

# Interwar Soviet Nationalities Policy: The Case of the Volga Germans

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## **Abstract**

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, scholarship on the interwar period of Soviet history has been augmented significantly by its newfound focus on the national dimension of Soviet policies. Such policies, which had previously been explained as political manipulation via the processes of Russification and attempted elimination of non-Russian national identifications are now understood as an intentional promotion and exploitation of minority nationalities by the Soviet regime. Using the Volga Germans as a case study of a Soviet diasporic nationality in the interwar period, this thesis demonstrates the Bolshevik regime's systematic efforts to construct a Volga German national identification among the region's inhabitants, with the aim of modeling the republic after a modern nation state. While previous works have suggested that repression of the Volga Germans was based on nationally determined criteria throughout the interwar era, this thesis demonstrates that prior to the mid-1930s, such repression was enacted because of the socioeconomic status of the Soviet Germans, a practice that stood in line with the Soviet regime's war against class enemies. However, by the end of the decade, the Volga Germans were subject to the categorization of "enemy nation," and thus can be used as a case study to demonstrate a larger transformation throughout the Soviet Union; a paradigm shift from class-based to nation-based repression. Paradoxically, however, the nation-building efforts of the Soviet regime continued in regards to the Volga Germans until the population was forcibly deported to Siberia and Kazakhstan in 1941, revealing that even national repression against the Volga Germans must be understood as more than a simple project of elimination.

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## Introduction

As a result of the establishment of the Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1924, the German-speaking inhabitants along the lower Volga River received an administrative homeland based on self-determination in the Soviet Union. Having initially migrated following Catherine II's 1763 Manifesto permitting the settlement of foreigners in *Novorossiia*, the Volga Soviet-Germans retained the dialects, cultures, and traditions of their émigré ancestors, with religion, primarily Catholicism and Lutheranism, being the predominant cultural foundation of the region.<sup>1</sup> Though the unique culture of the Volga German Republic managed to persist throughout the semi-capitalist New Economic Policy of the 1920s, the subsequent decade witnessed an increasingly confrontational state-sponsored Russian nationalist rhetoric throughout the Soviet Union, which began the process of eradicating the remaining cultural characteristics of the ethnic German population of the Volga region. This repression and acculturational Russification of the Volga Germans can be explained by a number of convergent factors, which culminated in the decision to forcefully deport all ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union following the invasion of Nazi Germany in 1941.

The early Soviet nationalities policy of *korenizatsiia* was designed to facilitate what the Bolsheviks saw as the inevitable process of decolonization while attempting to maintain the territorial integrity of the former Russian Empire. An integral aspect of this policy was the systematic promotion of the national consciousness of the constituent peoples of Russia by institutionalizing national territorial units that were very similar to the characteristics of modern nation-states. Consequently, the Volga Germans were granted an administrative homeland in the Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic located within the

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<sup>1</sup> Gerd Stricker, *Deutsche Geschichte im Osten Europas, Rußland* (Berlin: Siedler, 1997), 42-43.

Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR). Power in the autonomous republic was placed in the hands of German communists, German was made the language of administration and education, and massive efforts were made to promote the German language and culture through the publication of newspapers, books, and theatrical productions. Thus, *korenizatsiia* was implemented in order to Germanize the German-speaking inhabitants of the Volga Republic in an attempt to forge them into loyal Soviet citizens.

As the Volga Germans had historically been perceived as privileged subjects of the imperial regime, the collectivization and subsequent dekulakization campaigns contributed to the widespread perception of Volga Germans as affluent peasants, and therefore class enemies. Though collectivization and the removal of capitalist elements from the countryside were not enacted on national principles, the process would ostensibly take on this dimension in the 1930s. Popular anti-German sentiments increased considerably during the First Five-Year Plan, and Soviet-Germans were disproportionately victimized during the dekulakization campaigns throughout the collectivization period. In the first collectivization drive of 1930-1931, it is estimated that 3.7% of all Volga German households were destroyed, resulting in the forced deportation of approximately 25,000 German inhabitants of the autonomous republic.<sup>2</sup>

Various factors in the international arena contributed to the repression of the Soviet Germans, such as the German-Polish nonaggression pact signed in January of 1934. Following this agreement, ethnic Poles and Germans in the Soviet Union were blamed for the deterioration of the Soviet international position.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Hitler's consolidation of power in 1933 and the suppression of the German Communist Party escalated the Soviet regime's concerns, as the irredentist claims of the Third Reich became increasingly audacious

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<sup>2</sup> Irina Mukhina, *The Germans of the Soviet Union* (London & New York: Routledge, 2007), 37.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 91.

throughout the decade. In the German propaganda machine, the Soviet Union came to be represented as the homeland of barbaric ideology, and Bolshevism viewed as “a parasite destroying individual races.”<sup>4</sup> Following the Nazi’s rise to power, the central committee began to collect data on all Germans working in industry and administrative bodies.<sup>5</sup>

Such international factors signified the gradual shift from class-based repression to nation-based repression in the Soviet Union, which contributed to the perception of nationalities with potential cross-border kin-ties as citizens with an ultimate loyalty to an external state. The emergence of propaganda surrounding the 1936 Constitution emphasized the “stateness” and sovereignty of the Soviet Republics, and thus contributed to the growing perception that these nations held deep historic roots in their national territories. The diasporic nationalities with their own autonomous regions within the Union Republics became subject to the categorization of enemy nations. Consequently, the NKVD introduced mass operations against diasporic nationalities, including NKVD order number 00439, which specifically targeted ethnic Germans for repression. It is estimated that 42,000 people were shot as a result of the NKVD German Operation of 1937-1938.<sup>6</sup> By 1939, all German national territories outside the Volga Republic were liquidated, and the inhabitants of the smaller German national units in the RSFSR were subject to the assimilationist Russification policies of the Soviet regime. Nonetheless, *korenizatsiia* continued in the Volga German Republic until 1941, albeit at less intensive pace, and the center implemented an acculturational Russification policy towards the Volga Germans. Following the Nazi invasion in June of 1941, the approximately 400,000 Volga Germans were forcibly deported to special settlements in Siberia and Kazakhstan, and the Volga Republic was formally abolished.

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<sup>4</sup> James E. Casteel, “The Russian Germans in the Interwar German National Imaginary.” *Central European History* Vol. 40. (2007): 461.

<sup>5</sup> Ingeborg Fleischhauer and Benjamin Pinkus, *The Soviet Germans: Past and Present* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 1986), 4.

<sup>6</sup> Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*, Basic Books (2010), 107.

This thesis will examine the Soviet nationalities policy in regards to the Volga Germans in an attempt to determine why the Soviet Germans were disproportionately targeted for repression during the 1930s. As can be seen, there were a variety of factors that led to repression and various processes of Russification of ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union. Contrary to the few scholarly works pertaining to the Soviet-Germans that portray the Volga Germans as being subject to systematic repression by the Soviet authorities immediately following the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917,<sup>7</sup> this thesis will take a functionalist approach and argue that prior to the mid-1930s, the repression of the Volga Germans was a consequence of the perceptions of Volga Germans being privileged subjects of the Russian Empire, and therefore class enemies under the Soviet regime. Indeed, after taking power in 1917, the Bolsheviks sought to promote German culture through the establishment of German-language institutions along the Volga River in an attempt to integrate the inhabitants of the region into Soviet state and society. This thesis will examine the Bolsheviks' usage of "population politics" to categorize the population according to class and nationality, which facilitated both the class-based repression of the early 1930s and the nation-based arrests and deportations late in the decade.

By utilizing the "victimization syndrome" through national narratives, the few scholars of the Soviet Germans have entirely dismissed the crucial aspect of *korenizatsiia* and the promotion of German culture within the autonomous republic throughout the decade of the 1920s and into the 1930s. Indeed, such works simply use the umbrella term "Soviet Germans" to denote all ethnic Germans throughout the Soviet Union, and therefore erroneously imply that the Kremlin enacted uniform policies towards all citizens of German descent. Similarly, such narratives portray the major historical developments of the late

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<sup>7</sup> See Irina Mukhina, *The Germans of the Soviet Union*; Ingeborg Fleischhauer and Benjamin Pinkus, *The Soviet Germans: Past and Present*; Eric J. Schmaltz and Samuel D. Sinner, "'You will die Under Ruins and Snow': The Soviet Repression of Russian Germans as a Case Study of Successful Genocide," *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (2002): 327-356; James W. Long, "The Volga Germans and the Famine of 1921," *The Russian Review*, Vol. 51 (October 1992): 510-525.



1920s and early 1930s as only affecting the Soviet-Germans, and therefore ignore the fact that other nationalities of the Soviet Union were subject to brutal repression. This thesis will not contend that the Volga Germans were not subject to severe violence and repression during the ephemeral existence of the Volga Autonomous Republic-- they were undoubtedly victims of both. Instead, this thesis will examine the paradigm shift from class-based repression to nation-based repression in an attempt to clarify the national narratives that portray the repression as being systematic and nation-based from the moment the Bolsheviks consolidated power. Indeed, as this thesis will demonstrate, even after the regime categorized the Soviet Germans as an “enemy nation” in the late 1930s, the majority of the nationally determined repression against ethnic Germans was carried out in the smaller national territories in the western borderlands, and the regime continued to promote German language and culture in the Volga Republic until the outbreak of the Second World War. This simultaneous process of nation-building and nation-destroying is one of the great paradoxes Soviet history.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, scholarship pertaining to the nationalities question throughout the Soviet era has gained prominence as a field of study among historians. Previous interpretations of various historical developments, specifically during the interwar period, have been augmented by the inclusion of the study of the national dimension of Soviet regime’s consolidation of power leading up to the outbreak of the Second World War. Historical elements that had previously been simplistically understood as the results of class repression and political manipulation through the implementation of Russification policies and the eradication of nationality have recently been contested, leading to a shift in the scholarship that instead explains these developments as an intentional promotion and exploitation of nationality by the Soviet regime.

Having inherited a polity in which no nationality constituted an absolute majority, the Bolshevik regime set about the task of maintaining the territorial integrity of the Russian Empire while simultaneously attempting to gain the support of the many non-Russian nationalities in the peripheral regions. Indeed, on the eve of the Revolutions of 1917, Great Russians compiled only 44% of the population of tsarist Russia, and the empire was home to over 130 officially recognized nationalities.<sup>8</sup> By constructing what Terry Martin refers to as an “affirmative action empire,”<sup>9</sup> the Bolshevik strategy for maintaining the territorial integrity of the multi-ethnic Russian Empire involved the implementation of national self-determination to draw the internal borders of the Soviet Union. This resulted in the creation of thousands of national territorial administrative units based on the majority population residing within each territory, from Union Republics down to National Soviets. The utilization of nationalism, according to Martin, was due to Lenin’s perception that it contained the mobilizing potential to attract the Bolsheviks’ class allies, despite the fact that it had also united counterrevolutionary forces. Indeed, one of the most pressing issues for Lenin was the historical distrust of the non-Russians towards the Great Russians as an oppressor nation, and he maintained that self-determination could overcome such sentiments. As the most thorough work on nationalism and nationalities policies in the Soviet Union during the interwar era, Martin suggests that, through the policy of *korenizatsiia* (nativization/indigenization), the Soviet regime systematically promoted the national consciousness of its multi-national subjects in an attempt to emulate modern nation-states. By drawing the internal borders along national lines, the Soviet Union codified nationality

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<sup>8</sup> Liliana Riga, “The Ethnic Roots of Class Universalism: Rethinking the ‘Russian’ Revolutionary Elite,” *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 114, No. 3 (November 2008), 652.

<sup>9</sup> Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2001).

and established national territorial units for self-government. In doing so, Martin demonstrates “the paradoxical nature of the multiethnic Soviet state.”<sup>10</sup>

Francine Hirsch<sup>11</sup>, in direct contradiction to Terry Martin, suggests that the Bolsheviks did not wish to merely establish control over the peoples of the former Russian Empire; they set out to bring those peoples into the revolution and secure their active involvement in the great socialist experiment, and therefore submits that the logic behind the Soviet nationalities policy was found in the long-term ideological goals of the regime. Hirsch describes the process of simultaneously forging national identities and creating loyal socialist citizens, a process which she refers to as double assimilation, with the ultimate goal of amalgamating the many nationalities of the former Russian Empire into a single homogeneous group. Though the utilization of nationalism was incongruent with Marxist-Leninist ideology, this strategy was implemented due to what Hirsch refers to as “state-sponsored evolutionism” in an attempt to push the many nationalities of the former Russian Empire through the Marxist historical stages of humanity; to transform what were perceived as feudal era clans and tribes into nationalities, and nationalities into socialist nations. In contrast to Martin’s argument, which Hirsch interprets as a “retreat” from socialism, she suggests that the implementation of such policies was congruent with the Soviet regime’s long-term goal of communist internationalism.

The major works mentioned above pertaining to the Soviet nationalities policies provide useful aspects in constructing the framework for this thesis. The national territorialization of the former Russian Empire did not fit into a uniform plan on behalf of the Soviets; Hirsch’s strict notions of “state-sponsored evolutionism” and “double-assimilation” can certainly be applied to many nationalities, though not all. The strict boundaries of Hirsch’s theories therefore provide little room for negotiation, and while much of her

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<sup>10</sup> Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 18.

<sup>11</sup> Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge & the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2005).

argument of the imperativeness of scientific knowledge in the construction the Soviet Union is certainly valid and useful in explaining the national processes during the interwar era, these arguments presuppose a certain degree of uniformity that did not exist. With the decision to implement national self-determination and *korenizatsiia*, the Bolshevik regime undoubtedly attempted to forge national identities within each territorial unit. The ways in which this process was implemented as described by Hirsch through the construction of the censuses and the codification of ethnicity is a particularly valuable addition to the scholarship.

This thesis will therefore rely more heavily on Martin's theories of the "affirmative action empire," though much of Hirsch's work will also be utilized. As Martin suggests, the nationalities policies were not applied in a strict and uniform manner, though the creation of national territorial units was of paramount importance. The decisions pertaining to which level of autonomy to grant to each national territorial unit, however, was highly politicized and controversial. Furthermore, the process of consolidating power within each territory as well as implementing *korenizatsiia* was integral to the realization of Soviet nationalities policies. The harmonization of the multi-ethnic composition of the former Russian Empire by appealing to the non-Russian nationalities proved to be an imperative facet of the Bolshevik regime's policies.

Thus, the Soviet regime's strategy in dealing with the multi-national character of the Soviet Union was to create national territories in which the majority nationality would lead the government, and the language of the majority would be made the lingua franca of the territory. Perhaps the most effective way to promote the national culture of the majority was through the creation of native-language schools. Jeremy Smith,<sup>12</sup> in an article on the education of national minorities, demonstrates this process following the Bolshevik Revolution through 1928, and argues that the promotion of national languages in both the

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<sup>12</sup> Jeremy Smith, "The Education of National Minorities: The Early Soviet Experience" *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 75, No. 2, Apr., 1997, pp. 281-307.

educational system as well as in the administration guaranteed the strong development of national cultures in the Soviet Union. Indeed, common language is one of the primary unifying bonds in the formation of a nation. As Benedict Anderson<sup>13</sup> suggests, the rise of nationalism is largely a result of the development of print capitalism with its creation of a standardized print culture. The establishment of national language schools as well the dissemination of publications in a standardized print of each language was an integral aspect of *korenizatsiia* and functioned as a vessel to promote homogeneous national cultures.

