



BLOODLANDS

EUROPE BETWEEN HITLER AND STALIN

TIMOTHY SNYDER

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CHAPTER 10

ETHNIC CLEANSINGS



By the time the Red Army reached the remains of Warsaw in January 1945, Stalin knew what sort of Poland he wished to build. He knew where its borders would run, who would be forced to live within them, who would be forced to go. Poland would be a communist state, and an ethnically homogeneous country. Although Stalin would undertake no policies of mass killing in the east European empire he foresaw, Poland was to be the center of a zone of ethnic purity. Germany would be for Germans, Poland for Poles, and the western part of Soviet Ukraine for Ukrainians. He expected Polish communists, including those who personally represented a national minority, to cleanse their country of national minorities. Stalin had revived a Polish communist party, and chosen its leaders, and sent them to Poland. He knew that he would have support not only from Poles but from the Americans and the British for the removal of a large number of Germans. Hitler's own policies of moving Germans during the war suggested how Germans might be treated thereafter. German wartime colonization made a certain amount of forced population transfers seem inevitable. The only questions were how many Germans, and from which territories. Stalin had precise answers, even if his American and British allies did not.¹



At the conference with his British and American allies at Yalta in February 1945 Stalin made himself understood, and had no reason to expect opposition. Roosevelt and Churchill would not object as Stalin took again the lands that he had received from Hitler: half of Poland, as well as the Baltic States and northeastern Romania. Stalin would compensate Poland, his communist Poland, by

punishing Germany. Poland would be shifted to the west, absorbing German territory to a line defined by the Oder and the Lusatian Neisse Rivers. In the lands that Stalin foresaw as Polish lived no fewer than ten million Germans. Moving them out, or keeping them out, would be the task of a government dominated by Polish communists. They would profit from the desire of many Poles to remove the Germans, and take credit for the achievement of a goal, ethnic purity, that seemed self-evident to most leading Polish politicians by the end of the war. Communists would gain support among Poles by distributing the lands left by Germans, and keep it by reminding Poles that only the Red Army could prevent the Germans from coming back and claiming their lost property.²

Poland's communists had accepted these borders, and knew that they were to remove the Germans. "We have to throw them out," said Władysław Gomułka, general secretary of the Polish party in May 1945, "since all countries are built on national, not multinational, principles." Moving Poland to the west would not in itself make Poland a "national" state in this sense: the shift in borders simply replaced large Ukrainian and Belarusian minorities with a very large German minority. Poland would require a massive displacement of millions of Germans to be "national" in the way that Gomułka had in mind. Perhaps 1.5 million of them were German administrators and colonists, who would never have come to Poland without Hitler's war. They lived in houses or apartments that they had taken from Poles expelled (or killed) during the war or from Jews who had been killed. More than half a million more were Germans who were native to Poland, and had lived within Poland's prewar borders. The remaining eight million or so were to lose their homes in lands that had been in Germany even before Hitler's expansion, and had been predominantly German in population for centuries.³

In creating his Poland, Stalin turned Hitler's Generalplan Ost on its head. Germany, rather than expanding eastward to create a huge land empire, would be confined in the west. The Soviets, Americans, and British occupied Germany together, and its immediate political future was not entirely clear. What was obvious was that it would be a Germany for the Germans—but not in Hitler's sense. It would be a compact area in the middle of Europe, separated from Austria, separated from the Sudetenland taken from Czechoslovakia, collecting Germans from the East rather than sending them there as colonists. Rather than a master race commanding slaves along a brave new eastern frontier, Germans

would be one more homogeneous nation. Yet unlike Hitler, Stalin did not understand “resettlement” as a euphemism for mass killing. He knew that people would die in the course of mass population transfers, but the destruction of the German nation was not his goal.

Communist and noncommunist, all leading Polish politicians agreed with Stalin that Poland should move as far as possible to the west, and that the Germans should go. When the Home Army had initiated the Warsaw Uprising on 1 August 1944, the Polish government in London had deprived Germans of citizenship and obliged them to leave the country. Stanisław Mikołajczyk, the prime minister of the London government, was no less categorical than his communist foes about what the postwar settlement should mean for Germans: “The experience with the fifth column and with German occupation methods make impossible the cohabitation of Polish and German populations on the territory of one state.” This position represented a consensus not only of Polish society but also among the allied leaders. Roosevelt had said that the Germans “deserved” to be expelled by terror (while his predecessor, Herbert Hoover, called population transfers a “heroic remedy”). Churchill had promised the Poles “a clean sweep.”⁴

At Yalta in February 1945, the Americans and the British agreed in principle that Poland should be shifted west, but were not convinced that Poland should be moved all the way to the Oder-Neiße line. Nevertheless, as Stalin anticipated, they came around to his way of thinking by the next summit at Potsdam in July. By that time, much of his policy had already been achieved on the ground. By March the Red Army had already conquered all of the German lands that Stalin intended to concede to Poland. By May the Red Army was in Berlin, and the war in Europe was over. Soviet troops had moved through eastern Germany with such extraordinary haste and violence that suddenly anything seemed possible. Six million or so Germans had been evacuated by German authorities or had fled before the Red Army, creating the basic preconditions for Stalin’s ethnic and geographic version of Poland. Many of them would try to come back after Germany’s surrender, but precious few would succeed.⁵

In Britain, George Orwell raised his voice one last time, in February 1945, calling the planned expulsion of the Germans an “enormous crime” that could not be “carried through.” He was wrong. For once, his political imagination had failed him.⁶



During the march on Berlin, the Red Army followed a dreadfully simple procedure in the eastern lands of the Reich, the territories meant for Poland: its men raped German women and seized German men (and some women) for labor. The behavior continued as the soldiers reached the German lands that would remain in Germany, and finally Berlin. Red Army soldiers had also raped women in Poland, and in Hungary, and even in Yugoslavia, where a communist revolution would make the country a Soviet ally. Yugoslav communists complained to Stalin about the behavior of Soviet soldiers, who gave them a little lecture about soldiers and “fun.”⁷

