by the fact that the Germans were evicted to special settlements and their participation in hostilities was not envisaged. Nevertheless, many of the authors of the letters tried to emphasise that they had nothing to do with assisting the German invaders, since they were resettled even before the occupation and could not take part in military incursions. The circumstances of reset-

³⁷ Cf. *ibid.* I. 203.

³⁸ *Ibid.* I. 213–214ob.

tlement in 1941 are presented through the prism of evacuation – that is, as a salvation from the war, and not by seeing deportation as a punishment. As a consequence, the main attention is focused on the general tragic fate of the population.

Writing out his biography, Koch shows that the loss of his parents forced him to work from an early age, but that he achieved great success in this work, as he is in the Communist Labour Brigade. Such brigades were part of a new movement for high performance, which marked "the beginning of a new stage in the struggle of the Soviet people to achieve labour productivity that was seen as being inaccessible to capitalism and necessary for the transition to the highest phase of communism".³⁹ The mention of these matters underlines a certain position not only in Soviet society, but also Koch's attitude to the ideological aspects of developed socialism. Thus, Koch seems to signal to his addressee that he, too, has contributed to the common cause of the state. All these biographical facts demonstrate that both the author of the letter and his concerns are worthy of attention and deserving a solution to the issue of the redistribution of goods (in this case, non-material). They also highlight how the legal situation of the Germans was caused by injustices that need to be reversed.⁴⁰

By examining this letter, one can also discern those aspects which were favoured by the Presidium of the Supreme Council in the process of reading. Information about the applicant, about his family, about his employment history and the reason for the complaint seemed of particular importance, while the Presidium appeared indifferent to the words about these experiences being hurtful. Koch's account of the shame and pain that he was forced to experience because of his nationality were read and were also included in Sklyarov's report.

According to the author of another letter, Schäfer, he and his wife wanted to move to Crimea, but they were refused even though they were Germans who lived in the Crimea before the war and did not commit any crime:

"The decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR of September 5th, 1967 is a great joy for citizens of Tatar nationality who lived in the Crimea, they became full citizens of the USSR. (I and my wife), [name], (are German by nationality, we were born in Crimea, but not only we, and our parents, our grandfathers and great-grandfathers were born in Russia) and all of them are Russian subjects. But (the treacherous attack of fascist Germany on the Soviet Union was apparently the reason that we are still restricted in rights, i. e., we are not allowed to return to the Crimea) without committing the slightest crime. (If even a small part of the Crimean Tatars collaborated with the German invaders, then citizens of German nationality who lived in the Crimea for a long time before the occupation of the Crimea were taken to remote areas of the country). For this reason, I gave 40 years of work honestly and conscientiously to the motherland. In the jubilee year of the Soviet Government, I turn 60 years old [...]. The factory where I work accompanies me on a well-deserved vacation. The health of both me and my wife is severely undermined. I am a

39 Gershberg, Semen R.: Vozniknovenie v SSSR dvizheniya brigad i udarnikov kommunisticheskogo truda [The Emergence of the Movement of Brigades and Strikers of Communist Labor in the USSR]. In: Voprosy istorii 15/3 (1960), 3–18, here 18.

40 Cf. Utekhin, Iz nablyudenii nad poetikoï zhalobï (cf. n. 25), 284.

disabled worker. Therefore, we have an earnest request to you (to allow us to enjoy equal rights with all citizens of our vast homeland).”⁴¹

By taking the parts of the letter that are underscored, it can be assumed that it was read at least twice. At the one reading, significant lines were highlighted in orange brackets: information about the applicant and his family, his nationality, a fact from the biography (about the eviction), and the reason for the appeal. At the other reading, the reader emphasised important, in his or her opinion, information with a blue pen, for example information about a certain status (as a disabled worker), and an introductory sentence expressing ‘joy’ for citizens of Tatar nationality was added.

Sometimes the refusal to register all family members led to family dramas. Viktoria A. Karmeeva from Uralsk, Kazakh SSR, wrote that her husband was disabled during the Second World War and doctors recommended that he to moves to the sea, where the climate was milder. A family with two children decided to move to Crimea, where her husband once lived. He was registered but she was not because she was German by nationality. She and the children had to return: “So, the family began to disintegrate”.⁴² Karmeeva describes the difficulty of defining her as German because her father was Russian and her mother was German. Due to the lack of a birth certificate, she received a passport in which the nationality of her mother’s passport was recorded, meaning that she was German, not Russian. Furthermore, they did not change her nationality, even when her Russian birth certificate was restored.⁴³ So, in this case, it is problems with the Soviet bureaucracy that are considered by the author of the letter as the reason for the unfairness.