While the policy of promoting the national culture within each territory continued through the New Economic Policy of the 1920s, the situation changed considerably as a result of agricultural collectivization and the implementation of the First Five-Year Plan for economic development. One of the consequences of such policies was the dekulakization campaigns against affluent and middle-class peasants throughout the Soviet Union. Lynn Viola<sup>14</sup> demonstrates how dekulakization was an integral aspect of agricultural collectivization, and argues that such campaigns should be considered Stalin's first purges. The ultimate goal of such purges was to break down cohesion in the villages in order to eradicate the spirit of capitalism from the countryside, and to absolve any potential resistance to collectivization by the peasants. Thus, it was implemented to clear the way for a new collective farm social order. Though the initial dekulakization campaigns were not implemented according to nationality, the process would eventually take on this dimension later in the decade of the 1930s, as class and national identifications incrementally converged.

Especially useful in the regime's attempt to eradicate the spirit of capitalism from the

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<sup>13</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London & New York: Verso, 1983).

<sup>14</sup> Lynn Viola, *The Unknown Gulag: The Lost World of Stalin's Special Settlements*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

countryside was their engagement in “population politics.” As Peter Holquist<sup>15</sup> suggests, the tools and conditions that the Bolsheviks utilized to operate on the social body predated the Russian Revolution, and had been used similarly by the tsarist regime. For the Soviets, the key feature in counting and categorizing the population was to identify certain “malignant elements” within society that needed to be removed in order to protect the health of the Soviet system and promote its idealized image. The compilation of statistics and categorizations continued well into the Stalinist era, with dekulakization conducted in an attempt to remove “capitalist elements,” and the Great Terror similarly sought to remove anti-Soviet elements.

Eric Weitz similarly demonstrates the Soviet regime’s obsession with categorizing and labeling the population.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the Bolsheviks established legally defined social groups that in some ways resembled the estate system of the Russian Empire. Peasants were divided into three strata: poor (*bedniak*), middle (*seredniak*), and wealthy (*kulak*). Though the labeling process was often arbitrary and did not fit into a uniform criterion, the categorization of the peasantry facilitated the process of dekulakization. Just as classes needed to be defined, nations had to be filled and classified. With the various passportization campaigns in the 1930s, an individual’s nationality was recorded on their internal documents, which made the removal of nationalities a far easier task later in the decade.

The implementation of collectivization and industrialization coincided with a large-scale cultural revolution throughout the Soviet Union. David Brandenberger<sup>17</sup> investigates the revival of Russian culture and Imperial Russian heroes in the 1930s throughout the Soviet

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<sup>15</sup> Peter Holquist, “To Count, to Extract, and to Exterminate: Population Statistics and Population Politics in Late Imperial and Soviet Russia” In *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*. Ed. Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin, (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> Eric D. Weitz, *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931-1956*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

Union, a cultural policy that he refers to as “National Bolshevism.” This signified a strengthening of the Russian core throughout the Soviet Union, which elevated the status of Great Russians to “first among equals.” As the policy of *korenizatsiia* promoted the minority national cultures while ignoring Russian culture, the Soviet regime opted to implement cultural lines that continued to promote the titular nationality, while simultaneously boasting the achievements of the Russian nation due to both economic mobilization as well as military mobilization in the event of foreign intervention. Given the failure to properly mobilize Soviet society in the preceding decade, the regime sought to promote Soviet patriotism in the 1930s by using Russian culture to instill the interchangeable concepts of motherland and fatherland among the citizens of the polity, regardless of nationality. Brandenberger focuses on the implementation of Russocentric mass culture and education, though he does not call this assimilation or Russification. Instead, he demonstrates a cultural shift from the focus on national minority culture in the 1920s to one that included a Russocentric Soviet culture that gained prominence in the 1930s. The revival of a state-sponsored Russian nationalist rhetoric paved the way for the eventual adoption of the “Friendship of the Peoples,” in which titular cultures continued to be promoted, but universal Russian culture became the uniting force between all nationalities of the Soviet Union.

Martin explains this process of turning towards national repression as “Stalinist primordialism.”<sup>18</sup> The propaganda surrounding the 1936 Soviet Constitution stressed the rootedness and sovereignty of the national territorial units of the Soviet Union, and those national categories with “rootedness” in their territory were deemed to be loyal to Marxist-Leninist ideology. However, being perceived as maintaining an ultimate loyalty to an external state, “official nationalities” such as Germans, Poles, Greeks, Bulgarians, Koreans, Finns, Latvians, etc. were henceforth subject to the categorization of “enemy nations.” This

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<sup>18</sup> Martin, 443.

shift came largely as a result of various factors in the international arena, though it was also due to the fact that the Soviet state increasingly began to identify with its Russian core throughout the 1930s as a result of staunch resistance to collectivization as well as the reversal of the Piedmont Principal and mobilization in the event of war.<sup>19</sup>

The “enemy nations” of the Soviet Union were therefore disproportionately subjected to repression during the Great Terror. It must be stressed that all nationalities, including those who were deemed to have a sense of rootedness in their territory as well as the Russians, were subject to abhorrent repression and terror during the late 1930s, though for the majority of national categories, such aggression was not based on ethnicity. The “enemy nations,” however, were disproportionately targeted during the NKVD operations of the late 1930s, and the determining factor for the majority of whom proved to be nationality. This process was facilitated by the passportization campaign, and the efforts put forth by Soviet authorities towards the codification of nationality following the Bolshevik Revolution.

Hirsch demonstrates how the work of ethnographers and social scientists during the national operations facilitated the process of identifying members of “enemy nations” during the Great Terror. Though categorization by nationality in the 1920s allowed partial self-identification of the citizens, in the late 1930s, Soviet ethnographers required individuals to provide the mother-tongue of both of their parents in order to confirm one’s “self-identification.” The previous efforts to codify nationality culminated in the 1938 passportization decrees, which led to the operations to strip the “enemy nations” of their native-language institutions, land, and possessions, as well as the deportation of certain members from specific vulnerable regions of the Soviet Union.<sup>20</sup> The regime did not follow the Nazi racial criteria which saw certain nationalities as inferior from a biological perspective; rather, the hostility towards those categories of peoples with cross border kin-ties

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<sup>19</sup> Terry Martin, “The Origins of Soviet Ethnic Cleansing,” *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 70 No. 4 (December 1998): 860.

<sup>20</sup> Hirsch, 297.



was a result of suspicions that these nationalities would possess an ultimate loyalty towards an external state or that they would provide aid and service to a potential invading army. For Hirsch, however, the categorization of “enemy nations” did not signify a dramatic shift in Soviet nationalities policy; instead, she argues that the policies implemented in the 1930s were consistent with the regime’s long-term ideological goals of “double assimilation” and “state-sponsored evolutionism.”<sup>21</sup>

Works such as those listed above provide a general framework in which to study the Volga Germans during the ephemeral existence of the Volga Republic. In order to understand the popular perceptions of Germans as kulaks during collectivization, it is imperative to examine the history of German settlement along the Volga River in the long 19<sup>th</sup> century. Willard Sunderland<sup>22</sup> provides an examination of the colonization of the region of *Novorossiia* and east to the Volga River in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, a process through which the Germans settled in the Volga River basin. Sunderland shows that this process reflected and produced a particularly complicated kind of imperialism, one in which empire building, state-building, society building, and nation invariably intertwined. In order to fulfill the goals of the imperial center, the tsarist regime favored German settlers up to the reformist project of Alexander II in the 1860s and the Unification of Germany in 1871.

Equally important is the traditional of self-rule among Volga German colonists prior to the Bolshevik Revolution. Andreas Kappeler<sup>23</sup> focuses on the non-Russian nationalities during the Romanov dynasty in order to demonstrate the multiethnic character of the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union. As this book suggests, polyethnicity is an important and enduring factor in Russian history, and the primary strategy of the imperial authorities in dealing with the empire’s multinational composition was the utilization of indirect rule.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 295.

<sup>22</sup> Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization And Empire on the Russian Steppe* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> Andreas Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: a Multiethnic History* (Essex: Longman, 2001).

Thus, the Volga Germans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were granted considerable levels of autonomy within their communities, which contributed to their traditional form of regional identification and strengthened their practice of boundary maintenance. However, unlike many nationalities, the Volga Germans did not have local noble elites, and the imperial authorities established a special administrative system, the *Kontara*, that reported directly to the Ministry of the Interior and enabled the settlers to practice a special form of self-rule.

Though works dealing specifically with the Volga Germans prior to the Bolshevik Revolution are quite limited, James Long<sup>24</sup> examines the political, economic, and social history of the Volga colonies in the Russian Empire. By doing so, his book provides a thorough narrative of the Volga Germans specifically in regards to the social structure and traditional forms of identification among the Germans settlers in the long 19<sup>th</sup> century. Long argues that contrary to the stereotypical depiction of the Volga Germans as living in a time warp-- undisturbed, untouched, and isolated from the beginning of their 18<sup>th</sup> century settlement until Stalin's deportation in 1941-- the truth is that they adapted remarkably to ever-changing circumstances.

As a result of imperial policy during the First World War, Russian Germans, specifically living in the western borderlands, were categorized as enemy aliens and consequently subject to deportation and property expropriation. Eric Lohr<sup>25</sup> demonstrates that the Germans of the Russian Empire accumulated prodigious amounts of wealth on the eve of the First World War due to the development of mutual credit associations among Russian German communities, which provided the landless sons of peasants with a source of credit. For example, the landholdings of Germans in the Lower Volga River Valley ameliorated around the turn of the century, raising from 1.2 million *desiatin* in 1897 to 2

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<sup>24</sup> James W. Long, *From Privileged to Dispossessed: The Volga Germans 1860-1917* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988).

<sup>25</sup> Eric Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire: The Campaign against Enemy Aliens during World War I*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press (2003).

million *desiatin* in 1914.<sup>26</sup> The remarkable wealth of the Volga Germans in the imperial era was due to aggressive capitalistic land acquisition techniques, and would become the primary determining factor of their fate during the extirpation of the spirit of capitalism from the countryside during the dekulakization campaigns of collectivization.

Though scholarly works pertaining to the Russian Germans during the imperial regime are quite limited, works addressing the Volga Germans under the Soviet regime are even scarcer. The majority of such works have a tendency towards utilizing victimhood narratives of nationalizing historiography, which portray the repression of the Volga Germans as being nation-based from the moment the Bolshevik regime consolidated power. Such works completely omit the crucial aspects of Soviet nationalities policy as explained by Martin and Hirsch, among others. This is especially apparent in the work by Fleischhauer and Pinkus<sup>27</sup>, who concentrate on the victimization of the Soviet Germans throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and neglect to explain that certain historical events (i.e. famine and collectivization) were not ethnically based and affected all nationalities in the Soviet Union. By stating that “the national factor may well have been at work”<sup>28</sup> during the famines and dekulakization in the Volga Republic, the authors omit the fact that the Bolsheviks systematically sought to construct a Volga German Soviet identification. While treating the Soviet Germans as a homogeneous group and ignoring any differentiations between Volga Germans, Black Sea Germans, and those in the urban centers, the authors use an umbrella term to draw generalizations of the Germans in the Soviet Union, and imply that all Soviet-Germans were subject to assimilatory Russification in the late 1930s. Lacking any inclusion of theories of nationalism, Fleischhauer & Pinkus ignore the broader, multinational character of various historical events in the 1920s and 1930s, thus inadvertently implying that the Germans of the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>27</sup> Ingeborg Fleischhauer and Benjamin Pinkus, *The Soviet Germans: Past and Present* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 1986).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 63.

Soviet Union were the only nationality that was subject to repression during the dekulakization campaigns, among other examples. Similarly, Schmaltz and Sinner<sup>29</sup> describe the Soviet policy towards the Russian Germans throughout the Soviet period as leading to an ultimate classification of genocide. Though the article concentrates primarily on assimilatory policies in the post-World War Two era, the authors depict the Soviet policies towards Soviet Germans in the interwar period in a similar vein as Fleischhauer and Pinkus.

The most thorough account of the Volga Germans during the Soviet era is by Irina Mukhina.<sup>30</sup> Though Mukhina concentrates primarily on life in the post-war special settlements, she provides a brief yet useful narrative on the Volga German Republic. Mukhina utilizes theories of nationalism as well as the major recent works on Soviet nationalities policies, thus providing a thorough account of the Germans of the Soviet Union from the Bolshevik Revolution to the collapse of communism. In doing so, Mukhina concentrates on the identification of the Soviet Germans, and argues that a common sense of German national identity did not exist until the forced deportations in 1941, which provided a catalyst that served as a “lived commonality” experience. Therefore, the Volga Germans possessed neither a common Volga Germany identity nor an orientation towards the homeland in the first two decades of Soviet rule; rather, such sentiments would be developed in the 1950s and 1960s in the special settlements. The major fault of Mukhina as well as the other scholars addressing the Volga Germans during the Soviet era is the neglect to mention the importance of *korenizatsiia*. Similarly, much like Fleischhaer and Pinkus (and Schmaltz and Sinner), Mukhina neglects to stress that dekulakization was not implemented according to national criteria; rather, it was a class-based operation that led to the arrest, deportation, and execution of millions of Soviet citizens, regardless of nationality.

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<sup>29</sup> Eric J. Schmaltz and Samuel D. Sinner, ““You will die Under Ruins and Snow”: The Soviet Repression of Russian Germans as a Case Study of Successful Genocide,” *Journal of Genocide Research*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 2002, pp. 327–356.

<sup>30</sup> Irina Mukhina, *The Germans of the Soviet Union* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2007).

Thus, there is a significant gap in the literature that this thesis will attempt to fill. The major works on Soviet nationalities policies, primarily Martin's and Hirsch's, are not congruent with the nationalizing historiographies pertaining to the Volga Germans. One major fault of many historians, however, is their reference to the Volga Germans as a "diaspora nationality." By categorizing the Volga Germans as a "diaspora," historians are making implications that lead the reader to draw certain conclusions about the group in question. Many, though not all authors, describe the national operations as being directed towards the "diaspora nationalities" of the Soviet Union, such as Greeks, Poles, Koreans, Bulgarians, Germans, etc. In the case of the Soviet Terror of the late 1930s, the term "diaspora" does not provide a useful analytical category in which to study these processes. Rogers Brubaker<sup>31</sup> suggests that the term "diaspora" should be treated not as a homogenous category, "but as an idiom, stance, and claim." Thus, as Brubaker suggests, "diaspora" should be used as a category of practice. While historians refer to such categories of peoples as "diaspora nationalities," it implies a strong orientation towards the homeland, and thus questions the loyalty of these categories.

This thesis will attempt to bridge the gaps of the relevant literature in order to clarify the experiences of the Volga Germans during the interwar era. Contrary to the common narrative that portrays the Volga Germans as being subject to systematic repression immediately following the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, this thesis will argue that prior to the mid-1930s, repression aimed towards the Volga Germans was part of a broader operation throughout the Soviet Union that attempted to extirpate class enemies from the countryside. By doing so, this thesis will attempt to clarify the Soviet Terror of the 1930s in order to demonstrate the paradigm shift from class-based to nation-based repression.

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<sup>31</sup> Rogers Brubaker, "The 'Diaspora' Diaspora," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (January 2005): 1-19.

