

The Persecution of Mikhail Suprun and Aleksandr Dudarev: A Return to the Years of Great Silence?

By J. Otto Pohl*



The recent moves by the Russian government to rehabilitate Stalin have taken on a disturbing character. The revisionist interpretation of history recently embraced by Moscow has now moved from merely promoting the justification of Stalin's crimes against humanity to actively suppressing research seeking to establish the true fate of his victims.

The use of the FSB and the Russian criminal justice system to prevent historical research is most blatantly apparent in the current political persecution of Professor Mikhail Suprun of Pomorsky State University and Colonel Aleksandr Dudarev. These two men were engaged in researching the individual fate of thousands of Russian-Germans sent to labor camps and special settlements in the Arkhangelsk region.

While the Russian government has almost completely rehabilitated Stalin now, many of his victims including the Russian-Germans as a collective group have not been fully rehabilitated. The USSR and the Russian Federation today have never provided national equality to all citizens throughout their territory. Instead the various nationalities of these states

have only been protected and able to avail themselves to cultural resources in those territories specifically assigned to them.

In the 1920s and 1930s the Russian-Germans possessed the Volga German ASSR and a dozen national districts in Ukraine, Altai, the Kuban, Crimea, Azerbaijan and Georgia. Stalin permanently eliminated these territories and forcibly deported their German populations eastward to Kazakhstan and Siberia where around a fifth of them perished from hunger, disease and exposure. The official justification for this mass uprooting of humanity was the false accusation that the Russian-Germans harbored among their communities "thousands and tens of thousands of diversionists and spies" prepared to engage in sabotage against the Soviet state.

The deportations, however, did not spare even loyal members of the Communist Party, Red Army veterans and other ethnic Germans actively involved in the Soviet struggle against Nazi Germany. Like other acts of ethnic cleansing executed by the Stalin regime, the majority of the deportees consisted of women and children. The Russian-Germans remained under strict surveillance and legal restrictions known as the special settlement regime until 13 December 1955. Even after being freed from the special settlement restrictions, however, they still remained officially collectively stigmatized as traitors and prohibited from returning to their old homelands within the USSR or petitioning for

compensation for lost property.

On 29 August 1964, the Soviet government admitted that the charges of treason were without any basis, but did not lift the residency restrictions confining the Russian-Germans east of the Urals. Officially this blanket ban on living in the European areas of the USSR continued to exist for the Russian-Germans until 3 November 1972. Even after this date, however, most individual Russian-Germans could not obtain the necessary permission to live west of the Urals.

They remained scattered throughout Kazakhstan, Central Asia, and Siberia deprived of the national rights they had enjoyed prior to Stalin's negation of Leninist nationality policy. The refusal to fully rehabilitate the Russian-Germans made it apparent that they could never be fully equal Soviet citizens and spurred the emigration movement that developed in the 1970s.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s there were some positive changes for the Russian-Germans. On 1 January 1987, the Soviet government lifted the restrictions preventing Russian-Germans from leaving the USSR and returning to their ancestral homeland. As a result most of the Russian-Germans living in the former Soviet Union left for Germany. Their population in Eurasia plummeted from over two million in 1989 to around 800,000 today. In 1989 the Soviet government finally denounced the 1941 deportation of the Russian-Germans. These pronounce-

ments inspired many observers with the hope that the Russian government would come to terms with the Stalinist past of the USSR and provide some mechanism for its victims to acquire some measure of justice.

But, full rehabilitation never came. Neither the Soviet nor the Russian government ever restored the Volga German Republic abolished in 1941 or the schools, libraries, publications and other cultural institutions associated with this former territory. Only one of the dozen German national districts existing before 1938, Halbstadt in Altai Krai has been reconstituted. A new district for ethnic Germans was also founded in Asowo, Omsk Oblast. But, these two small territories in western Siberia are a completely inadequate substitute for the lack of a national republic within the Russian Federation.

The 600,000 ethnic Germans still living in the Russian Federation remain at a distinct disadvantage compared to most other nationalities due to their continued lack of any designated republic to provide for the protection of their cultural, political and economic interests. The Volga Tatars, Yakuts, Bashkirs, Kalmyks and other nationalities in the Russian Federation all have their own republics to promote their rights and interests.

Nor have the individual survivors received proper compensation for the suffering they endured or the property they lost during the deportations. The unjust

punishment inflicted by the Stalin regime upon these men and women still remains for the most part unrecognized by the Russian state and Russian society as a whole. A large number of men, women and children, however, did not survive Stalin's repressive measures. Now the Russian government wishes to prevent individual academics from publicizing their fate.

Even such innocuous forms of recognizing these victims as memory books are now under threat from the Russian government. The suppression of the truth regarding these victims is a significant reduction in the already restricted rights of the German minority in Russia. This is the real meaning of the persecution of Suprun and Dudarev.

If Russia wishes to be accepted as part of the civilized world it must first disavow its Stalinist past, confront the crimes committed during that era and provide a basis for reconciliation between the descendents of the perpetrators and the victims. Germany, South Africa, Chile and many other states have all successfully embarked upon this path to establish democratic societies and ensure human rights. Russia should follow their example rather than its current movement backwards towards a neo-Stalinist regime. The first step in this direction is to drop the charges against Suprun and Dudarev and allow them to continue their research and publication on the Russian-German victims of Stalinism.

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