The scale of the rape increased once Soviet soldiers reached Germany itself. It is hard to be sure just why. The Soviet Union, though egalitarian in principle, did not instill respect for the female body in this most elemental sense. Aside and apart from their experience with Germans, Red Army soldiers were prod-

ucts of the Soviet system, and often of its most vicious institutions. About a million Gulag prisoners were released early so that they could fight on the front. All Soviet soldiers seemed frustrated by the utter senselessness of the German attack on their poor country. Every German worker's house was finer than their own homes. Soldiers sometimes said that they attacked only "capitalists," but from their perspective a simple German farmer was unthinkably rich. And yet despite their obviously higher standard of living the Germans had come to the Soviet Union, to rob and to kill. Soviet soldiers may have understood the rape of German women as a way to humiliate and dishonor German men.⁸

As the Red Army took enormous losses as it moved west, its ranks were filled by conscripts from the Belarusian and Ukrainian Soviet republics whose families had suffered at the hands of Germans and whose young lives had been shaped by German occupation. Many Soviet soldiers thus had personal reasons to endorse the propaganda that they read and heard, which sometimes blamed the entire German nation for the Soviet tragedy. The vast majority of Red Army soldiers were not avenging the Holocaust as such, but they were reading the propaganda of people who had been deeply wounded by the mass murder of Jews. Ilya Ehrenburg, the Soviet-Jewish writer now working as a journalist for the army newspaper *The Red Star*, was at this point a specialist in hate propaganda. "From now on," he had written in 1942, "we have understood that the Germans are not humans."⁹

Whatever the motivations, the outburst of violence against German women was extraordinary. Men who tried to defend daughters or wives were beaten and sometimes killed. The women had few men to protect them. Theirs were dead in battle (some five million German men had been killed in action by this point), drafted into the Wehrmacht, summoned to the emergency civil defense, or seized by the Soviets as labor. Most of the men present were aged or disabled. In some villages, every single female was raped, whatever her age. As the German novelist Günter Grass learned later in life, his mother had offered herself so that his sister might be spared. Neither was. Gang rapes were very common. Many women died as a result of wounds sustained during successive rapes.¹⁰

German women often committed suicide, or tried to kill themselves, to prevent rape or to evade the shame of having been raped. As one recalled her flight, "With the darkness came an indescribable fright. Many women and girls were right there and raped by the Russians." Hearing their screams, she and her sister

slit their wrists, but survived: likely because they were too cold to bleed to death, and because they were treated by a Soviet doctor the following day. They were spared during the night, probably because they had passed out and seemed to be dead. Indeed, death was one of the few defenses against rape. Martha Kurzmänn and her sister were spared only because they were burying their mother. “Just as we had washed our dead mother and wished to dress her body, a Russian came and wanted to rape us.” He spat and turned away. That was the exception.¹¹

Women who were raped were sometimes then taken as forced labor; but most of those seized for labor were men. The Soviets seized about 520,000 Germans—so about a tenth as many people as the Germans had taken from the Soviet Union for forced labor. The Soviets also took some 287,000 people as laborers from east European countries, and deported at least 40,000 Poles thought to represent a threat to Soviet power or future communist rule. They seized Hungarian civilians in Budapest, treated them as prisoners of war, and forced them to work in camps. Germans were sent to do dark and dangerous work in the mines of Polish Silesia, or eastern Ukraine, or Kazakhstan, or Siberia. Death rates among Germans were far higher than among Soviet citizens. At Camp 517 in Karelia, Germans died at five times the usual Gulag rates.¹²

About 600,000 Germans taken as prisoners of war or laborers at the end of the war would die. Perhaps 185,000 German civilians died in Soviet captivity during and after the war, and perhaps 30,000 more in Polish camps. About 363,000 German prisoners of war also perished in the Soviet camps (an 11.8 percent fatality rate, as compared to 57.5 percent for Soviet soldiers in German camps). Many more prisoners died on the way to the camps, or were shot after surrendering without being registered as prisoners of war.¹³

As so often, Stalin’s crimes were enabled by Hitler’s policies. In large measure, the German men were there to be seized, and the German women to be raped, because the Nazis failed to organize systematic evacuations. In the last few weeks of the war, German troops were racing west to surrender to the British or the Americans rather than to the Soviets; civilians often lacked such an option.

Hitler had presented the war as a matter of will, and thereby accentuated the tendency, always present in war, to deny defeat and therefore to worsen its

consequences. He saw armed conflict as a test of the German race: "Germany will either be a world power, or there will be no Germany." His nationalism was always of a particular kind: he believed that the German nation was potentially great, but that it required the challenges of empire to purge itself of degeneracy. Thus Germans could be favored so long as a war was going on, and going well. If Germans disappointed Hitler by failing to cleanse themselves in the blood of their defeated enemies, then that was their fault. Hitler had showed them the way, but Germans had failed to follow. If Germans lost their war of salvation, there was no longer any reason why they should survive. For Hitler, any suffering that Germans might endure was a consequence of their own weakness: "If the German people are not prepared to stand up for their own preservation, fine. Let them perish."¹⁴