In order to do so, chapter one will examine the history of German settlement in the Russian Empire throughout the long 19<sup>th</sup> century to demonstrate that agriculturalists from Germanic territorial states were initially granted a special status, and were generally perceived as privileged subjects of the imperial regime. By mid-century, however, such perceptions began to gradually change due to a number of convergent factors, which culminated in Russian-Germans being categorized as “enemy aliens” during the First World War. Chapter two examines the Bolsheviks and the national question in 1917 in order to explain why the regime sought to utilize national self-determination to preserve the territorial integrity of the former Russian Empire. An integral component of this decision was the implementation of *korenizatsiia*, which is the subject of the third chapter. As will be seen, the Bolsheviks sought to promote German national consciousness in the Volga German Autonomous Republic in order to emulate a modern nation-state. Instead of merely allowing the existence of German culture, as some scholars suggest, the regime actively promoted German culture and language in the ASSR. During this time, the Bolshevik regime sought to categorize the population by ascribing socially and ethnically determined classifications in an attempt to manage the health of the social body. Such measures facilitated the liquidation of kulaks as a class during collectivization, which chapter four will address. Though the dekulakization campaigns during agricultural collectivization held an ostensibly national dimension, the extirpation of the spirit of capitalism from the countryside was enacted purely according to socioeconomic status. Consequently, the policy of *korenizatsiia* continued throughout agricultural collectivization and the First Five-Year Plan. Nevertheless, these economic policies of the early 1930s contributed to the development of a diasporic stance among the Germans of the Soviet Union. While the German state incrementally imposed a diasporic claim among the *Volksdeutsche* of the Soviet Union, which became audacious following Hitler’s consolidation of power, chapter five will demonstrate that the Volga

Germans did not possess a strong attachment to an external “homeland,” though both Moscow and Berlin came to perceive them as members of the German “diaspora.” Chapter six explains how this designation omitted the Volga Germans (and other diasporic nationalities) from the “Friendship of the Peoples” campaign beginning in the mid-1930s, which stressed the sovereignty and rootedness of the Soviet Union’s constituent nationalities in order to implement a Russocentric notion of Soviet patriotism. Such sentiments were manifested in the Constitution of 1936, which symbolized a shift of focus from class to *narod*. Chapter seven examines this shift in order to demonstrate that after claiming to have defeated class enemies throughout the Soviet Union, a vacuum appeared which was to be filled by “enemy nations,” such as the Volga Germans. In 1937-1938, the NKVD enacted national operations against the diasporic nationalities, including the Soviet Germans, which is the topic of chapter eight. The German Operation coincided with operations to eradicate the Evangelical-Lutheran Church from the Volga region, as well as efforts to affirm the loyalty of the Volga Germans through a policy of acculturational russification, though *korenizatsiia* continued until 1941. Following the invasion of Nazi Germany, the Volga German ASSR was formally abolished, and all Volga Germans, without exception, were forcibly deported to special settlements in Siberia and Kazakhstan.

## Chapter 1: German Settlement in the Russian Empire

With the Russian Empire's rapid territorial expansion in the preceding centuries, the imperial authorities in the long nineteenth century dealt with an increasingly complex task of settling the steppe in order to build and legitimize the empire itself. The steppe region north of the Black Sea and to the Lower Volga River in the east in what is today southern Russia and Ukraine had been viewed by the 18<sup>th</sup> century imperial authorities as an alien and empty space. With Catherine II's implementation of enlightened reforms, however, the steppe became increasingly perceived as a frontier region inhabited by disloyal and barbaric nomads who needed to be "civilized" by adopting a European way of life. The adoption of the enlightened notion of "civilization versus barbarism" signified a shift that would completely transform the physical, cultural, and political space of the frontier. In the name of the enlightenment and civilization, Catherine's government set about the task of colonizing the steppe by enticing settlers, both Slavic Orthodox and foreigners, to inhabit the region in order to transform the steppe into a loyal and civilized facet of the Russian Empire. As this chapter will demonstrate, for the imperial authorities, the preferred actors to implement this transformation to civilization and loyalty were German settlers. By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, however, the privileged status of the Russian Germans began to deteriorate for a number of convergent factors, and on the eve of 1917, they were subject to the categorization of "enemy aliens."

In 1763, Catherine II issued a manifesto permitting the settlement of foreigners in the steppe region of Southern Russia, while at the same time promoting the migration of Russians and "Little Russians" to the region. For the imperial center, the two primary goals of settling the steppe were considerably intertwined; not only would the settlers embark on a civilizing mission against the indigenous nomads of the steppe, they would provide defensible borders, patrolled by loyal Cossacks and others "whose faithfulness could only be



guaranteed by the imposition of direct imperial administration and the more ardent promotion of Russian-style improvement.”<sup>32</sup>

As a general rule of the pre-modern Russian Empire, the government respected certain aspects of the pre-existing social, economic, and administrative structures of the frontier territories so long as these could exist harmoniously with the policies of St. Petersburg. The perception of loyalty to the tsar was of crucial importance, as loyalty served to connect the various territories and societies of the empire with one another as well as with the center.<sup>33</sup> However, the pre-existing nomadic structures of *Novorossiia* and the Volga River region were deemed to be neither loyal to the dynasty nor congruent with the aims of the empire. In order to continue the policy of indirect rule, the imperial authorities sought to entice loyal settlers to colonize the region in an attempt to civilize the steppe while remaining consistent with imperial policy.

According to the manifesto of 1763 that initiated the large-scale migration to the steppe of Southern Russia, foreign settlers from Western Europe were preferred to Russian and Slavic settlers. Catherine’s government utilized ethnographers to determine where certain foreigners should settle. As Sunderland explains, “in a world divided into ‘nations,’ each possessing its own ‘morals and customs,’ the empress and her advisors knew that different ‘nations’ were influenced by different ‘climates’ (environments) and predisposed to different ‘uses and occupations,’ all of which (ideally) needed to be taken into account when charting the course to maximum settlement utility.”<sup>34</sup> Western Europeans, and those from German territorial states in particular, were perceived by St. Petersburg as being the manifestation of the spirit of modernization and economic development. Consequently, while many nationalities were invited to settle the steppe, Germans received by far the most enticing offers, resulting in a massive influx of German colonists. Privileges guaranteed to

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<sup>32</sup> Sunderland, 58.

<sup>33</sup> Kappeler, 114.

<sup>34</sup> Sunderland, 81.

German settlers included the promise to settle wherever they pleased; free lodging for six months upon arrival in Russia; reimbursement of travel funds; a thirty year exemption from all taxes; and permanent exemption from military service, among many other benefits.<sup>35</sup>

During the first wave of emigration, an estimated 27,000 Germans founded 104 colonies along the Volga River from 1764-1768.<sup>36</sup> The promotion of German emigration continued under Paul I and, during the reign of Alexander I, imperial policy towards German emigration switched between the promotion of foreign settlement and the attempt to discourage foreign colonization. The large waves of German settlement in Southern Russia and Little Russia during the reign of Alexander I came in 1802-1804, 1808-1809, and 1819-1820. Due to a number of factors, primarily the inability of local authorities to handle the massive influx of settlers, Alexander I imposed strict regulations on foreign colonists. According to Alexander I's ukaz of 1804, "only competent farmers, specialists in wine-growing, in silk-culture, and in animal husbandry.... and also village craftsmen were to be allowed entry."<sup>37</sup> The tsar thus sought to continue the policies of his father and grandmother in regards to German settlers, though he insisted that such migrants be brought in to perform specific economic functions.

As Germans as an ethnicity were perceived as hardworking and loyal subjects, Mennonites from Danzig and West Prussia in particular were deemed especially useful for attempts to modernize the steppe, and were promised privileges even greater than those of other German settlers through their own charter from the tsar in 1800. Such Anabaptists were widely praised in the imperial administration for their work ethic and strict moral code.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, as the 1804 ukaz omitted Mennonite settlers from the criteria for settlement, they were perceived as the manifestation of modern agriculturalists and loyal citizens, and were

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 86-87.

<sup>36</sup> Anna Sheehy, "The Crimean Tatars, Volga Germans, and Meskhetians: Soviet Treatment of some National Minorities." *Minority Rights Group* no. 6

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 11.

thus the primary models for the Slavic Orthodox peasants to emulate.<sup>39</sup> Whereas Catholic and Lutheran German settlers following the 1804 ukaz were granted 60 dessiatines of land per family, Mennonites were granted 65 dessiatines, and the tax per dessiatine was significantly lower for them than for other Germans and other foreign settlers.<sup>40</sup> The Anabaptist settlers, however, founded communities that were more often than not closed to outsiders, and though they did flourish culturally and economically,<sup>41</sup> by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, their influence on the Russian and Little Russian peasantry had an adverse effect in the eyes of both the imperial authorities as well as Russian and Ukrainian nationalist groups.

The Mennonite settlers of Southern Russia, as representatives of the Anabaptist wing of the radical reformations of Western Europe, brought with them millennial and ecumenical ideas to the steppe, which contributed to a spiritual awakening among many Mennonites prior to the institutionalization of the All-Russian Baptist Union in the 1860s. Consequently, the ecclesiastical beliefs of German Anabaptist colonies in Southern Russia diverged considerably from the Anabaptist sects in Prussia, which became the foundation for the evangelical movement known as Stundism.<sup>42</sup> The distinct identification among Russian Stundists was constructed to emulate the religious ethos of the German Protestant settlers. Little Russians, Great Russians, and others who joined the Stundist movement replaced their traditional regionalist identification with the “new international evangelical culture based on universal notions and images of reformed Christianity.”<sup>43</sup> Indeed, towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, after gradually distancing themselves from their traditional identification, Little Russian Stundists rejected their status as “Little Russian Orthodox peasants,” and began

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<sup>39</sup> Sunderland, 117.

<sup>40</sup> Detlef Brandes, “German Colonists in Southern Ukraine up to the Repeal of the Colonial Statute,” in *German-Ukrainian Relation in Historical Perspective* ed. Hans-Joachim Torke & John-Paul Himka (Edmonton & Toronto, Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 1994), 17.

<sup>41</sup> Kappeler, 146-147.

<sup>42</sup> Sergei Zhuk, *Russia's Lost Reformation: Peasants, Millennialism, and Radical Sects in Southern Russia and Ukraine, 1830-1917* (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 155.

<sup>43</sup> Sergei Zhuk, ““A Separate Nation” of “Those who Imitate Germans:” Ukrainian Evangelical Peasants and Problems of Cultural Identification in the Ukrainian Provinces of Later Imperial Russia,” *Ab Imperio* 3 (2006): 147-148.

referring to themselves as “a separate nation.”<sup>44</sup> Considering the rise of Russian nationalism, the imperial authorities, while acknowledging that German settlement contributed to the economic development and modernization of the steppe, perceived the Stundist movement as a threat that “undermined the ideological foundations of the Russian political system, and created cultural confusion,”<sup>45</sup> which challenged the notion of the traditionally loyal Little Russian peasantry. Similarly, Ukrainian intellectuals were troubled by the notion that these Little Russian peasants had lost their traditional Little Russian identifications and had emulated German culture in order to create their own identification as a separate nation.

The German settlers along the Lower Volga entered a territory of cultural diversity, with significant populations of Russians, Little Russians, Tatars, Chuvash, Kalmyks, etc. The authorities in St. Petersburg worried that such ethnic and linguistic diversity could create social instability in Southern Russia, and thus relied heavily on noble estate owners to implement social and political stability in the region.<sup>46</sup> In the socio-ethnic hierarchy of the steppe, German settlers represented the rural, privileged middle class, and practiced a form of self-government that was modeled after their state of origin.<sup>47</sup> While foreign settlement in the regions of Southern Russia and continued sporadically during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, by the late 1850s, for all intents and purposes, systematic foreign colonization in the region had been halted.<sup>48</sup>

Prior to the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the government’s policies granted the Volga German settlers significant amounts of autonomy. Up to the reign of Alexander II, the settlers were ruled under a special administrative system, officially known as the Saratov Office for the Guardianship of Foreign Settlers, but commonly known as the *Kontara*, which

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>46</sup> Leonard Friesen, “Mennonites and their Peasant Neighbors in Ukraine Before 1900,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, Vol. 10 (1992), 57.

<sup>47</sup> Fleischhauer and Pinkus, 19.

<sup>48</sup> Sunderland, 144.

was under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Interior. The local governance was generally placed in the hands of the village assembly, to which each household sent a member as a representation. The assembly would elect officials to ensure that local laws were congruent with those of the region and of the empire in general. Local administrative authority was given to the *Schulze* (later called the *Vorsteher*), which was the counterpart to the Russian village elder.<sup>49</sup> The elder and his two or more assistants (*Beisitzern*) were elected for two year terms.

With all regional German administration going through the *Kontara* in Saratov, however, there was a lack of horizontal communication between villages, and therefore an acute shortage of governmental integration and cooperation among the colonies.<sup>50</sup> While the *Kontara* allowed substantial levels of village autonomy, this policy contributed to schism among the settlers, which help explains the lack of an all-encompassing Volga German identification. This, in turn, served to perpetuate the particularisms of the separate German colonies, which further augmented the regional identification among the settlers. In the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, the privileged status of German settlers began to deteriorate.

## 1.2: The Revocation of Special Status

Imperial policy towards foreign settlers did not significantly alter during the reign of Nicholas I (1825-1855), as the tsar's top priority was to maintain the political and social stability of the Russian Empire, which included the cooperation with loyal non-Russian elites. Despite Count Uvarov's often misinterpreted triad of "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality," the "official nationalism" of Nicholas I's reign was based more upon civic

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<sup>49</sup> Long, 21.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 20.

nationalism as opposed to a more exclusive ethnic nationalism.<sup>51</sup> The ascension of Nicholas' son, Alexander II, in 1855 signified a transformation in the Russian Empire from that of a multi-ethnic one to a Russocentric empire. This shift greatly affected the settlers of Southern Russia, both Slavic Orthodox and foreign settlers such as the Germans. Though Alexander II is often remembered as the great reformer and liberator of the serfs, the national history of many of the empire's non-Russian peoples portray the tsar as an oppressor rather than a liberator.<sup>52</sup>

The reappraisal of the nationalities question during the reign of Alexander II was due in part to the Polish uprising of 1863, which initiated a systematic Russification campaign against the Polish nobility. Indeed, the Polish uprising of 1863 was yet another instance of the imperial regime's inability to fully comprehend the various national movements within the Russian Empire. As Alexei Miller suggests, "the Russian autocracy was at least several decades behind the West in grasping the importance of nationalistic political principles."<sup>53</sup> For example, prior to the Emancipation Edict, St. Petersburg was not overly worried about the danger of Ukrainian nationalism, as it was widely believed among imperial authorities that both the Ukrainian and Belorussian languages were merely dialects of Russian.

As a result of the Polish Uprising of 1863, the tsarist authorities attempted to suppress the national movements in the western borderlands, and significantly increase their Russification efforts. It was not only the national movements of the Poles, Ukrainians, and Belorussians that were adversely affected by the rise of Russian nationalism in the empire. With the gradual adoption of Russian nationalist policies, the status of the categories of peoples that had been historically considered "dominant" and "privileged," such as the Germans of the steppe, began to decay. Indeed, the settlements of non-Russians began to be

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<sup>51</sup> Alexei Miller, *The Romanov Empire and Nationalism: Essays in the Methodology of Historical Research* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008), 146.

<sup>52</sup> Kappeler, 171-172.