Some of the letters concerned registration in the Crimea. It is difficult to trace the deep motivation of the authors of these complaints, why they sought to move to the Crimea, except that it is a favorable place to live because of the proximity to the sea and a milder climate (all the authors going to the Crimea left the regions of the Urals or Siberia). In addition, the actions of Crimean Tatars in 1967 also complicated matters for those Germans who were, seeking a residence permit in that area, and whose letters had been previously held back. They, like the Germans, were still not allowed to return back to the Crimea. But the Crimean Tatars unauthorised resettlement from the places to which they were deportated, led to a specific situation in which the issue of registration on the Crimean Peninsula was considered in a particularly strict manner.⁴⁴

⁴¹ GARE, f. 7523, op. 101, d. 409, l. 37–37ob.

⁴² Ibid. l. 35f.

⁴³ Cf. *ibid.*

⁴⁴ Cf. Fisher, Alan: *The Crimean Tatars*. Stanford 1978, 181–184.

Conclusion

Certain contradictions in the idea of what rehabilitation is arose in Soviet society in the late 1950s after the "exposure of the cult of personality". In February 1956, almost a year after Stalin's death, during the twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the USSR, Khrushchëv talked about the violation of the basic principles of the Party and the policy of the Soviet state which Stalin allowed. As a consequence, it was necessary to revise measures that did not comply with socialist legality, including the mass resettlement of peoples and the abolition of their national autonomies. In 1957, the charges previously brought against several repressed peoples were dropped and national autonomies were restored. At the same time, expectations were formed for the rehabilitation of Soviet Germans. Since the second half of the 1950s, Soviet Germans sent individual and collective letters to the highest party and state authorities on the issue of their rehabilitation, something that was upheld in the decree of 1964.

In the 1960s Soviet state citizenship acquired a criterion defining its legal consciousness. This marked a departure of the Soviet authorities from granting rights to certain social groups as classes, towards the development of a universality of civil rights.⁴⁵ New opportunities for understanding and discussing the civil rights were provided by the thaw. The appeal to the language of law was also facilitated by the drafting of a new Constitution that updated the basic law of 1936. In April 1962, a Constitutional Commission was formed, its main goal being "to develop, discuss together with all the people and adopt a new Constitution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics".⁴⁶ In the summer of that year nine sub-commissions were formed which were engaged in the development of individual issues, including issues of national policy and national-state construction.⁴⁷ The authors of the letters often referred to the legal practice and legislative acts of both the USSR and other countries. This opened one of the ways of communicating with the authorities on a legal basis.

Rights discourse also acquired special significance with the development of the dissident and human rights movement. Human rights defenders compiled collective petitions to the Soviet authorities, courts, and the prosecutor's office to draw attention to violations of the rights of various groups of the population, including national minorities, who sought support from them.

However, there were still numerous restrictions, in particular in registrations in places from where the Germans were evicted. The letters discussed above can be attributed to complaints that were appropriate when there was an asymmetry of resources and power between the addressee and the sender. Within the framework of this model, the complainant counted on the care of the state, which had the resources and could

45 Cf. Nathans, Benjamin: Soviet Rights-Talk in the Post-Stalin Era. In: Hoffmann, Stefan-Ludwig (Ed.): Human Rights in the Twentieth Century. Cambridge-New York 2011, 166–190, here 176.

46 Pravda. No. 116 (15972). 26.04.1962, 1.

47 Cf. Pravda. No. 167 (16023). 16.07.1962, 1.

distribute them. The authors of the complaints were looking for understanding, sympathy, and a fair trial. This is why they prescribed their status in their appeals, which could consist of a set of components (gender, age, nationality, social titles, family status, profession, and other criteria) and thereby demonstrated their position in the social hierarchy, which was supposed to contribute to a positive solution for their problems. The abundance of notes made by the authorities confirms the hypothesis that such rhetorical techniques were read by officials and could have contributed to a positive resolution of the issue.

The letters in question demonstrated a specific request: namely a residence permit. There was territorial differentiation in the USSR, and part of it consisted of closed cities that were integral to the military and industrial infrastructure. Living was only permitted in these cities through special requests or permission. Soviet Germans were denied registration and the right to live in closed cities, as well as in 'open' territories, solely based on their nationality, which was also an essential characteristic of being a Soviet citizen. This ban persisted as a relic of Stalinist era policies, even during a time when his repressive regime was being criticized. Despite this contradiction, the Germans reaffirmed their loyalty to the political system and the Soviet state.

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