Hitler himself chose suicide. His were not the sort of pragmatic attitudes necessary to preserve the lives of civilians. The civilian authorities in eastern Germany, the Gauleiters, were dedicated Nazi party men, and among Hitler's most loyal followers. In three crucial provinces, the Gauleiters failed to organize evacuations. In East Prussia, the Gauleiter was Erich Koch, the same man who had been Reichskommissar for Ukraine. He had once said that he would have to shoot any Ukrainian who was worthy of eating at his table. Now, in January 1945, an army composed quite significantly of Ukrainians was bearing down on his German province, and he could not seem quite to believe it. In Pomerania, Franz Schwede-Coburg actually tried to halt the flow of German refugees. In Lower Silesia, Karl Hanke was concerned that flight would undermine his campaign to make of Breslau (today Wrocław) a fortress that could stop the Red Army. In fact, the Red Army surrounded Breslau so quickly that people were trapped. Because German civilians left too late, they died in far higher numbers than they might have. The Soviet navy sank 206 of the 790 ships used to evacuate Germans from the Baltic coast. One of these, the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, was recalled later by Günter Grass in his novel *Crabwalk*.¹⁵

Germans fleeing by land were often caught, quite literally, in the crossfire of the Red Army and the Wehrmacht. Over and over again, Soviet tank units crashed into columns of German civilians and their horse carts. Eva Jahntz recalled what happened then: "The few men were shot, the women raped, and the children beaten and separated from their mothers." Grass, who saw such a scene as a Waffen-SS soldier, "saw a women scream, but could not hear her scream."¹⁶

The new Poland was founded at the moment when flight became deportation. The end of hostilities brought organized ethnic cleansing to the new western lands of Poland, officially known as the “recovered territories.” On 26 May 1945 the central committee of the Polish party resolved that all Germans on Polish territory were to be removed. By then, Germans were already coming back. They had fled the Red Army, but had no wish to lose all of their property and belongings, or to abandon their homeland. They also had no way of knowing that their return was pointless, that their homeland was to become Polish, and their homes to be given to Poles. By June 1945 perhaps a million of the six million or so German refugees had returned. The Polish communists decided to send the newly constituted army, now under their command, to “cleanse” these Germans from what they understood to be Polish territory.¹⁷

In summer 1945, the Polish communists were looking ahead nervously to the final peace settlement. If they could not keep the Germans west of the Oder-Neiße line, perhaps they would not be awarded these territories. They were also following the example set by democratic Czechoslovakia, just to the south. Its president, Edvard Beneš, had been wartime Europe’s most articulate advocate of deporting Germans. He had told his citizens on 12 May that the German nation “had ceased to be human.” The day before, the leader of the Czechoslovak communist party had spoken of postwar Czechoslovakia as “a republic of Czechs and Slovaks.” The Czechoslovaks, whose German minority numbered about three million (a quarter of the population), had been marching their German citizens across the border since May. As many as thirty thousand Germans would be killed in these expulsions; some 5,558 Germans committed suicide in Czechoslovakia in 1945. Günter Grass, by then a prisoner of war in an American camp in Czechoslovakia, wondered if the GIs were there to guard him or to protect the Germans from the Czechs.¹⁸

The officers of the new Polish army told their troops to treat the German peasants as the enemy. The entire German nation was guilty, and not to be pitied. The commanding general issued instructions to “treat them as they treated us.” It never came to that, but the conditions of the military deportations of 20 June–20 July 1945 reflected haste, indifference, and the primacy of high politics. The army deported people who lived closest to the Oder-Neiße line, to

create the impression that these territories were ready for transfer to Poland. The army surrounded villages, gave people a few hours to pack, formed them into columns, and then marched them across the border. The army reported moving some 1.2 million people in this way, although that is likely a very considerable exaggeration; some people, in any event, were deported twice, since slipping back after the soldiers had gone was none too difficult.¹⁹

In all likelihood, these Polish efforts of summer 1945 made no difference to the final outcome. Although the British and the Americans had agreed between themselves that they should resist Stalin's plans for the Polish western frontier, they conceded the point at Potsdam in late July 1945. They accepted Stalin's proposed border for Poland, the Oder-Neiße line; the only condition, which Stalin probably understood as window dressing for Polish-American voters, was that the next Polish government be chosen in free elections. The three powers agreed that population transfers from Poland and Czechoslovakia (and Hungary) should be continued, but only after a pause necessary to ensure more humane conditions for the people resettled. Germans lands were under joint occupation, the Soviets in the northeast, the British in the west, and the Americans in the south. The Americans and British were concerned that further chaotic population movements would bring chaos to their occupation zones in Germany.²⁰

After Potsdam, the Polish government sought precisely to create inhumane conditions for Germans in Poland, so that Germans would decide to leave. Stalin had told Gomulka that he "should create such conditions for the Germans that they will want to escape themselves." From July 1945, Polish authorities did just this, under the euphemistic guise of "voluntary repatriations." The policy of indirect expulsion was perhaps most flagrant in Silesia, where the regional governor forbade the use of German in public places, banned German schools, seized German property, and ordered German men to work in the mines. The approach was perhaps most guileless (or cynical) in the city of Olsztyn, formerly in East Prussia, where Germans were summoned "voluntarily" to go to Germany by the end of October 1945—and at the same time informed that "those who resist shall be directed to the camps."²¹

Polish prisons and temporary penal and labor camps were at this time full of Germans, who, along with all other prisoners, were treated very badly. The prisons and camps were placed under the jurisdiction of the communist-led Ministry of Public Security, rather than under the ministry of justice or internal

affairs. At this time the Polish government was still a coalition; but it was dominated by the communists, who always made sure to control such offices as Public Security. The camp commanders, generally free of discipline from above, presided over general chaos and frequent murder. In the village of Nieszawa in north-central Poland, thirty-eight men, women, and children were thrown into the Vistula River; the men and women were shot first, the children were not. At the camp at Lubraniec, the commander danced on a German woman who was so badly beaten that she could not move. In this way, he exclaimed, “we lay the foundation for a new Poland.”²²