<sup>53</sup> Alexei Miller, *The Ukrainian Question: Russian Nationalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2003), 66.

perceived in strikingly negative terms following the Emancipation Edict. The deterioration of relations between the imperial center and the German colonists was accompanied by popular anti-German sentiments, many of which had been apparent in Southern Russia and Little Russia prior to this period. In the eyes of both the popular imagination of the Russian Empire as well as the imperial administration, German colonies became increasingly perceived as well-off, and were associated with aggressive land-buying techniques. This contributed to the perception of German colonists as a “threat,” and became problematic enough that by the 1870s, the German population of Southern Russia became the subject of the “German Question.”<sup>54</sup>

In addition to the general shift in policy of St. Petersburg towards the non-Russian areas, the imperial center’s perception of the German communities in Southern Russia as a threat was augmented by the unification of Germany by Prussia in 1871, and relations between the center and the German colonies deteriorated along with the relations of the two empires. Not only did this increase official and popular anti-German sentiment throughout the Empire, it motivated the imperial authorities and Russian nationalists to ameliorate their own agenda to consolidate the Slavs of the empire into a single nation under the guise of the Russian Empire.<sup>55</sup> It was a widely held belief among authorities that the Pan-German movement would eventually mobilize the German-speaking inhabitants of the Russian Empire, thus questioning the traditional loyalty of Russian-Germans, specifically the Baltic German nobles who had historically been held as conservative and loyal subjects. The German Empire’s adoption of a citizenship policy based on ethnicity included *Volksdeutsche* abroad was interpreted as a direct threat to the loyalty of Russian-Germans, even to the long-naturalized and assimilated urban Germans.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, as a result of the Unification of Germany and the formation of an anti-Russian coalition of central European powers, the

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<sup>54</sup> Sunderland, 189.

<sup>55</sup> Alexei Miller, *The Romanov Empire and Nationalism*, 22.

<sup>56</sup> Lohr, 93.

Baltic Germans became a factor in the geopolitical fears of the imperial authorities. Though the Baltic German nobles and the German settlers in Southern Russia and Little Russia were separated on multiple levels, the dynasty viewed them as equivalent categories of peoples and thus enacted their Russification policy accordingly.

In 1871, the special legal status of foreign (German) settlers in Southern Russia was formally abolished, and the bureaucratic authority of the state was augmented in the German communities throughout the Russian Empire.<sup>57</sup> For all intents and purposes, new immigration from German territorial states to Southern Russia ceased. The intention of the imperial authorities was the ultimate amalgamation of foreign settlers and peasants in social, political, and administrative spheres. The majority of the preexisting privileges guaranteed to the settlers were revoked, including the abolishment of their self-administrative governing bodies. Russian became the official language of the settlements as well as the language of education, and the settlers were incorporated into the legal categorization of peasants. The Russian Germans were now subject to the Russification efforts of the imperial authorities. As Alexei Miller explains, the goal of Russification, especially in the borderlands, was not necessarily an attempt to instill cultural-linguistic predominance, but rather the intention was the implementation of loyalty to the tsar and the imperial dynasty.<sup>58</sup> With the newfound perception of German settlers as disloyal subjects, the authorities attempted to integrate them into Russian society by revoking many of their guaranteed privileged.

Though numerous aspects of the pre-reform society of the settlements remained in place despite the revocation of the special status in 1871,<sup>59</sup> the Military Reforms of 1874 extended compulsory military service to the German settlers, which further served as an instrument of integration though it also contributed to the sense of alienation among the Germans. As many of the initial migrants had settled in Southern Russia due to the

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<sup>57</sup> Long, 26.

<sup>58</sup> Miller, *The Romanov Empire and Nationalism*, 54.

<sup>59</sup> Kappeler, 265.



guaranteed exemption from mandatory military service, the 1874 Military Reforms triggered the emigration of at least 50,000 Russian and Ukrainian Germans abroad, mainly to the United States, Brazil, and Argentina, especially among Mennonites.<sup>60</sup> For settlers and observers alike, the annulment of exemption from military service and the revocation of the settlers' special status signified the abandonment of the century-old special relationship between the Russian Empire and German settlers.

Nonetheless, the wealth of the Germanic communities along the Volga River continued to grow following the reforms of the 1860s and 1870s. The region's economy was closely tied to the black earth region's agricultural production and the processing and shipping of grain and other products, and by the turn of the century, Saratov province produced more flour than any other territory in the empire.<sup>61</sup> Germans, in particular, benefitted from the economic affluence in the region, due to their agricultural efficiency as well as their practices of inheritance, which ensured that all sons would receive compensation following the death of their parents. The primogeniture system of inheritance that was prevalent among these communities provided incentives for families to accumulate as much wealth as possible to ensure that the younger sons could purchase new land.<sup>62</sup> The Volga Germans, and Germans throughout the Russian Empire, accrued vast amounts of landholdings and wealth by the turn of the century. By 1914, German agriculturalists owned 24 million acres within the Russian Empire, much of which was among the most fertile land in the polity.<sup>63</sup> The imperial authorities, alarmed by the vast wealth of Germans in comparison with the Slavic peasantry, enacted a law in 1892 that limited the land acquisitions of Russian subjects of German origin in certain provinces in the western borderlands.

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<sup>60</sup> Sunderland, 188.

<sup>61</sup> Donald J. Raleigh, *Revolution on the Volga: 1917 in Saratov* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1986), 19.

<sup>62</sup> Lohr, 90.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

Despite this increased scrutiny, the wealth of settlers along the Volga continued to increase until 1914.

### 1.3: The Volga Germans and the Revolutions

By 1905, the majority of descendants of the original 18<sup>th</sup> century colonists had lived their entire lives without contact with Germany. Indeed, the predominant forms of identification among Volga Germans had traditionally been based on regionalism, point of origin, and religion.<sup>64</sup> Roman Catholics generally intermarried with Poles and Lithuanians, though Protestants generally married people of the same faith and nationality.<sup>65</sup> The German villages along the Volga generally remained closed to outsiders, contributing to the boundary maintenance that enabled each individual community to retain their particularisms. Indeed, some authors have gone so far as to argue that the Volga Germans at the turn of the century retained the same disinterested attitude towards German affairs that is apparent among contemporary German Americans.<sup>66</sup> Though this claim is highly dubious for a variety of reasons, primarily because Americans of German descent have been culturally, socially, and linguistically assimilated for more than a century, it can be said that the Volga Germans at the turn of the century did not possess a salient German national identification.

The 1905 Revolution and subsequent October Manifesto, however, led to the creation of German unions and clubs in all major German centers throughout the Empire. By and large, there was little revolutionary activity among the German settlers, nor were there significant levels of such activity in the steppe region, aside from a brief period of large-scale

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<sup>64</sup> Mukhina, 7.

<sup>65</sup> Cynthia M. Vakareliyska, "Due Process in Wartime? Secret Imperial Russian Polices Files on the Forced Relocation of Russian Germans during World War I," *Nationalities Papers* Vol. 37, No. 5 (September 2009): 592.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

peasant movements among “Little Russians” in 1905-1906.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, the most violent and strongest peasant movements in 1905 in Saratov province were generally located in regions with large concentrations of Great Russians and other Slavs, and were not apparent in the villages and towns with significant German populations.<sup>68</sup> Though Russian-Germans lacked a strong intelligentsia, Baltic-German representatives of the Russian-German national movement attempted to amalgamate the various German communities into a homogeneous national group.<sup>69</sup> This attempt, however, ended in failure due to a number of factors, primarily the fact that the national movement held the presumption that German settlers in Southern Russia and Little Russia held a singular form of identification based on their “Germanness.”<sup>70</sup> Moreover, the majority of Germans in the Russian Empire were politically conservative and loyal to the tsar, thus siding mainly with moderate and center parties in the first and second Dumas.

The outbreak of the First World War created an increasingly difficult situation for the Germans of the Russian Empire. Though the Baltic Germans and the German settlers declared their loyalty towards the tsar in the war against the German Empire,<sup>71</sup> their hitherto loyalty was questioned, and Russians and Little Russians of German descent became subject to the categorization of “enemy aliens.” Individuals in the borderlands ascribed to this category, such as Germans and Jews, were forcibly deported from the regions near the combat areas, and became disenfranchised through property expropriations. With the enactment of the “liquidation laws,” 500,000 hectares of German landholdings were confiscated, and commercial undertakings were “subject to compulsory alienation if they

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<sup>67</sup> Andreas Kappeler, “Ukrainians and Germans in Southern Ukraine, 1870s to 1914,” in *German-Ukrainian Relations in Historical Perspective* ed. Hans-Joachim Torke & John-Paul Himka (Edmonton & Toronto: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press, 1994), 59.

<sup>68</sup> Raleigh, *Revolution on the Volga*, 29.

<sup>69</sup> Fleischhauer and Pinkus, 24.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-26.

<sup>71</sup> Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: A Multiethnic History*, 348.

were not working for the war industry, (and) the owners' accounts were blocked."<sup>72</sup> The imperial authorities during the First World War no longer attempted to Russify individual Germans; rather it began the process of nationalizing German land and commercial and industrial holdings through expropriation.<sup>73</sup> Anti-German sentiments throughout the Empire ameliorated. In May of 1915, workers in Moscow rioted, and destroyed firms and businesses that were deemed to be German-owned. An estimated 700 individuals whom were believed to have been of German descent were physically attacked during this incident.<sup>74</sup>

The February Revolution brought the majority of such measures to an end, and by this time, the German settlers' loyalty to the tsar had all but disappeared. In general, the Germans of Southern Russia and Little Russia granted almost unconditional support towards the Provisional Government.<sup>75</sup> With the Bolshevik Revolution and the ensuing campaigns against class enemies (which would later take on a national dimension), the traditional privileged status and perceived loyalty towards the imperial dynasty would prove to be devastating for the Germans of the Soviet Union. In the immediate aftermath of the October Revolution, however, the new regime sought to put an end to the anti-German sentiment that had become widespread throughout the former Russian Empire.

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<sup>72</sup> Fleischhauer and Pinkus, 27.

<sup>73</sup> Lohr, 7.

<sup>74</sup> Vakareliyska, 595.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 28.

## Chapter 2: The Bolsheviks and the National Question

Following the October Revolution, the Bolshevik regime faced the difficult task of maintaining the territorial integrity of the former Russian Empire as well as its polyethnic composition. Marx and Engels had left very little guidance in matters of nationality and nationalism in their writings, as it was believed that socialism would first be incepted in the more economically advanced states of Western Europe, particularly Germany. These philosophers had only predicted three stages of human development: Feudalism (ethnic isolation within petty states); capitalism (the rise of nationalism and nation-states); and socialism (internationalism). Their writings had presupposed that socialism would rise in capitalist and industrialized societies that had already formulated as nation-states, and in capitalist states where nationalist sentiment lingered, they had confidence in socialism's ability to replace nationalism with internationalism without experiencing any major national conflict.<sup>76</sup>

Though Marx and Engels underestimated the power of nationalism, they did acknowledge the strength of the multiple institutions of nation-states, including their potential to mobilize the population among both the lower and upper strata of a given national society.<sup>77</sup> Despite this acknowledgement, nationalism was deemed a bourgeois concept and a product of capitalism that imposed a false consciousness on society. Consequently, it was a widely held belief among socialists in capitalist states that socialist internationalism would easily replace nationalist sentiment, thus underestimating the compelling power of nationalism and the strength of individuals' ultimate loyalty to a particular nation and dedication to its promotion and advancement. The Bolshevik regime, however, was fully aware of the power behind national sentiment in the former Russian Empire, as many non-

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<sup>76</sup> Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism, 1917-1923*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 22.

<sup>77</sup> Michal Kasprzak, "To Reject or not to Reject Nationalism: Debating Marx and Engels' Struggles with Nationalism, 1840s-1880s," *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (July 2012): 586.

Russian Bolshevik cadres had previously been national activists in their respective peripheral national movements. Indeed, ethnic Russians were a substantial minority within the Bolshevik party elite, with two thirds of the upper echelon composed of Jews, Ukrainians, Poles, Latvians, Georgians, Armenians, and others.<sup>78</sup> The majority of these non-Russians had first entered political activism in order to support national movements, and joined the internationalist Bolshevik party for a variety of reasons leading up to 1917. Therefore, by the time of the October Revolution, the Bolshevik regime was well aware of the power of peripheral nationalism, and thus enacted their nationalities policies accordingly in order to control what they saw as the inevitable process of decolonization.

As early as 1912, however, the Bolshevik party adopted a policy on the nationalities question that would later be implemented following the party's consolidation of power. By this time, all other Russian political parties had adopted definite programs for the solution to the nationalities question, and Lenin commissioned Stalin to present the Bolshevik plan in an essay entitled "Marxism and the National Question." Stalin called for the establishment of civic equality and broad regional autonomy, as well as the protection of minority languages through the creation of a minority education system. Though Stalin at this point did not overtly call for the right of nations to self-determination, the principle was implied through his writings.<sup>79</sup> For Stalin, the principle of national rights was of paramount importance. As opposed to the Austrian Social Democrats, led by Karl Renner and Otto Bauer, who proposed a type of national-cultural autonomy which entailed that each nationality would have control over their own cultural matters regardless of spatial separation and irrespective of territory, Stalin proposed that territorial autonomy was crucial for the protection of national rights, writing that "self-determination endows a nation with complete rights, whereas national

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<sup>78</sup> Riga, 649.

<sup>79</sup> Pipes, 38.

autonomy endows it only with cultural rights.”<sup>80</sup> Indeed, though Stalin promoted the notion of self-determination in his essay, the Bolshevik party line did not officially condone the principal until Lenin determined how to make the notion congruent with Marxist ideology in 1913. Lenin, however, continued to believe that nationalism would disappear with capitalism, and the promotion of nationality was thus a means to an end. Prior to the Revolution, however, Lenin and the Bolsheviks held a very ambiguous definition of self-determination. Though Lenin and Stalin did not expand on this notion, self-determination in principle equated to the opposition of any type of national oppression and therefore favored the freedom of subjugated peoples. This policy line thus inadvertently granted endorsement to every nationalist and separatist movement in the borderlands. As Martin suggests, the Bolsheviks thus held that nationalism was a “masking ideology,” and it was believed that by granting national self-determination, class divisions within each national society would naturally emerge, which would in turn provide the Bolsheviks with class allies in their struggle to promote the socialist agenda.<sup>81</sup> Consequently, the Soviet nationalities policy of *korenizatsiia* utilized national self-determination in order to address the nationalities question of the former Russian Empire.

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<sup>80</sup> Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and the National-Colonial Question* (San Francisco: Proletarian Publishers, 1975), 53

<sup>81</sup> Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 4-5.

### Chapter 3: *Korenizatsiia* and the Volga German ASSR

Perhaps one of the most significant faults of the national historiographies of the Volga Germans is the omission of the nationalities policy of *korenizatsiia*. Through this policy, the Soviet regime systematically promoted the national consciousness of the titular nation within each territory while simultaneously creating national territorial units that were meant to emulate modern nation-states. Instead of merely allowing “some room for cultural expression,” as Mukhina suggests,<sup>82</sup> this chapter will demonstrate that the Bolsheviks methodically sought to mold a Volga German national identification that was congruent with Marxist-Leninist ideology. While some authors, most notably Fleischhauer and Pinkus, have argued that the *korenizatsiia* project in the Volga Republic largely failed,<sup>83</sup> this section will demonstrate that despite numerous setbacks in the 1920s, the *korenizatsiia* project in the ASSR produced increasingly positive results from the perspective of Moscow throughout the ephemeral existence of the Volga Republic.

The integral aspect of *korenizatsiia* was the promotion of the majority culture and language within each territorial unit, and the promotion of national cadres to govern the territory. The implementation of *korenizatsiia* and the policies associated with it in the Volga German Republic was initially obstructed by numerous factors, though the policy incrementally became more successful throughout the 1920s. One of the most prominent issues was the lack of Volga German Bolsheviks to fill the government posts on the regional and local level, as the region lacked an intelligentsia with revolutionary roots. Indeed, given the traditionally predominant forms of identification among Volga Germans were locality and religion, and that the two forms mostly overlapped, the national elites were generally clergy. Until the implementation of direct imperial rule in the 1870s, the Volga Germans had mostly

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<sup>82</sup> Mukhina, 31.

<sup>83</sup> Fleischhauer and Pinkus, 35-37.



been unofficially governed by the ecclesiastical authorities of the Lutheran, Catholic, and Anabaptist churches. Consequently, the Bolsheviks were initially unable to recruit national cadres who were loyal to socialism. Furthermore, given the levels of piety among Volga Germans as well as their general attachment to private property, the basic internal elements of their traditional lifestyles conflicted with Soviet ideology. Indeed, it was not until 1933 that Germans reached a majority of Communist Party members in their own autonomous republic; the Bolsheviks held a much more loyal following among Ukrainians and Russians in the territory throughout the 1920s.<sup>84</sup>

Consequently, the actors behind the *korenizatsiia* project as well as the majority of the national leaders of the Volga Republic were ethnic Germans from Moscow and Petrograd as well as former Austrian and German prisoners of war. In February of 1918, the Bolsheviks established the Volga Soviet Commission in order to address the “German Question.” The commission, headed by Karl Petin, was comprised mostly of Muscovite Germans with little connection to the Volga region.<sup>85</sup> With the aid of various German and Austrian prisoners of war who had converted to Bolshevism, most notably Ernst Reuter, the Volga Commission with little to no familiarity of the region was able to establish the Volga German territorial unit. The majority of the Central Executive Committee Chairmen throughout the short-lived existence of the Volga German Republic were former prisoners of war, and many of the upper-level leadership positions throughout the 1920s were similarly filled by ethnic Germans who did not originate from the Volga region.

Indeed, it would not be until the following decade that Bolshevism would gain a substantial following in the Volga Republic. While the Volga Germans were among the first to receive their own national territorial unit in 1918, the Lower Volga region, as a Socialist Revolutionary (SR) stronghold, witnessed wide-spread peasant dissent in the early 1920s.

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<sup>84</sup> Fleischhauer and Pinkus, 43.

<sup>85</sup> Mukhina, 30.

War Communism's forced acquisition of grain from the peasantry, the worsening economic situation, and the famine that ravaged the countryside caused wholesale discontent in the region. Indeed, the disaffected peasant bands of "Greens" were active in the territory beginning in the summer of 1920, and a large portion of the Volga German Commune had joined the movement in March of 1921. The Greens, who sought to eradicate the area of Bolshevism in an attempt to restore the Constituent Assembly and a parliamentary system without the presence of monarchists, were not officially affiliated with the SR party, though much of the leftist SR program provided a framework for the peasant rebellion. While there were numerous cases of Volga Germans providing aid and shelter to the local Bolsheviks to hide them from the Green Bands, the German districts generally rose up with the rebels. By April, however, Red Army forces entered the territory, and quickly eliminated the rebel threat.<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, popular anti-Soviet sentiment among all nationalities persisted in the trans-Volga regions throughout the early 1920s, though such discontent was greatly reduced as a result of the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP), which allowed peasants to pay a tax in kind.

Prior to the introduction of the NEP, much of this hostility towards the Bolsheviks in the region was due to the famine that devastated the lands of the former Russian Empire, and especially the trans-Volga region. Some authors, most notably James Long, have argued that the the famine in the Volga German territorial unit was largely due to politics as opposed to climate and environment and therefore the Bolsheviks willingly allowed the famine to happen.<sup>87</sup> Though politics undoubtedly contributed to the extent of the famine, it is doubtful that the regime knowingly allowed it to develop. As Donald Raleigh suggests, it is more

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<sup>86</sup> Donald J. Raleigh, "A Provincial Kronstadt: Popular Unrest in Saratov at the End of the Civil War." *Provincial Landscapes: Local Dimensions of Soviet Power, 1917-1953*. Ed. Donald J. Raleigh, (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), 88-91.

<sup>87</sup> James W. Long, "The Volga Germans and the Famine of 1921," *The Russian Review*, Vol. 51 (October 1992): 510.

realistic that the Bolsheviks ignored the local warnings of the impending famine.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, the regime did not “bungle” its treatment and handling of the Volga Germans in particular, contrary to Long’s suggestions;<sup>89</sup> rather it was War Communism’s policy of forced grain requisitioning that was applied throughout the polity that contributed to the extent of the famine. Nevertheless, it has been estimated that perhaps 48,000 Volga Germans perished as a result of the famine of 1921-1922. In addition to the large-scale emigration movement that was triggered by the lack of food in the countryside, the population of the Volga German Commune dropped by perhaps 150,000.<sup>90</sup> The policies that led to the extent of the famine increased the feeling of discontent among many in the trans-Volga region, not only the Germans. Though a number of Germans joined the “Green” peasant rebels, recalcitrance generally took the form of emigration; a theme that would continue throughout the interwar period.

Though there was certainly violence in the Lower-Volga region in the early 1920s, this was based on political ideologies, and therefore did not contain an overt national dimension. Nevertheless, Martin erroneously refers to the type of *korenizatsiia* implemented in the Volga German Republic as “The Tatar Variant,” in which “the region is relatively well-developed and has, in comparison to other Soviet eastern regions, a well-developed national intelligentsia... given minimal conflict over land possession and no invidious historic estate divisions, popular ethnic conflict is weak and violent conflict entirely absent.”<sup>91</sup> Similar projects include Tatarstan, Crimea, and Chuvashia. Though such ethnic conflict was not apparent in the lower Volga, this was not due to a lack of estate divisions. Rather, the Germans of the Volga were much more affluent than their Russian and Ukrainian neighbors, as can be seen by their prodigious levels of wealth and land-ownership on the eve of the

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<sup>88</sup> Raleigh, “A Provincial Kronstadt,” 98.

<sup>89</sup> Long, “The Volga Germans and the Famine,” 511.

<sup>90</sup> Raleigh, “A Provincial Kronstadt,” 100.

<sup>91</sup> Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 57.

Revolution.<sup>92</sup> Similarly, one of the criteria of this variant is a well-established national intelligentsia, which was absent in the case of the Volga Germans.

Though many of the definitive criteria behind “The Tatar Variant” are incongruent with the case of the Volga Germans, it can be said that *korenizatsiia* in the Volga Republic was a comparatively peaceful process, and the region witnessed little to no ethnic conflict throughout the 1920s. Though the Volga Germans were a majority in the region, the autonomous republic was also home to more than 30 official nationalities, many of whom lived in compact ethnic enclaves with only small groups of their co-ethnics living outside these communities.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, aside from Germans, Russians, and Ukrainians, the territory was home Kazakhs, Tatars, and Mordvins, among others.<sup>94</sup> As the population of the autonomous republic was 87.2% rural,<sup>95</sup> the multi-national character of the region contributed significantly to the fact that there had historically been scant amounts of ethnic violence in the lower Volga region, which continued during the socialist era.

According to the Soviet census of 1926, Germans comprised 66.4% (379,630) of the Volga Republic, with Russians and Ukrainians being significant minorities.<sup>96</sup> Consistent with the policy of *korenizatsiia*, German was made the official language of administration within the territory. Though German speakers made up a majority of inhabitants of the autonomous republic, they spoke a wide variety of dialects that were at times unintelligible between one another, and very few spoke the High German dialect that became the official language. Consequently, the Soviet regime implemented the usage of High German in the

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<sup>92</sup> Lohr, 89.

<sup>93</sup> A. Tazhurizin, *Ocherki o Hozyaystvennom i Kul'turnom Stroitel'stve v Nacional'nyh Rayonah Nizhney Volgi*, (Stalingrad: Nizhnevolzhskoe Kraevoe Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1934), 17-18.

<sup>94</sup> “Predvaritel'nye itogi Vsesoyuznoj Perepisi Naseleniya 1926 goda po ASSR Nemcev Povolzh'ya”, (Pokrovsk, 1927).

<sup>95</sup> *Atlas Soyuz Sovetski Socialisticheskii Republik Izanie Cik USSR*, (Moscow, 1928), 45-46.

<sup>96</sup> Predvaritel'nye itogi Vsesoyuznoj perepisi naseleniya 1926 goda po ASSR Nemcev Povolzh'ya, (Pokrovsk, 1927).

educational and cultural spheres in an attempt to eradicate the regional peculiarities and boundaries that had been in place since the settlers first arrived in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

As one of the goals of *korenizatsiia* was the amalgamation of peoples into nationalities, the Soviet regime utilized language in order to group peoples into a common form of identification. Though this process in the Volga Republic was not nearly as drastic as in the Soviet east, the Soviet leaders attempted to nationalize the territorial units by establishing standardized print culture within each national region.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, as Gellner suggests, common language is one of the primary unifying bonds in the formation of a nation, as “literacy, the establishment of a reasonably permanent and standardized script, means in effect the possibility of cultural and cognitive storage and centralization.”<sup>98</sup> The establishment of national language schools as well the dissemination of publications in a standardized print of each language was an integral aspect of *korenizatsiia* and functioned as a vessel to promote homogeneous national cultures. Consequently, the Soviets initially published 11 main newspapers in the Volga Republic, all in a standardized High German dialect. Though a small number German-language newspapers circulated in the Volga region prior to the Revolution, they were generally religious publications and did not have a wide-readership, and were shut down in 1918.<sup>99</sup> The Volga German Soviet newspapers, headed by the daily *Nachrichten*, published an even mix of regional and Union-wide material until the mid-1930s, which focused primarily on ideological and political issues. Such publications served the purpose of both exposing the population to the secular developments in the autonomous republic, as well as larger trends in the Soviet Union as a whole.<sup>100</sup> From *Stalins Weg* to *Der Kollektivist* and *Die Rote Sturmflagge*, among others, all with a circulation of

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<sup>97</sup> Hirsch, 174.

<sup>98</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism: Second Edition* (Ithaca & New York: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 9.

<sup>99</sup> Fleischhauer and Pinkus, 55.

<sup>100</sup> For example, *Nachrichten* on September 22, 1920 reports extensively on regional issues, as well as the war against Poland and the Civil War.

3,000 to 5,000 per issues,<sup>101</sup> the regime promoted the publication native-language newspapers both in an attempt to unify the culturally heterogeneous Volga Germans into a singular form of national identification, and to integrate the national categorization into the Soviet state and society.<sup>102</sup> By 1936, of the 29 newspapers published in the ASSR, 21 were German-language.<sup>103</sup>

Such promotion of a distinctly German national culture through a standardized dialect was furthered by the publication of German-language books, the creation of a national theater in the capital city of Engels, the construction of 52 cinemas, and the creation of radio broadcast networks.<sup>104</sup> Similarly, local party leaders promoted the creation of the Museum of German Culture and various exhibitions that demonstrated the cultural achievements of the Volga Germans. Contrary to the victimhood narratives of the Volga Germans that insinuate that the Bolsheviks merely allowed the promotion of German Culture in the Volga Republic in the 1920s,<sup>105</sup> the Soviet regime actively promoted and funded cultural publications and productions in an attempt to forge a Volga German identity in the region.

Similarly, native language education played a pivotal role in both the promotion of the titular national culture as well as promoting Marxist-Leninist ideology. As German was the liturgical text among Protestants in the region,<sup>106</sup> the ecclesiastical base of the Volga colonists' education contributed to the fact that the Russian Germans were among the most literate categories of peoples in the Russian Empire.<sup>107</sup> The utilization of national language education through a standardized curriculum was meant to guarantee that the Soviet

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<sup>101</sup> Nizhnevolzhskiy Krayplan- Krayunhu, *Statisticheskij Spravochnik Nizhney Volgi. 1929-1933 gg.* (Stalingrad, 1934), 381.

<sup>102</sup> Hirsch, 14.

<sup>103</sup> Beschluss des Prasidiums des Zentralvollskomitees der Union der SSR, "Ueber den Sowjet: Wirtschaftlichen und Kulturellen Aufbau der ASSR der Wolgadeutschen," (Detuscher Staatsverlag: Engels, 1936), 5

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Mukhina, 31.

<sup>106</sup> Vakareliyska 592.

<sup>107</sup> Natsional'naia politika VKP(b) (Moscow, 1930), 278-279 in Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question*, 157.

nationalities would develop into strong and unified political forces. Indeed, education proved to be high on the agenda for the Bolsheviks, as 8.5% of the total state budget for the RSFSR in 1918 was earmarked for education when Russia was devastated by war and hunger.<sup>108</sup> The number of German-language schools in the Volga Republic grew from 236 in 1919 to 396 in 1926,<sup>109</sup> and at the pinnacle of educational *korenizatsiia* in 1927, 98.2% of all Volga German pupils attended German-language schools.<sup>110</sup>

### 3.2: Population Management and Social Categorizations in the 1920s

An integral component of the social and political structure of the Soviet Union was the attention given to the “population” as a point of policy. Having become a predominant tool throughout Europe in the preceding century, a polity’s usage of population management sought to gain knowledge of the inhabitants of a territory in an attempt to augment the populations’ conditions and enhance the health and well-being of the social body. By attempting to convert “peoples” into “populations” through the use of statistics and scientific knowledge, officials held that it was possible to control and manipulate social processes in order to transform them into state resources.<sup>111</sup> Upon taking power, the Bolsheviks continued the usage of managing and categorizing the population into collectivities that had initially been put in use by the imperial authorities at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, as the First World War brought an amelioration of efforts on behalf of the European powers to engage in population management through war mobilization, the Bolsheviks merely inherited the preexisting order of total mobilization and adopted the imperial authorities’ management

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 283.

<sup>109</sup> Fleischhauer and Pinkus, 54.

<sup>110</sup> Smith, “Education,” 302.

<sup>111</sup> Holquist, 113.

techniques, which in turn became one of the cornerstones of the new social order.<sup>112</sup> In doing so, the regime employed ethnographers, statisticians, and other social scientists, many of whom were implied in a similar capacity by the tsarist authorities, to supply the information necessary to formulate the inhabitants of the former Russian Empire in an attempt to facilitate their transformation into loyal Soviet citizens. The Bolsheviks held that individuals did not exist unto themselves, but were instead members of collectivities based on class, nation, and political perspective.<sup>113</sup> Within weeks of taking power, the regime introduced the arbitrary and ambiguous categorization of “enemy of the people,” and shortly thereafter established the Extraordinary Commission to Combat Counterrevolution and Sabotage—the *Cheka* (the NKVD’s predecessor).