In some places the revenge was quite literal. At the camp at Łambinowice, Czesław Gęborski consciously modeled the regulations on those of the Germans (despite orders to the contrary) and openly proclaimed his desire for vengeance. On 4 October 1945 forty prisoners in Łambinowice were murdered; all in all, some 6,488 Germans died there in 1945 and 1946. Gęborski had been in prison under the Germans; other commanders of Polish camps had other reasons for revenge. Izydor Cedrowski, the commander at the camp at Potulice, was a Jewish Auschwitz survivor whose family had been shot by the Germans. Germans and others died of exposure, disease, and mistreatment in these camps by the hundreds each day. All in all, some two hundred thousand Germans labored in Polish camps, of whom a very high number, perhaps thirty thousand, died in 1945 or 1946.²³

By the second half of 1945, Germans had good reason to depart Poland “voluntarily,” though leaving proved to be just as dangerous as staying. Trains were now allocated for the transports, although these were freight trains, often with open cars. When the cars were not open, the Germans sometimes feared that they would be gassed. This, of course, never happened—though it does demonstrate that Germans knew that other people had very recently been led into enclosed spaces and asphyxiated. Indeed, in one of the places from which Germans were now expelled, at Stutthof, the Germans had used a railcar as a gas chamber.²⁴

The trains moved very slowly, turning journeys that should have lasted hours into horrible odysseys. The Germans who boarded the trains were very often hungry or sick. They were allowed to take with them only what they could

carry on their backs. This was promptly stolen from them by bandits—or by the Polish militia who were supposed to protect them. One reason why the trains stopped so frequently was to allow bandits to rob people of what they had left. In these situations, mortality on the trains was considerable, although it should have been negligible. Germans had to bury their dead along the way, at these anonymous stops, in the middle of nowhere, without markers or any way of knowing just where to return. They had no one to look after their interests in Poland, and very often no one to greet them on the other side. About six hundred thousand Germans reached Germany in this fashion in the second half of 1945.²⁵

The Allies agreed to a plan for the further deportations in November 1945, and the British and the Soviets prepared themselves to greet and care for the Germans who were to arrive in 1946. Because much of the death and disorder was a result of the conditions of boarding and embarkation, the Soviets and the British now sent representatives to monitor the deportations on the Polish side. The expectation, largely fulfilled, was that more orderly transports would mean less chaos in Germany. Over the course of 1946 about two million more Germans were dispatched by train to the British and the Soviet occupation zones of Germany; another six hundred thousand or so followed in 1947. Although conditions were far from humane, fatalities during these transports were much lower, no more than a few thousand or, at most, a few tens of thousands.²⁶

By the end of 1947 some 7.6 million Germans had left Poland, roughly half of them as refugees fleeing the Red Army, roughly half as deportees. These proportions and these numbers can never be rendered with precision, as many people fled, returned, and were deported; others were deported more than once. Many people who had presented themselves as Germans during (or even before) the war now claimed to be Poles, and so eluded the transports. (By this time, the Polish government, more interested in labor than in ethnic purity, looked favorably upon requests in ambiguous cases that people be regarded as Poles. And by this time, many people who had earlier called themselves Poles were presenting themselves as Germans, believing that Germany's economic future was brighter than Poland's.) But the general balance is clear: the vast majority of people who regarded themselves as Germans had left Poland by the end of 1947. In all of this flight and transport, from early 1945 to late 1947, perhaps four hundred thousand Germans native to lands that were annexed by Poland

died: most of them in Soviet and Polish camps, and a second large group caught between armies or drowned at sea.²⁷

The last weeks of the war itself, and the belated evacuations, were far more dangerous than the expulsions that followed the end of the war. In the final four months of the war, Germans suffered in one of the ways that other civilians had during the previous four years of war on the eastern front, during the advance and the retreat of the Wehrmacht. Millions of people had fled the German attack in 1941; millions more had been taken for labor between 1941 and 1944; still more were forced to evacuate by the retreating Wehrmacht in 1944. Far more Soviet and Polish citizens died after fleeing Germans than did Germans as a result of flight from Soviets. Although such displacements were not policies of deliberate murder (and have therefore received almost no attention in this study), flight, evacuation, and forced labor led, directly or indirectly, to the death of a few million Soviet and Polish citizens. (German policies of deliberate mass murder killed an *additional* ten million people.)²⁸

The war had been fought in the name of the German race, but ended with unconcern for actual German civilians. Much responsibility for the deaths associated with flight and expulsion thus rested with the Nazi regime. German civilians knew enough about German policy during the war to know that they should flee, but their flight was not well organized by the German state. The behavior of many Soviet soldiers was certainly tolerated by the high command and expected by Stalin; the Red Army would not have been in Germany, however, had the Wehrmacht not invaded the Soviet Union. Stalin favored ethnic homogeneity, but this was an idea that Hitler's own policies made seem inevitable, and not only in Moscow. The expulsions themselves were a result of an international consensus of victors and victims.

In the end, the expulsions were one more way that Stalin won Hitler's war. By taking so much of Germany on Poland's behalf, Stalin guaranteed that Poles would be beholden, whether they liked it or not, to Soviet military power. Who but the Red Army could be counted upon to defend such a westerly Polish border from a resurgent Germany at some later point?²⁹

In these years, Poland was a nation in movement. Even as the Germans had to move west to a more westerly Germany, Poles had to move west to a more

westerly Poland. As Germans were cleansed from communist Poland, Poles were cleansed from the Soviet Union. Despite the preferences of all Polish political parties, including the communists, the Soviet Union once again annexed the lands that had been eastern Poland. The people who were then “repatriated” (as the Stalinist euphemism had it) to Poland had no reason to love communism or Stalin. Yet they were indeed bound to the communist system. Communists could take land but also grant it, expel people but also give them refuge. People who had both lost old homes and gained new ones were utterly dependent upon whomever could defend them. This could only be the Polish communists, who could promise that the Red Army would protect Poland’s gains. Communism had little to offer Poland as an ideology, and was never very popular. But Stalin’s ethnic geopolitics took the place of the class struggle, creating a durable basis of support, if not legitimacy, for the new regime.³⁰