The Bolsheviks’ engagement in population politics facilitated what they saw as the preservation of the health of the societal body throughout the polity. The Soviet regime’s prevalent perception of “elements” that served as malignant “parasites” within the larger social realm led to the enactment of policies designed to remove such detrimental forces from the social body in order to both promote the health of the Socialist system as well as to remake society in the regime’s idealized image.<sup>114</sup> Through the process of what Alexander Solzhenitsyn referred to as “social prophylaxis,”<sup>115</sup> the regime sought to take preventative measures by categorizing the population into social classes and nationality in the event that such “elements” needed to be removed from the social realm. Throughout the course of the Civil War and into the mid-1920s, the regime increasingly used the term “banditism” as an umbrella term to denote criminal action and political deviance, but soon came to represent

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>113</sup> Weitz, 54.

<sup>114</sup> Peter Holquist, “To Count, to Extract, and to Exterminate: Population Statistics and Population Politics in Late Imperial and Soviet Russia” In *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, Ed. Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 129.

<sup>115</sup> Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago: 1918-1956* (New York, Evanston, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row, 1973), 25.



any antisocial phenomenon, which was generally tantamount to anyone who was inimical to the Bolshevik agenda.<sup>116</sup>

While Marxist theory insinuated that society was to be “classed,” and with the large-scale emigration of pre-revolutionary bourgeoisie during the Civil War, the Bolsheviks thought it crucial for society to be “reclassified” in order to determine who would be trusted allies and who would be the stigmatized class enemies. The reclassing of society required the abolition of the old *soslovie* social structure in exchange for a more Marxian socioeconomic system, which in the final analysis, did not actually differ significantly from that of Imperial Russia’s.<sup>117</sup> Nevertheless, the peasantry was divided into three strata: poor (*bedniak*), middle (*seredniak*), and wealthy (*kulak*), and urban inhabitants were generally categorized as either bourgeois or proletariat. There were no codified criteria for such class ascriptions; categories were arbitrarily ascribed based on the basic indicators of current and former professions and social positions as well as those of the individual’s parents.<sup>118</sup> The label of kulak, for example, was often attached to individual peasants simply because they wore nice clothes or had large families, or disagreed with local political actors, regardless of their actual wealth.<sup>119</sup> Such categorizations did not merely apply to individuals; rather, peasant social class was defined in terms of families. All relatives, young and old, were ascribed the same status as the rest of their families.<sup>120</sup> To the Bolsheviks, the upper echelon of the peasantry was deemed to be the epicenter of anti-socialist forces in the countryside. Though the actual material difference between the three peasant classes was often negligible, the prodigious

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<sup>116</sup> Holquist, 130.

<sup>117</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Ascribing Class: The Construction of Social Identity in Soviet Russia,” *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (December 1993): 751.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 756.

<sup>119</sup> Viola, 18.

<sup>120</sup> Naimark, 58.

wealth and landholdings of the agriculturalists of the Volga Republic resulted in the overwhelming majority being categorized as *seredniaki* and *kulaki*.<sup>121</sup>

In the 1920s, the main stigmatized categories of peoples in the Soviet Union were kulaks, Nepmen, priests, and members of the imperial nobility—all of whom fell under the legal classification of *lishentsi*. Members of this juridical category were legally disenfranchised and generally subject to discrimination in the public sphere. Aside from being ineligible to receive social and political rights, obtaining resources and opportunities for *lishentsi* was difficult, and many were evicted from their homes, barred from employment and education, and denied rations.<sup>122</sup> In the 1920s, however, during an era of high geographic, occupational, and social mobility, many who would normally be categorized as *lishentsi* were able to evade this classification by abandoning their place of residence and occupation since the label did not contain any determining physical characteristics. As these practices became more widespread, however, cadres ambitiously sought to “unmask” such class enemies and reveal their true identity. Such sentiments gained momentum throughout the decade, and by 1929, the unmasking of kulaks and other class enemies reached a pinnacle, as the Soviet regime enacted a policy to liquidate the kulaks as a class.

Just as classes were defined and ascribed, the population was further categorized according to nationality, a process that was even more arbitrary than that of codifying the socioeconomic structure. The First All-Union Census in December of 1926 transformed the Soviet populace’s notions of national identity. The previous large-scale census, taken by the Russian Empire in 1897, had classified the citizens of the Empire according to native language and religion, which at the time had been viewed as the primary aspects of nationality. The previous post-revolutionary censuses, taken in 1920 and 1923, had limited scopes as the former had been conducted in the midst of the Russian Civil War, and the latter

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<sup>121</sup> Fleischhauer and Pinkus, 46-47.

<sup>122</sup> Weitz, 65.

being confined exclusively to urban areas. The data of these two censuses had been compiled according to the respondents' national self-identification. Both had asked the respondents their *natsional'nost'*, which had been defined as "a population group united into a nationally self-conscious community."<sup>123</sup>

Soviet ethnographers worked to develop a questionnaire for the 1926 census that would serve to confirm each individual's response to their claims of self-identification according to *natsional'nost'*. The Soviet categorization in the 1926 census was intended to both gather data on the Soviet Union as well as to begin the process of transforming the subjects' identities, despite the fact that the administration knew that the concept of nationality was not meaningful for many of the peoples they were registering.<sup>124</sup> While using information such as mother-tongue, religion, and national self-identification of mother and father, the ethnographers hoped to ensure that the respondents' claims to national self-identification were appropriate.<sup>125</sup> However, while choosing their self-identified nationality, the individuals picked from an official list of nationalities of the Soviet Union, which contained some 200 "official" national groups. Only "official" nationalities would be entitled to national rights, and those that were omitted would be assimilated into the majority nation of their territory.<sup>126</sup>

Whereas the census in the majority of societies serves as a quantification of racial-ethnic categories,<sup>127</sup> the Soviet regime sought to construct salient forms of national identification where they did not previously exist. While using the cognitive perspective of nationality, one can understand the process of choosing from a list of "official" nationalities, such as the case of the 1926 census, as dividing the social world of the Soviet Union in ethnic and national terms. As Brubaker, Loveman, and Stamatov explain, "race, ethnicity, and

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<sup>123</sup> Hirsch, 106.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 102-103.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>127</sup> Anderson, 168.

nationality exist only in and through our perceptions, interpretations, representations, classifications, categorizations, and identifications. They are not things in the world, but perspectives on the world-- not ontological but epistemological realities.”<sup>128</sup> While limiting self-identification to a list of 200 “official” nationalities, the Soviet ethnographers and census takers attempted to impose national identities on many of the minority nationalities of the Soviet Union. The codified categorization of the Soviet regime attempted to create groups and assign members to them, regardless of whether the new members identified as being part of the group.

Consequently, the German-speaking inhabitants living in the Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic had little choice but to identify themselves as Soviet-Germans. As was especially apparent in the East, Soviet ethnographers audaciously sought to amalgamate clans and tribes into nationalities where scant cultural similarities had previously existed. Though this process elsewhere was taken to extremes, the 1926 census in the Volga Republic served the purpose of a instilling a sense of “Germanness” that had traditionally not been a salient form of identification. According to the self-identification of Soviet citizens in the 1926 census, there were 571,822 Germans in the Volga German Republic.<sup>129</sup> During this period prior to Soviet mobilization and Stalin’s “Socialism in One Country,” a citizen’s proclaimed nationality was not considered potentially detrimental for the individual. The structuring of the 1926 census, however, signified the beginning of the Soviet regime’s gradual adoption of nationality as a fundamental social categorization. As Brubaker explains, in regards to the Soviet nationalities policy, “what is distinctive... is the thoroughgoing state-sponsored codification and institutionalization of nationhood and

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<sup>128</sup>Rogers Brubaker, Mara Loveman,& Peter Stamatov, “Ethnicity as Cognition,” *Theory and Society* Vol. 33 (2004): 45.

<sup>129</sup>Perepisi 1926.

nationality exclusively on a sub-state rather than a state-wide level.”<sup>130</sup> This institutionalization and codification of the Volga German nationality facilitated the systematic repression of the Volga Germans a decade following the 1926 census.

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<sup>130</sup> Rogers Brubaker, “Nationhood and the National Question in the Soviet Union and Post-Soviet Eurasia: An Institutionalist Account, *Theory and Society*, vol. 23 (1994), 50.

## Chapter 4: Collectivization in the Volga Republic

The enactment of the First Five Year Plan and agricultural collectivization in 1928 radically transformed Soviet society. Collectivization and the subsequent dekulakization campaigns aimed to extirpate the spirit of capitalism from the countryside and to eradicate traditional village leadership structures in order to dissipate village cohesion in an attempt to transform Soviet rural society into a new collective farm order.<sup>131</sup> Given the prodigious amount of wealth of Volga German agriculturalists prior to the October Revolution as well as the common perception of Russian Germans as privileged subjects of the imperial regime, Volga Germans disproportionately suffered during the dekulakization campaigns. This chapter will argue that contrary to the national narratives, this was not a result of nation-based repression; rather, dekulakization was a war against class-enemies, and in the case of the Volga Germans, national and class categorizations overlapped. The Volga Germans undoubtedly suffered as a result of the dekulakization of 1930-1931, when 24,000 Volga German kulaks were deported,<sup>132</sup> accounting for approximately 16% of all Germans in the Volga Republic. As perhaps 1.8 million kulaks were deported throughout the Soviet Union,<sup>133</sup> the Volga Germans did not constitute a significant number of those who were deported, and though they were disproportionately subject to dekulakization, this process did not contain an overt national dimension.

The Lower Volga Krai, an administrative unit created in 1928 that included the provinces of Astrakhan, Saratov, and Stalingrad, as well as the Volga German ASSR and the Kalmyk Oblast, was among the first territories to witness large-scale collectivization efforts. Indeed, the initial success of the creation of *kolkhozy* and *sovkhozy* in the region proved to be a source of pride for the Soviets. In October of 1929, while the density of collectivization

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<sup>131</sup> Viola, 7.

<sup>132</sup> Mukhina, 37.

<sup>133</sup> Viola, 31.

averaged 7.5% throughout the polity, the Lower Volga Krai boasted a rate of 12%, and the process was moving at a rapid pace.<sup>134</sup> In a speech given the following month, Vyacheslav Molotov further praised the success in the Lower Volga Krai.<sup>135</sup> The Volga Republic, however, lagged behind the success of collectivization in the rest of the Krai, though by the following year, the ASSR had a collectivization rate of 27.4%, while the Lower Volga as a whole had risen to 37.5%.<sup>136</sup>

Although staunch resistance to collectivization was apparent throughout the Soviet Union, it was much more violent and widespread among non-Russian nationalities. While the new agricultural policies triggered mass emigration movements, specifically among Western nationalities such as Soviet-Germans, peasant resistance in the Soviet east turned violent, including in neighboring Kazakhstan and Tatarstan. In response, the center made a short-term concession on the pace of collectivization in certain “backwards” regions who had demonstrated recalcitrance towards the establishment of collective farms in their territories. Indeed, in March of 1930, Kalinin accused Tatarstan’s ASSR leaders “counterrevolution” by sponsoring mass dekulakization in a national territory, despite the fact that this was consistent with the center’s policies, and was undoubtedly apparent elsewhere.<sup>137</sup> Later in the decade, such factors would contribute to the leadership’s perception that the Russian core was more reliable than the national periphery.

Though the Volga Germans certainly resisted collectivization to a certain degree, it was not as audacious or violent as in many of the neighboring national territories. Instead, resistance took the form of emigration. In the fall of 1929, in the midst of a large-scale

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<sup>134</sup> “Report by G.N. Kaminsky ‘On the Results and Further Tasks of Collective-Farm Construction,’ 14 November 1929,” in *The War Against the Peasantry, 1927-1930: The Tragedy of the Soviet Countryside*, ed. Lynne Viola, V.P. Danilov, N.A. Ivinskii, and Denis Kozlov (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2005), 153.

<sup>135</sup> “From the speech by V.M. Molotov in the discussion of G.N. Kaminsky’s report, 15 November 1929,” in *The War Against the Peasantry, 1927-1930: The Tragedy of the Soviet Countryside*, ed. Lynne Viola, V.P. Danilov, N.A. Ivinskii, and Denis Kozlov (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2005), 158.

<sup>136</sup> Nizhnevolzhskiy Krayplan- Krayunhu, *Statisticheskij Spravochnik Nizhney Volgi. 1929-1933 gg.*, 125.

<sup>137</sup> Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 295.

emigration movement throughout the Soviet Union, 10,000 Soviet citizens of German descent, mostly Mennonites, converged on Moscow in an attempt to receive exit visas, which triggered the most politically charged emigration movement in the Soviet Union since the Bolsheviks had taken power in 1917. Though this episode will be discussed in more detail below, suffice to say that collectivization proved to be the most significant factor in triggering this emigration movement, though this proved to be a religious-based movement rather than a national one.

Despite the Soviet regime's intent to break down village cohesion through dekulakization in order to clear the way for the new collective farm order, the center sought to continue the promotion of national identity and culture. Indeed, by organizing kolkhozes according to nationality, collective farms were meant to be small-scale national territorial units, in which titular language and culture would be promoted while simultaneously instilling "Soviet sensibilities."<sup>138</sup> At the same time, mid-sized national territorial units continued to be established during collectivization. Though the borders of the Volga ASSR had been established in 1918, self-determination issues continued to arise throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s. Germans in neighboring Samara, for example, successfully established a mid-sized German national district within Samara Oblast as late as 1928.<sup>139</sup> As Martin suggests, there are literally thousands of pages of documents devoted to increasing the number and quality of German-language institutions and territorial units throughout the Soviet Union in 1930 alone.<sup>140</sup> While the creation of German national territorial units would cease following the end of the First Five-Year Plan, even during the early stages of

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<sup>138</sup> Hirsch, 247.

<sup>139</sup> Orgkomitetu Sredne-Volzhskoy Oblasti- Prezidiuma Vserossijskogo Central'nogo Ispolnitel'nogo Komiteta Sovetov, "Samarskomu Okrispolkomu, Vypiska iz Protokola 74, Zasedaniya ot 10 Sentyabrya 1928," in Oformlenie n. Grigor'eva, *Istoriya Rossijskikh Nemcev v Dokumentah (1762-1992)* Moscow: MIGUP, 1993), 140.

<sup>140</sup> Martin, "Origins of Soviet Ethnic Cleansing," 838.



collectivization, the regime sought to continue to expand *korenizatsiia* throughout the Soviet Union for all national categories, including the diasporic communities.