The Americans and the British had supported expulsions at Potsdam, in the expectation of democratic elections in Poland. These never took place. Instead the first postwar government, dominated by communists, intimidated and arrested opponents. The Americans then began to see the Oder-Neiße line as an issue that could be used against the Soviet Union. When the American secretary of state questioned its permanence in September 1946, he was increasing American and weakening Soviet influence in Germany, among Germans unreconciled to the loss of territory and the expulsions. But he was also helping to consolidate the Soviet position in Poland. The Polish regime held parliamentary elections in January 1947, but falsified the results. The Americans and the British then watched their own chances for influence in Poland disappear. Stanisław Mikołajczyk, the prime minister of Poland’s government in exile, had returned to contest the elections as the head of a peasant party. Now he had to escape.³¹

The Polish regime could make the powerful claim that only its Soviet ally could protect the new western frontier from the Germans, whom the Americans were only encouraging. By 1947, Poles themselves, regardless of what they thought about the communists, could hardly contemplate losing the “the recovered territories.” As Gomułka had correctly anticipated, the expulsion of the Germans would “bind the nation to the system.” The gifted communist ideologist Jakub Berman believed that communists should make the most of their ethnic cleansing. The “recovered territories” gave many Poles who had suffered during the war a better house or a bigger farm. It allowed for land reform, the

first step in any communist takeover. Perhaps most of all, it gave a million Polish migrants from eastern Poland (annexed by the USSR) a place to go. Precisely because Poland had lost so much in the east, the west was all the more precious.³²

The ethnic cleansing of Germans from newly Polish lands came at the end of the war. It was, however, the second half of a Soviet policy that had actually begun much earlier, during the war itself, in the prewar lands of eastern Poland, east of the Molotov-Ribbentrop line. Just as Germans had to leave lands that were no longer German, Poles had to leave lands that were no longer Polish. Although Poland was technically a victor in the war, it lost almost half (forty-seven percent) of its prewar territory to the Soviet Union. After the war, Poles (and Polish Jews) were no longer welcome in what became the western parts of the Soviet Belarusian and Soviet Ukrainian republics and the Vilnius region of the Soviet Lithuanian republic.³³

The alteration of the population structure of eastern Poland to the detriment of Poles and Jews began earlier, during the war itself. The Soviets had deported hundreds of thousands of people during their first occupation, in 1940 and in 1941. A disproportionate number of these had been Poles. Many made their way from the Gulag through Iran and Palestine to fight with the Allies on the western front, and sometimes they reached Poland at war's end; but they almost never made it back to their homes. The Germans had killed about 1.3 million Jews in the former eastern Poland in 1941 and 1942, with the help of local policemen. Some of these Ukrainian policemen helped to form a Ukrainian partisan army in 1943, which under the leadership of Ukrainian nationalists cleansed the former southwest Poland—which it saw as western Ukraine—of remaining Poles. The OUN-Bandera, the nationalist organization that led the partisan army, had long pledged to rid Ukraine of its national minorities. Its capacity to kill Poles depended upon German training, and its determination to kill Poles had much to do with its desire to clear the terrain of purported enemies before a final confrontation with the Red Army. The UPA, as the partisan army was known, murdered tens of thousands of Poles, and provoked reprisals from Poles upon Ukrainian civilians.³⁴

Although the UPA was a determined (perhaps the most determined) opponent of communism, the ethnic conflict that it started only strengthened Stalin's



empire. What Ukrainian nationalists had started, Stalin would conclude. He continued the removal of Poles, attaching the contested territories to his Soviet Ukraine. Polish communists signed agreements in September 1944 providing for population exchanges between Poland and Soviet Ukraine (as well as Soviet Belarus and Soviet Lithuania). In Soviet Ukraine, Poles remembered Soviet rule from the very recent past, and faced now a continuing threat from Ukrainian nationalists. They thus had every reason to take part in these “repatriations.” Some 780,000 Poles were shipped to communist Poland, within its new frontiers, along with a comparable number from Soviet Belarus and Soviet Lithuania. Some 1,517,983 people had left the Soviet Union as Poles by the middle of 1946, along with a few hundred thousand who did not register for the official transports. About a hundred thousand of these people were Jewish: Soviet policy was to remove both ethnic Poles and ethnic Jews from the former eastern Poland, but to keep Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Lithuanians. About a million Polish citizens were resettled in what had been eastern Germany, now the “recovered

territories” of western Poland. Meanwhile, about 483,099 Ukrainians were dispatched from communist Poland to Soviet Ukraine in 1944–1946, most of them by force.³⁵

Even as the Soviet regime was dispatching people across borders, it was also sending its own citizens to camps and special settlements. Most of the new Gulag prisoners were people from the lands that Stalin had taken in 1939 with German consent and then took again in 1945. Between 1944 and 1946, for example, 182,543 Ukrainians were deported from Soviet Ukraine to the Gulag: not for committing a particular crime, not even for being Ukrainian nationalists, but for being related to or acquainted with Ukrainian nationalists. At about the same time, in 1946 and 1947, the Soviets sentenced 148,079 Red Army veterans to the Gulag for collaboration with the Germans. There were never more Soviet citizens in the Gulag than in the years after the war; indeed, the number of Soviet citizens in the camps and special settlements increased every year from 1945 until Stalin’s death.³⁶

Communist Poland had no Gulag, but in 1947 its rulers did propose a “final solution” to their “Ukrainian problem”: by the dispersion of remaining Ukrainians far from home but within the boundaries of Poland. Between April and July 1947, the Polish regime itself carried out one more operation against Ukrainians on its territory, under the cryptonym “Vistula.” Some 140,660 Ukrainians, or people identified as such, were resettled by force from the south and southeast of the country to the west and north, to the “recovered territories” that until recently had been German. Operation Vistula was supposed to force Ukrainians in Poland, or at least their children, to assimilate into Polish culture. At the same time, Polish forces defeated the units of the Ukrainian partisan army, the UPA, on Polish soil. Ukrainian nationalist fighters in Poland had been given a new lease on life as defenders of people who did not wish to be deported. But once almost all Ukrainians had in fact been deported, the UPA’s position in Poland was untenable. Some UPA fighters fled to the West, others to the Soviet Union to continue the fight.³⁷

Operation Vistula, originally codenamed Operation East, was undertaken entirely by Polish forces, with little Soviet assistance inside Poland. But the crucial people involved in planning the operation were Soviet clients, and it was certainly coordinated with Moscow. It took place at the same time as a number

of Soviet operations, on adjacent Soviet territories, which bore similar cryptonyms. The most obviously related was Operation West, which took place on adjoining territories of Soviet Ukraine. As Operation Vistula was brought to a close, the Soviets ordered the deportation of Ukrainians from western Ukraine to Siberia and central Asia. In a few days in October 1947, some 76,192 Ukrainians were transported to the Gulag. In western Ukraine, Soviet special forces were engaged with the UPA in a fantastically bloody conflict. Both sides committed atrocities, including the public display of the mutilated corpses of the enemy or his supposed collaborators. But in the end the technology of deportation gave the Soviets a decided advantage. The Gulag kept growing.³⁸

After this success at the Ukrainian-Polish border, the Soviets turned to other European borderlands, and applied similar means in similar operations. In Operation Spring in May 1948, some 49,331 Lithuanians were deported. The following March, Operation Priboi saw the removal of 31,917 more people from Lithuania, as well as 42,149 from Latvia and 20,173 from Estonia. All in all, between 1941 and 1949, Stalin deported some two hundred thousand people from the three small Baltic States. Like all of the thrice-occupied (Soviet, then German, then Soviet) lands east of the Molotov-Ribbentrop line, the Baltic States entered the USSR in 1945 having lost much of their elite, and indeed a significant share of the total population.³⁹

Under Stalin, the Soviet Union had evolved, slowly and haltingly, from a revolutionary Marxist state into a large, multinational empire with a Marxist covering ideology and traditional security concerns about borders and minorities. Because Stalin inherited, maintained, and mastered the security apparatus of the revolutionary years, these anxieties could be released in bursts of national killing in 1937–1938 and 1940, and in bouts of national deportation that began in 1930 and continued throughout Stalin's lifetime. The deportations of the war continued a certain evolution in Soviet deportation policy: away from the traditional resettlements of individuals thought to represent enemy classes, and toward an ethnic cleansing that matched populations to borders.

In the prewar period, the deportations to the Gulag were always meant to serve two purposes: the growth of the Soviet economy and the correction of the Soviet population. In the 1930s, as the Soviets began to deport large numbers

of people on ethnic grounds, the goal was to move national minorities away from sensitive border regions toward the interior. These national deportations could hardly be seen as a specific punishment of individuals, but they were still premised on the assumption that those deported could be better assimilated into Soviet society when they were separated from their homes and homelands. The national actions of the Great Terror killed a quarter of a million people in 1937 and 1938, but also dispatched hundreds of thousands of people to Siberia and Kazakhstan, where they were expected to work for the state and reform themselves. Even the deportations of 1940–1941, from annexed Polish, Baltic, and Romanian territories, can be seen in Soviet terms as a class war. Men of elite families were killed at Katyn and other sites, and their wives, children, and parents left to the mercy of the Kazakh steppe. There they would integrate with Soviet society, or they would die.

During the war, Stalin undertook punitive actions that targeted national minorities for their association with Nazi Germany. Some nine hundred thousand Soviet Germans and about eighty-nine thousand Finns were deported in 1941 and 1942. As the Red Army moved forward after the victory at Stalingrad in early 1943, Stalin's security chief Lavrenty Beria recommended the deportation of whole peoples accused of collaborating with the Germans. For the most part, these were the Muslim nations of the Caucasus and Crimea.⁴⁰

As Soviet troops retook the Caucasus, Stalin and Beria put the machine into action. On a single day, 19 November 1943, the Soviets deported the entire Karachai population, some 69,267 people, to Soviet Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Over the course of two days, 28–29 December 1943, the Soviets dispatched 91,919 Kalmyks to Siberia. Beria went to Grozny personally to supervise the deportations of the Chechen and Ingush peoples on 20 February 1944. Leading about 120,000 special forces, he rounded up and expelled 478,479 people in just over a week. He had at his disposal American Studebaker trucks, supplied during the war. Because no Chechens or Ingush were to be left behind, people who could not be moved were shot. Villages were burned to the ground everywhere; in some places, barns full of people were burned as well. Over the course of two days, 8–9 March 1944, the Soviets removed the Balkar population, 37,107 people, to Kazakhstan. In April 1944, right after the Red Army reached the Crimea, Beria proposed and Stalin agreed that the entire Crimean Tatar population be resettled. Over the course of three days, 18–20 March 1944, 180,014

people were deported, most of them to Uzbekistan. Later in 1944, Beria had the Meshketian Turks, some 91,095 people, deported from Soviet Georgia.⁴¹

Against this backdrop of essentially continuous national purges, Stalin's decision to cleanse the Soviet-Polish border seems like an unsurprising development of a general policy. From a Soviet perspective, Ukrainian, Baltic, or Polish partisans were simply more bandits causing trouble along the periphery, to be dealt with by overwhelming force and deportations. There was, however, an important difference. All of the kulaks and members of national minorities deported in the 1930s found themselves far from home, but still within the USSR. The same was true of the Crimean and Caucasian and Baltic populations deported during and shortly after the war. Yet in September 1944, Stalin opted to move Poles (and Polish Jews), Ukrainians, and Belarusians back and forth across a *state* border in order to create ethnic homogeneity. The same logic was applied, on a far greater scale, to the Germans in Poland.