The operations to remove capitalist elements from the countryside were thus not implemented according to nationality. Catherine II had initially provided generous privileges to German settlers due to the popular perception that such settlers were model farmers who utilized modern capitalist agricultural techniques. Such sentiments continued throughout the imperial era, and were undoubtedly a factor in the extirpation of capitalism from the countryside during the Soviet regime's war against "kulak elements." Indeed, many Slavic Orthodox inhabitants of the Volga Republic witnessed first-hand the aggressive land and capital acquisition among the Germans prior to the First World War, and held a sense of embitterment towards these class enemies of the Soviet regime. While popular perceptions in the region certainly displayed animosity towards affluent German peasants, dekulakization was initiated according to socially determined criteria, and the directives issued by Moscow that specified concrete numbers of those "capitalist elements" to be removed were issued according to krai and not to national territories. In other words, instead of declaring that the Volga Republic as a national entity was to be cleansed of kulaks, it was the responsibility of the administrative territory of the Lower Volga Krai to extirpate 11,000-14,000 kulak families in 1930, regardless of nationality.<sup>141</sup>

The label of kulak itself was divided into two separate categories; counter-revolutionary activists who were often executed without trial, and those who could be potentially "cured" who were exiled to remote regions of the USSR.<sup>142</sup> Such was the formula throughout the various class, political, and nation based repressions throughout the 1930s; the most harmful and malignant "elements" were eliminated, while those who were deemed fit for rehabilitation were sent to special settlements in the Soviet east. The Bolsheviks saw both

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<sup>141</sup> Pavel Polian, *Against Their Will: The History and Geography of Forced Migrations in the USSR*, (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2004), 71.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

categories of kulak as the embodiment of the capitalist spirit and therefore natural “parasites” to Soviet society. As Solzhenitsyn explains,

In Russian, a *kulak* is a miserly, dishonest rural trader who grows rich not by his own labor but through someone else’s... and by 1930 *all strong peasants in general* were being so called- all peasants strong in management, strong in work, or even strong merely in convictions. The term *kulak* was used to smash the strength of the peasantry.<sup>143</sup>

Though the social standing of the peasantry was codified according to the three divisions, actual material differences between *bedniaks*, *seredniaks*, and *kulaks* were usually minimal, and the categorization of people into the three was frequently inconsistent.<sup>144</sup> Indeed, the arbitrary process through which all Soviet citizens were categorized, whether according to nationality, ethnicity, or class, cannot be considered objective decisions.<sup>145</sup> Similar to the atmosphere of political denouncement that would prevail later in the decade, a peasant who would normally be ascribed as *bedniak* would often be labeled as *kulak* due to local feuds.

Such practices were especially the case in regards to the Volga Germans. As the local cadres were typically ethnic Germans from the major urban centers or had been prisoners of war during World War One, they lacked any previous knowledge of the traditional lifestyles of their subject and were not familiar with local issues.<sup>146</sup> This created conflict between the leadership and the constituents, which further contributed to the atmosphere of denunciation and accusations based on personal feuds. Consequently, Volga Germans were more likely to be categorized as kulaks not only because of the popular perceptions that they were affluent capitalists, but because of the disconnect between the inhabitants of the autonomous republics and the national cadres as well.

Dekulakization campaigns were never directed specifically towards the Volga Germans or any other nationality, but rather the operations were against wealthier peasants in

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<sup>143</sup> Solzhenitsyn, 55.

<sup>144</sup> Eric D. Weitz, *A Century of Genocide: Utopias of Race and Nation* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), 65.

<sup>145</sup> Viola, 18.

<sup>146</sup> Fleischhauer and Pinkus, 39.

general. Such class categories were consistent with the socioeconomic analysis of Marxist terminology and were thus congruent with the basic socialist premise of Marxist-Leninist ideology. Certain minority nationalities undoubtedly held a higher status than the Great Russians during the Romanov dynasty, which at times has led authors to assert that dekulakization held an overt national dimension. Instead, such class-based operations are better understood as an overlap of social and national categorizations, as was the case with the Volga Germans.

#### **4.2: *Korenizatsiia* in the Volga Republic during Collectivization**

Throughout 1930, considerable effort was put into increasing the number and quality of German institutions, both in the Volga Republic as well as in the Western borderlands. *Korenizatsiia* continued throughout agricultural collectivization and dekulakization in the Volga Republic, reaching a pinnacle in 1933-1934. The publication of German-language books reached its height in 1933, and the German-language theater opened in Engels in the same year.<sup>147</sup> Similarly, the number of pupils attending German-language schools in the Volga Republic rose from 53,642 in 1926 to 68,085 in 1932.<sup>148</sup> German culture therefore continued to be promoted both within the Volga Republic and throughout the Soviet Union as a whole, and the First (and last) Convention of the German Writers Union was held in Moscow in March of 1934. Of the 45 German writers in attendance, 12 were from the Volga Republic.<sup>149</sup>

Nevertheless, in 1930, the first policy of an ethnic deportation was implemented in regards to Poles living along the Western border zone in the Belorussian SSR within 22 kilometers of the Polish border. It was feared that if the Poles had engaged in a large-scale

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<sup>147</sup> Fleischhauer and Pinkus, 58.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 53-54.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 56.

emigration movement (as was the case with German Mennonites the previous year), then the Polish government would intervene and provide assistance to their co-ethnics across the border. Indeed, given that the relations with Poland were rapidly deteriorating, it was a widely held belief among the Soviet leadership that the presence of Soviet-Poles in the borderlands was potentially dangerous. Ethnic Poles within close proximity to the border, regardless of socioeconomic status, were moved to the interior. Such measures, however, were adopted by the republican level (of the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic), and not the All-Union Council of People's Commissars.<sup>150</sup> Consequently, this did not drastically alter Soviet nationalities policies, as a new Polish national district was established along the Belorussian-Polish border less than two years later.<sup>151</sup> Indeed, despite the radical transformations of Soviet society that came with collectivization and the First Five-Year Plan, the nationalities policies did not fundamentally change until the new Constitution of 1936.

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<sup>150</sup> Polian, 69.

<sup>151</sup> Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 321-323.

## Chapter 5: The Volga Germans as a “Diaspora”

The existing literature on the Volga Germans and similar Soviet nationalities that were perceived as having allegiance to a separate state address such categories of people simply as “diasporas.” Though the Soviet regime did not use the term to designate such categories of peoples, in the late 1930s, they came to be officially known as “citizens of foreign states” and “enemy nations,” both of which were tantamount to “diaspora.” Such a designation carries certain implications, most notably the orientation towards a homeland outside of the Soviet Union. The majority of literature on theories of diaspora considers the orientation and loyalty to a homeland abroad as paramount criteria for the designation of a diaspora. Indeed, in the inaugural issue of the journal *Diaspora*, William Safran presents a list of six characteristics of a diaspora, in which the community in question should share several of the criteria. Of the six, four pertain directly towards the notion of a homeland.<sup>152</sup> This chapter will argue that by treating “diaspora” as an idiom, stance, or claim, it can be seen that the Volga Germans did not adopt a strong diasporic stance until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1930s, however, Berlin began to aggressively claim that the *Volksdeutsche* of the Soviet Union were members of the German diaspora, and Moscow in turn began to treat them as such.

The insinuation that Volga Germans held a salient orientation towards the Reich is questionable. Instead, literature pertaining to the Soviet-Germans stress that they did not develop an orientation towards an ancestral homeland (*Urheimat*) until Gorbachev’s reforms in the late 1980s triggered mass immigration to Western Germany.<sup>153</sup> Indeed, the majority of the initial settlers at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had left their respective German principalities at great risk to their families in order to escape religious and political persecution as well as military devastation, and therefore held a sense of disillusionment in regards to their

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<sup>152</sup> William Safran, “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return,” *Diaspora* Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring 1991): 83.

<sup>153</sup> Schmaltz and Sinner, 347.

supposed homeland.<sup>154</sup> This disillusionment persisted following the Unification of Germany in 1871 and the formation of the German Empire. As a result of numerous convergent factors, Tsar Alexander II annulled the guaranteed exemption of Russian-Germans from military conscription in 1874, contributing to a massive emigration from the Russian Empire. Tellingly, however, the majority of Russian-Germans did not wish to emigrate to the German Empire, their alleged homeland; rather, the vast majority emigrated to the United States, Canada, and Latin America.<sup>155</sup>

Such an episode more than 50 years later would have a similar outcome. In the fall of 1929, in the midst of a large-scale emigration movement throughout the Soviet Union, 10,000 Soviet citizens of German descent, mostly Mennonites, converged on Moscow in an attempt to receive exit visas. The preferred destination of migration, however, was not Weimar Germany; rather, it was the United States and Canada, a fact that the surge of German press coverage tended to ignore.<sup>156</sup> Indeed, emigration to Germany in both the Russian Empire as well as the Soviet Union was quite limited. Instead, those Russian-Germans who opted for emigration generally chose the Americas as their destination. In 1923-1926, an estimated 20,000 Soviet-Mennonites had immigrated to Canada.<sup>157</sup> These settlers in the Canadian prairies had prospered materially in their new environment, and were able to construct their social patterns based on their villages in imperial Russia.<sup>158</sup> The Soviet citizens of German descent who converged on Moscow in 1929 hoped to resume this movement, mostly in an attempt to escape the abhorrent repression that they had been subject to as a result of agricultural collectivization.

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<sup>154</sup> Long, xiii.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>156</sup> "Die Bauernflucht aus Rußland," *Vossische Zeitung*, Berlin (November 14, 1929): 1.

<sup>157</sup> Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 319.

<sup>158</sup> Harvey Dyck, *Weimer Germany & Soviet Russia, 1926-1933: A Study in Diplomatic Instability* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1966), 164.

The Soviet Germans were initially denied exit visas, and the émigrés could not turn US and Canadian embassies for help as these countries did not establish diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union until 1933. The movement, however, quickly generated a storm of media coverage in Germany, and an organization called “Brothers in Need” was founded in order to raise money to provide aid to the Soviet Germans, and President Hindenburg donated 200,000 Marks of his own money to the cause.<sup>159</sup> Consequently, the German embassy began to intervene diplomatically, and the Soviet regime eventually allowed 5,500 to emigrate. This was the first time that the German government took an active interest in the *Volksdeutsche* of the Soviet Union, and intervened aggressively on their behalf.

This episode, however, does not necessarily signify a lack of orientation towards a “homeland” among Soviet Germans. As Takeyuki Tsuda suggests, even if ethnic ties to a homeland are present, migration is foremost a response to economic pressures.<sup>160</sup> As the Soviet Union’s First Five-Year Plan for economic development and agricultural collectivization had been implemented the previous year, the Soviet Germans had opted to migrate for economic purposes, among other reasons. Weimar Germany was in the midst of the long process of economic recovery following the First World War, and North America therefore presented a more lucrative destination for migrants. Though this situation was further complicated by the “Black Tuesday” stock market crash in the US that triggered the Great Depression, North America continued to be the preferred destination for the Soviet German migrants.

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<sup>159</sup> Terry Martin, “Origins of Soviet Ethnic Cleansing,” 836.

<sup>160</sup> Takeyuki Tsuda, “Why Does the Diaspora Return Home?” in Takeyuki Tsuda, ed., *Diasporic Homecomings: Ethnic Return Migration in Comparative Perspective* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 21.

## 5.2: Nazi Irredentism and the *Volksdeutsche* of the Soviet Union

Though the Volga Germans at this time did not actively perceive Germany as their true ancestral homeland, following the First World War the German government increasingly perceived the *Volksdeutsche* of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union as members of a larger German collectivity that possessed superior levels of civilization. Indeed, the preamble to the 1919 Weimar Constitution stated that there was a connection and unity between the German tribes of Europe, and provided a legislative framework for any German community to join the Reich.<sup>161</sup> Such sentiments would become especially aggressive following the rise of Hitler and the Nazi party in 1933, when the German state began to audaciously construct their foreign policy specifically to protect the interests of the *Volksdeutsche*. Nazi Germany's interest in the Volga Germans thus contributed to the Soviet regime's suspicions of the Soviet Germans as possessing an ultimate loyalty to an external state. As Armstrong suggests, the most significant source of a dominant elite's animosity towards a situational mobilized diaspora is the existence of a "homeland" outside the polity's territorial control.<sup>162</sup> Thus, as the German state increasingly identified *Volksdeutsche* as members of a larger German collectivity, the Soviet state began to treat the Volga Germans as a diaspora, despite the fact that at this time, a strong attachment of the Soviet Germans towards the German state as an *Urheimat* was dubious.

Despite the German government's aggressive intervention on behalf of the *Volksdeutsche* of the Soviet Union during the 1929 migrations, the Kremlin's stance towards the Soviet-Germans was not fundamentally altered. Though many Mennonites had opted for emigration, the leadership continued to the attempts to integrate the Volga Germans (and all nationalities) into Soviet state and society; a sentiment which was apparent throughout the

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<sup>161</sup> *Die Verfassung des Deutschen Reichs* (1919).

<sup>162</sup> Armstrong, 401.



First Five-Year Plan. This would change, however, due to various factors in the international arena which led to the questioning of both Soviet Germans as well as the so-called “diaspora nationalities” in general, when the loyalty of citizens with cross-border kin ties came into question.

The rise of Hitler and the National Socialist Party in 1933 was particularly detrimental for the position of the “diaspora nationalities,” because the new Nazi government began to audaciously construct their foreign policy to protect the interests of the *Volksdeutsche* in Eastern Europe. The consolidation of the German state under the banner of National Socialist led to the notion among Bolsheviks that the revolution in the Soviet Union needed to be accelerated.<sup>163</sup> Indeed, the rise of fascism in the west contributed to the feeling of a dual threat to the Soviet Union; Nazi biological theories on race ran contrary to those of the Soviets which challenged the premise of the Soviet nationalities policy and the threat of “imperial” encirclement from Nazis in the west and the Japanese in the east.

Concerns over Nazi Germany escalated during the famine of 1933-1934, when a continuation of “Brothers in Need” was launched in Germany to provide aid to the starving Soviet Germans. Called “Hitler Help” by the Soviets, the campaign sent monetary remittances and tens of thousands of food packets to the Germans of the Soviet Union.<sup>164</sup> The most problematic aspect of Nazi Germany was undoubtedly their interest in the well-being of the *Volksdeutsche* of Eastern Europe, which signified the adoption of a “diasporic stance” in regards to the Volga Germans on behalf of the “homeland.” Indeed, the German nation became increasingly viewed as a collective unit that transcended state boundaries, and the survival of the collect superseded that of the individual. The well-being of their “brothers” in Russia thus fit into the Germanocentric worldview in the German national

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<sup>163</sup> Hirsch, 16.

<sup>164</sup> Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 328.

imaginary that had been gaining momentum since the First World War.<sup>165</sup> By 1939, Nazi Germany had disseminated their ideologies of “German racial and cultural soil,” which demonstrated their irredentist claims by claiming that “German racial soil” included what was “already in the Reich, South Tyrol in Italy, German-speaking Switzerland, Alsace and Lorraine in France, Transylvanian German settlements in Romania, and the Volga German Republic in Soviet Russia.”<sup>166</sup>

The Nazi state continuously increased its irredentist claims in Eastern Europe throughout the 1930s, and created a propaganda machine that portrayed Bolshevism as a systematic undermining of the racial bonds that held together the German people as a collective unit.<sup>167</sup> To achieve this, anthropologists and other scholars in the *Reich* pronounced that the peoples of the Soviet Union, save the ethnic Germans, were of inferior racial stock, and thus insinuated that such “races” would ultimately be destined to degeneration.<sup>168</sup> The biological racism of the Nazis directly contradicted the Soviets’ notion of ethnicity. Whereas German scholars disseminated ideas which implied that separate nationalities held inherent characteristics, Soviet academics, consistent with Marxist-Leninist terminology, maintained that such characteristics were rather a result of society’s socioeconomic class structure that had been constructed due to exploitation of capitalism. Indeed, just as class was the essential component of the Bolsheviks’ worldview, race was the central element for the Nazis.<sup>169</sup>

While the Soviet regime’s concerns over Nazi Germany had been gaining momentum since Hitler’s consolidation of power, the Kremlin’s concerns escalated even further

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<sup>165</sup> Casteel, 453.

<sup>166</sup> Otto D. Tolischus, “Nazis Envision Control of World’s Resources: Imperial Urge Justified on Grounds of Race, Language, and ‘Living Room,’” *The New York Times* (April 2, 1939), 67.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 459.

<sup>168</sup> Hirsch, 280.