Working in parallel, and sometimes together, the Soviet and communist Polish regimes achieved a curious feat between 1944 and 1947: they removed the ethnic minorities, on both sides of the Soviet-Polish border, that had made the border regions mixed; and at the very same time, they removed the ethnic nationalists who had fought the hardest for precisely that kind of purity. Communists had taken up the program of their enemies. Soviet rule had become ethnic cleansing—cleansed of the ethnic cleansers.

The territory of postwar Poland was the geographical center of Stalin's campaign of postwar ethnic cleansing. In that campaign, more Germans lost their homes than any other group. Some 7.6 million Germans had left Poland by the end of 1947, and another three million or so were deported from democratic Czechoslovakia. About nine hundred thousand Volga Germans were deported within the Soviet Union during the war. The number of Germans who lost their homes during and after the war exceeded twelve million.

Enormous as this figure was, it did not constitute a majority of the forced displacements during and after the war. Two million or so non-Germans were deported by Soviet (or communist Polish) authorities in the same postwar period. Another eight million people, most of them forced laborers taken by the Germans, were returned to the Soviet Union at the same time. (Since many

if not most of them would have preferred not to return, they could be counted twice.) In the Soviet Union and Poland, more than twelve million Ukrainians, Poles, Belarusians, and others fled or were moved during the war or in its aftermath. This does not include the ten million or so people who were deliberately killed by the Germans, most of whom were displaced in one way or another before they were murdered.⁴²

The flight and deportation of the Germans, though not a policy of deliberate mass killing, constituted the major incident of postwar ethnic cleansing. In all of the civil conflict, flight, deportation, and resettlement provoked or caused by the return of the Red Army between 1943 and 1947, some 700,000 Germans died, as did at least 150,000 Poles and perhaps 250,000 Ukrainians. At a minimum, another 300,000 Soviet citizens died during or shortly after the Soviet deportations from the Caucasus, Crimea, Moldova, and the Baltic States. If the struggles of Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian nationalists against the reimposition of Soviet power are regarded as resistance to deportations, which in some measure they were, another hundred thousand or so people would have to be added to the total dead associated with ethnic cleansing.⁴³

In relative terms, the percentage of Germans moved as a part of the total population of Germans was much inferior to that of the Caucasian and Crimean peoples, who were deported down to the last person. The percentage of Germans who moved or were moved at the end of the war was greater than that of Poles, Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Balts. But if the population movements caused by the Germans during the war are added to those caused by the Soviet occupation at war's end, this difference disappears. Over the period 1939–1947, Poles, Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Balts were about as likely (some a bit more, some a bit less) to have been forcibly moved as Germans. Whereas all of the other peoples in question faced hostile German and Soviet policies, the Germans (with some exceptions) experienced oppression only from the Soviet side.

In the postwar period, Germans were about as likely to lose their lives as Poles, the other group that was mainly sent west to a national homeland. Germans and Poles were much less likely to die than Ukrainians, Romanians, Balts, and the Caucasian and Crimean peoples. Fewer than one in ten Germans and Poles died during or as a direct result of flight, exile, or deportation; among Balts and Soviet citizens, the rate was more like one in five. As a general rule, the further east the deportation, and the more directly Soviet power was involved, the

more deadly the outcome. This is evident in the case of the Germans themselves: the tremendous majority of Germans who fled Poland and Czechoslovakia survived, whereas a large proportion of those transported east within or to the Soviet Union died.

It was better to be sent west than east, and better to be sent to an awaiting homeland than to a distant and alien Soviet republic. It was also better to land in developed (even if bombed and war-torn) Germany than in Soviet wastelands that deportees were supposed to develop themselves. It was better to be received by British and American authorities in occupation zones than by the local NKVD in Kazakhstan or Siberia.

Rather quickly, within about two years after the end of the war, Stalin had made his new Poland and his new frontiers, and moved peoples to match them. By 1947, it might have seemed that the war was finally over, and that the Soviet Union had well and truly won a military victory over the Germans and their allies and a political victory over opponents of communism in eastern Europe.

Poles, always a troublesome group, had been dispatched from the Soviet Union to a new communist Poland, bound now to the Soviet Union as the anchor of a new communist empire. Poland, it might have seemed, had been subdued: twice invaded, twice subject to deportations and killings, altered in its borders and demography, ruled by a party dependent on Moscow. Germany had been utterly defeated and humiliated. Its territories as of 1938 were divided into multiple occupation zones, and would find their way into five different sovereign states: the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany), the German Democratic Republic (East Germany), Austria, Poland, and the USSR (at Kaliningrad). Japan had been utterly defeated by the Americans, its cities firebombed or, at the very end, destroyed by nuclear weapons. It was no longer a power in continental Asia. Stalin's traditional threats had been removed. The prewar nightmare of a Japanese-Polish-German encirclement was passé.

More Soviet citizens had died in the Second World War than any people in any war in recorded history. At home, Soviet ideologists had taken advantage of the suffering to justify Stalinist rule: as the necessary price of victory in what was called "the Great Patriotic War." The patria in question was Russia as well as the Soviet Union; Stalin himself famously raised a toast to "the great Russian



nation” just after the war’s end, in May 1945. Russians, he maintained, had won the war. To be sure, about half the population of the Soviet Union was Russian, and so in a numerical sense Russians had played a greater part in the victory than any other people. Yet Stalin’s idea contained a purposeful confusion: the war on Soviet territory was fought and won chiefly in Soviet Belarus and in Soviet Ukraine, rather than in Soviet Russia. More Jewish, Belarusian, and Ukrainian civilians had been killed than Russians. Because the Red Army took such horrible losses, its ranks were filled by local Belarusian and Ukrainian conscripts at both the beginning and the end of the war. The deported Caucasian and Crimean peoples, for that matter, had seen a higher percentage of their young people die in the Red Army than had the Russians. Jewish soldiers had been more likely to be decorated for valor than Russian soldiers.

The Jewish tragedy, in particular, could not be enclosed within the Soviet experience, and was thus a threat to postwar Soviet mythmaking. About 5.7 million Jewish civilians had been murdered by the Germans and Romanians, of whom some 2.6 million were Soviet citizens in 1941. This meant not only that more Jewish civilians were murdered in absolute terms than members of any other Soviet nationality. It also meant that more than half of the cataclysm took place beyond the postwar boundaries of the Soviet Union. From a Stalinist perspective, even the experience of the mass murder of one’s peoples was a worrying example of exposure to the outside world. In 1939–1941, when the Soviet Union had annexed Poland and the Germans had not yet invaded the USSR, Soviet Jews mingled with Polish Jews, who reminded them of religious and linguistic traditions, of the world of their grandparents. Soviet and Polish Jews, during that brief but important moment, lived together. Then, after the German invasion, they died together. Precisely because extermination was a fate common to Jews across borders, its recollection could not be reduced to that of an element in the Great Patriotic War.

It was precisely exposure to the West that concerned Stalin, even as his system was replicated in several states of eastern and central Europe. In the interwar period, Soviet citizens really had believed that they were better off than the masses suffering under capitalist exploitation in the West. Now America had emerged from the Second World War as an unrivalled economic power. In 1947 it offered economic aid, in the form of the Marshall Plan, to European countries willing to cooperate with one another on elementary matters of trade

and financial policy. Stalin could reject Marshall aid and force his clients to reject it as well, but he could not banish the knowledge that Soviet citizens had gained during the war. Every returning Soviet soldier and forced laborer knew that standards of living in the rest of Europe, even in relatively poor countries such as Romania and Poland, were far higher than in the Soviet Union. Ukrainians returned to a country where famine was raging again. Perhaps a million people starved to death in the two years after the war. It was western Ukraine, with a private agricultural sector that the Soviets had not yet had time to collectivize, that saved the rest of Soviet Ukraine from even greater suffering.⁴⁴

Russians were a safer basis for a Stalinist legend of the war. The battles for Moscow and Stalingrad were victories. Russians were the largest nation, theirs was the dominant language and culture, and their republic was further away from the West, both in its Nazi and in its emerging American incarnations. Russia is vast: the Germans never even aimed to colonize more than its western fifth, and never conquered more than its western tenth. Soviet Russia had not suffered total occupation for months and years, as had the Baltics, Belarus, or Ukraine. Everyone who remained in Soviet Belarus and Soviet Ukraine experienced German occupation; the vast majority of the inhabitants of Soviet Russia did not. Soviet Russia was much less marked by the Holocaust than Soviet Ukraine or Soviet Belarus, simply because the Germans arrived later and were able to kill fewer Jews (about sixty thousand, or about one percent of the Holocaust). In this way, too, Soviet Russia was more distant from the experience of the war.

Once the war was over, the task was to insulate the Russian nation, and of course all of the other nations, from cultural infection. One of the most dangerous intellectual plagues would be interpretations of the war that differed from Stalin's own.

The victory of Soviet-style communism in eastern Europe gave rise to as much anxiety as triumphalism. The political victories were certainly impressive: communists in Albania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Yugoslavia dominated their countries by 1947, thanks to Soviet help but also thanks to their own training, ruthlessness, and ingenuity. Communists proved rather good at mobilizing human resources for the immediate problems of postwar reconstruction, as for example in Warsaw.

But how long could the Soviet-economic model of rapid industrialization produce growth in countries that were more industrial than the Soviet Union

had been at the time of the first Five-Year Plan, and whose citizens expected higher standards of living? How long could east European societies accept that communism was national liberation, when their communist leaders were obviously beholden to a foreign power, the Soviet Union? How could Moscow sustain the image of the West as a constant enemy, when the United States seemed to represent both prosperity and freedom? Stalin needed his appointed east European leaders to follow his wishes, exploit nationalism, and isolate their peoples from the West, which was a very difficult combination to achieve.

It was the task of Andrei Zhdanov, Stalin's new propaganda chief and favorite, to square all of these circles. Zhdanov was to theorize the inevitable victory of the Soviet Union in the postwar world, and protect Russian purity in the meantime. In August 1946 the Soviet communist party had passed a resolution condemning Western influence on Soviet culture. The pollution might flow from western Europe, or America, but also through cultures that crossed boundaries, such as the Jewish or the Ukrainian or the Polish. Zhdanov also had to account for the new rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States, in a way that the east European leaders could understand and apply in their own countries.

In September 1947, the leaders of Europe's communist parties gathered in Poland to hear Zhdanov's new line. Meeting in Szklarska Poręba, a formerly German resort town until very recently known as Schreiberhau, they were told that their parties would be taking part in a "Communist Informational Bureau," or "Cominform." It would be the means by which Moscow would communicate the line and coordinate their policies. The assembled communist leaders learned that the world was divided into "two camps," progressive and reactionary, with the Soviet Union destined to lead the new "people's democracies" of eastern Europe, and the United States doomed to inherit all the flaws of degenerate capitalism, on display so recently in Nazi Germany. The unalterable laws of history guaranteed the final victory of the forces of progress.⁴⁵

Communists needed only to play their allotted role in the progressive camp, led of course by the Soviet Union, and avoid the temptation to take any separate national road to socialism. So all was well.

Then Zhdanov suffered a heart attack, the first of several. Somehow all was not well.