<sup>169</sup> Weitz, 104.

following the German-Polish nonaggression pact of January 1934.<sup>170</sup> This agreement heightened the fears of an “imperialist encirclement,” and the Kremlin has held that the Polish-German alliance had significantly weakened their international position. Such international agreements coupled with the irredentism of Nazi Germany led to the deterioration of the Soviet centers relationship with the “diaspora” peripheries, which signified the shift from exchange to coercion.

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<sup>170</sup> Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 329.

## Chapter 6: The Friendship of the Peoples

With the notion of Great Russian chauvinism and nationalism being deemed one of the greatest dangers to the socialist experiment throughout the previous decade, the mid-1930s witnessed a resurgence of state-sponsored Russian nationalist rhetoric. In 1935, the regime enacted a strategy which sought to propagandize the notion of the “Friendship of the Peoples” of the Soviet Union, which, as this chapter will demonstrate, did not refute the notion of separate national identities, but rather aimed to implement multiethnic unity among the titular nations of the polity,<sup>171</sup> though this policy would prove to be detrimental for the diasporic nationalities. Russian culture, which had previously been partially eschewed in favor of minority nations in the “affirmative action empire,” was now meant to be the unifying force among the inhabitants of the Soviet Union. Indeed, in a speech addressing collective farmers in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan in December of 1935, Stalin exclaimed that

The present conference is a vivid proof of the fact that the former mistrust between the peoples of the U.S.S.R. has long ago been laid to rest, that mistrust has been replaced by complete and mutual trust, that the friendship between the peoples of the U.S.S.R. is growing and gaining in strength. That, comrades, is the most precious thing that the Bolshevik national policy has given us... For as long as this friendship exists, the peoples of our country will be free and invincible. Nothing can daunt us, neither enemies at home nor enemies abroad, as long as this friendship lives and flourishes. You need have no doubt of that, comrades.<sup>172</sup>

Stalin, therefore, stressed that the policy of *korenizatsiia*, after 18 years, had eradicated the historical mistrust of the minority nationalities towards Great Russian chauvinism.

Paradoxically, an integral aspect of this program was the popularization of Russian national heroes, imagery, and myths from the Romanov dynasty and Kievan Rus era. As Eric Hobsbawm suggests, Marxist states and societies generally have a tendency to not only

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<sup>171</sup> Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 433.

<sup>172</sup> Joseph Stalin, “Speech at a Conference of the Foremost Collective Farmers of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan,” *Works: Volume 14, 1934- 1940* (London: Red Star Press, 1978), 124-125.

become nationalist in form, but also in content.<sup>173</sup> Through implementing an ideology of what David Brandenberger refers to as “National Bolshevism,” the regime hoped to augment the legitimacy of the Soviet state by promoting a society-wide sentiment of loyalty and allegiance to the USSR.<sup>174</sup> Frustrated by the inability of society to mobilize during the war threat of the late 1920s, Stalin and the party leadership utilized certain aspects of Russian nationalism in an attempt to create a unifying force for economic and military mobilization. The previously predominant notion of proletariat internationalist loyalty was undermined in the mid-1930s by an increasingly imperious understanding that was grounded in the notion of Soviet patriotism and a connection to the interchangeable concepts of motherland and fatherland. This shift signified a new sense of allegiance throughout Soviet society; those class categories that had formerly been perceived as disloyal towards the Soviet system, such as peasants and scholars, could now wholeheartedly support socialism in the Soviet propaganda machine. The notion of Soviet loyalty was longer exclusively socially based; from the mid-1930s, Soviet allegiance began to encompass “geographic and cultural semantics as well.”<sup>175</sup>

## 6.2: The Reemergence of the Russians

Having been suppressed in the 1920s, Russian culture became the centerpiece of the “Friendship of the Peoples” of the 1930s, and the new campaign excluded “foreign” nationalities, i.e. Germans, Poles, Japanese, Koreans, etc.<sup>176</sup> It must be stressed, however, that this did not entail Russification or assimilation for the non-Russian nationalities throughout the Soviet Union; *korenizatsiia* continued throughout the 1930s, though less

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<sup>173</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, “Some Reflections on ‘the Breakup of Britain,’” *New Left Review*, Vol. 105 (September-October 1977): 13. In Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 3.

<sup>174</sup> Brandenberger, 4.

<sup>175</sup> Brandenberger, 28-29.

<sup>176</sup> Hirsch, 292.

fervently than the previous decade. Nevertheless, the “Friendship of the Peoples” did witness efforts to Russify *the Russian regions* of the RSFSR. However, this did not fundamentally alter the internal cultural policies of larger national units within the Russian Federation, such as the Volga German Autonomous Republic. German national institutions that were located outside the ASSR, such as Moscow’s German-language newspaper, *Die Deutsche Zentral Zeitung*, were either closed entirely or moved to the national territory in Southern Russia. Similarly, central institutions which handled national minority issues such as *Komants* and *Komsever* were abolished in 1934 and 1935 respectively.<sup>177</sup> The efforts to Russify the Russian regions of the RSFSR, however, would become increasingly audacious following the 1936 Constitution, specifically in regards to the diasporic nationalities, such as the Russian-Germans outside of the Volga Republic.

This trend contributed to the emergence the previously unmentionable issue of assimilation. It must be stressed, however, that Russification is not tantamount to assimilation; much like the policies of the Romanov dynasty, Russification in the 1930s could mean multiple processes, most notably assimilation and acculturation, the fundamental difference being that assimilation brings a change to an individual’s self-identification, whereas acculturation entails the adoption of certain aspects of the dominant culture, and does not lead to a radical change.<sup>178</sup> As part of the “Friendship of the Peoples,” the Soviet regime pursued the right of assimilation for individuals, which also included acculturation. Much like in the Russian Empire, many non-Russian parents in the 1930s hoped to increase the chances of upward mobility for their children by allowing them to assimilate, a process which was eventually allowed.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 408.

<sup>178</sup> Miller, *The Romanov Empire and Nationalism*, 49.

<sup>179</sup> Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 409.

## Chapter 7: The Shift from Class to *Narod*

The “Stalin Constitution of 1936” signified yet another transformation of Soviet society.

With this document, the regime claimed that socialism had triumphed in the former Russian Empire through the eradication of the nobility, the bourgeoisie, and the kulak.<sup>180</sup> The Kremlin thus held that the spirit of capitalism had been extinguished in the Soviet Union, and as this chapter will suggest, the 1936 Constitution symbolically marked the transition from class to people. Indeed, on the eve of signing the new Constitution into legislation, Stalin proclaimed that

The absence of exploiting classes, which are the principal organizers of strife between nations... and... the flourishing national culture of the peoples of the U.S.S.R., culture which is national in form and Socialist in content -all these and similar factors have brought about a radical change in the aspect of the peoples of the U.S.S.R.- their feeling of mutual distrust has disappeared, a feeling of mutual friendship has developed among them, and thus real fraternal cooperation among the peoples has been established within the system of a single federated state. As a result, we now have a fully formed multi-national Socialist state, which has stood all tests, and whose stability might well be envied by any national state in any part of the world.<sup>181</sup>

Stalin therefore attributed the success of the Soviet nationalities policy to the extirpation of class-enemies from the USSR. Consequently, the legal category of *lishentsy*-- class enemies who were normally kulaks, tsarist officers, priests, NEPmen, bourgeoisie, and nobles of the old regime-- was formally abolished. Instead, the regime introduced the legal classification of “social marginal.” Similar to other Soviet ascriptions, “social marginal” was a highly fluid and arbitrary label that included many who, prior to 1936, would have been considered *lishentsy*. As Eric Weitz explains, this classification was disturbingly similar to the category of “asocial” in Nazi Germany.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Weitz, 76.

<sup>181</sup> Joseph Stalin, “On the Draft Constitution of the USSR- Report Delivered at the Extraordinary Eighth Congress of Soviets of the USSR, 25 November, 1936,” in Joseph Stalin, *Works: Volume 14, 1934- 1940* (London: Red Star Press, 1978), 163-164.

<sup>182</sup> Weitz, 65.

Though the Constitution itself did not fundamentally alter the Soviet nationalities policies, the propaganda and societal changes surrounding the document proved to be detrimental for the Volga Germans and other diasporic nationalities, as the year symbolically marked the transition from class to *narod*. For the regime, one of the most significant factors that was deemed to be conceivably detrimental for the success of the multinational state was the presence of certain national categories who potentially held ultimate allegiance towards an external homeland, and did not possess “rootedness” in their national territory. The premise of the primordialism of nations has been debunked by the vast majority of scholars of nationalism studies, as most agree that the notion of national identification and consciousness is an inherent facet of modernization. Nevertheless, the Soviet regime began to portray the many nationalities of the former Russian Empire through a primordial lens.

The diasporic nationalities, such as the Volga Germans, could not adopt a primordial stance, and were thus excluded in the Kremlin’s discourse involving the notion of *sovietski narod* (Soviet people). Due to the perception that some nations held a “homeland” outside of the Soviet Union’s borders, and since the regime could not fully reinvent their histories and traditions, the regime began to question whether such nationalities could ever become thoroughly “Soviet.”<sup>183</sup> Indeed, given the legal abolition of *lishentsy* and the ubiquitous efforts to mobilize society, Soviet xenophobia became ethnicized. Having previously been portrayed as a confrontation against class enemies, Stalin’s pronouncement that capitalist elements had been eradicated from the Soviet Union by 1936 created a vacuum which needed to be filled by new “enemies.” Despite the fact that Article 123 of the Constitution stipulated that an individual’s *natsional’nost’* did not hold any judicial or legal significance,<sup>184</sup> Soviet propaganda began to focus on a new classification, “enemies of the people,” which was

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<sup>183</sup> Hirsch, 295.

<sup>184</sup> “Constitution (Fundamental Law) of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, with Amendments and Additions Adopted by the First, Second, Third, Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth Sessions of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR,” in Joseph Stalin, *Works: Volume 14, 1934- 1940* (London: Red Star Press, 1978), 230-231.



tantamount to the later categorization of “enemy nations.”<sup>185</sup> Such categorizations applied to all diasporic nationalities with a “homeland” outside the territory of the Soviet Union.

Regardless of whether or not such national categories felt as though they were members of a diaspora, the regime imposed a diasporic stance upon the USSR’s Germans, Poles, Koreans, Bulgarians, Greeks, etc. Nonetheless, Article 135 of the Constitution guaranteed all nationalities of the Soviet Union the right to participate in the party’s nominal democracy.

Despite the fact that the diasporic nationalities had been excluded from the “Friendship of the Peoples” due to their lack of “rootedness” in their national territories, the propaganda surrounding the Constitution of 1936 on the autonomous republic level implied that it was still the duty of the Volga Germans to protect the “socialist homeland.” German-language publications portraying service in the Red Army as an “honorable duty” continued throughout the period. Similarly, such publications called to further the class struggle, claiming that the Constitution was enacted to “inspire the fight for the fall of the bourgeoisie for a new socialist life.”<sup>186</sup> Similar publications stressed the importance of Stalinism in the modernization of the Volga German Republic by stating that under socialism, the quality of life among Volga Germans and all nationalities had ameliorated.<sup>187</sup> Such publications reiterated that the protection of the motherland was the duty of all Soviet nationalities, including the Volga Germans. Thus, though the diasporic nationalities were excluded from being members of the Soviet nation, they continued to portray themselves as loyal Soviet citizens. Nevertheless, Poles, Germans, and similar nationalities were designated as those who “belonged to” a foreign state, and it made little difference that their ancestors had resided on the territory for more than a century.<sup>188</sup> Ethnic Germans (unlike some diasporic

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<sup>185</sup> Weitz, 77.

<sup>186</sup> David Borger, “Der Dienst in der Roten Armee—eine Ehrenpflicht” *Zum X Sowjetkongress Der Wolgadeutschen Republik*, (Engels: Deutscher Staatsverlag, 1936), 68.

<sup>187</sup> Schamschir Ibatowa, “Alle Wege zur Bildung Stehen mir Offen,” *Zum X Sowjetkongress Der Wolgadeutschen Republik*, (Engels: Deutscher Staatsverlag, 1936), 50.

<sup>188</sup> Hirsch, 294.

categories) continued to be deemed sufficiently reliable to be drafted into the Red Army, though this policy would change in 1941.<sup>189</sup> The efforts of the Volga Germans to prove their loyalty to the socialist cause prior to the Nazi invasion, however, fell short.

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<sup>189</sup> Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 48.

## Chapter 8: The NKVD National Operations

Until recently, the Great Terror of 1937-1938 had been understood simply in political terms. Well it is certainly true that the political aspect of the purges did not differentiate between nationalities, an integral part of the Terror were the national operations, which targeted Soviet citizens simply on the basis of ethnicity. Indeed, the purges are best understood as a multidimensional phenomenon that, in addition to political opposition, encompassed entire social and national categories. Some authors, such as Timothy Snyder, have downplayed the significance of the political terror in comparison to the national and class repression in 1937-1938. Snyder suggests that of the 681,692 executions carried out in this two year span, class and national orders accounted for 625,483.<sup>190</sup> Though these numbers are often questioned and Snyder's analysis of the extent of the dekulakization efforts in the late 1930s raises doubts, it does demonstrate that the Great Terror was not chiefly an operation against Stalin's political opponents. Like the attacks on kulaks and other class enemies, the assault on selected nationalities took place in different waves and in various scales throughout the late 1930s, with the violence applied to some diasporic nationalities more than others at different times.<sup>191</sup> As this chapter will suggest, the late 1930s witnessed repression according to nationally-determined criteria throughout the Soviet Union, specifically in regards to the diasporic nationalities.

An intrinsic aspect of carrying out the policies of the Stalinist purges in the late 1930s was the work on population management that had been conducted prior to 1936. As previously mentioned, the Bolsheviks sought to categorize the population according to both social and national criterion, which was a continuation of tsarist policy and was a trend that had been apparent among the European powers since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. While national

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<sup>190</sup> Snyder, 107.

<sup>191</sup> Naimark, 81.

categorization in the 1920s allowed for a certain degree of self-identification, this policy would change in the 1930s. National self-identification in the late 1930s, for example, required an individual to provide the mother tongue of both parents in order to confirm their response. Moreover, in order to implement the nationalities policy efficiently, the regime continuously required individuals to provide their nationality. With the internal passportization campaigns beginning in 1932, an individual's self-identification became codified, and each individual became the carrier of an ascribed nationality. The Soviet passport system initiated a practice of constant ethnic labeling that "inadvertently indoctrinated its population in the belief that ethnicity was an inherent, fundamental, and crucially important characteristic of all individuals."<sup>192</sup> Henceforth, all individuals had to mark their nationality in personal documents, and a citizen's nationality proved to be either a crucial advantage or disadvantage. By the middle of the decade, virtually no one could escape national categorizations, which for some offered opportunity for social advancement, and for others, most notably the diasporic categories, classification facilitated their management as "enemy nations."<sup>193</sup>

The ethnicization of "malignant elements" in the social body was thus facilitated by the utilization of population management and national categorization. Beginning in early 1937, the NKVD began to enact the so-called national operations against national categories with potential cross-border ties. The first of such operations, NKVD Order no. 00439, also known as the "German Operation," sought to remove German citizens living within the Soviet Union who worked in defense, chemical, and transportation industries.<sup>194</sup> This goal was quickly met, with between 750 and 820 German citizens arrested and repatriated.<sup>195</sup> This operation spread to encompass political émigrés, including professions such as teachers and

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<sup>192</sup> Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 449.

<sup>193</sup> Weitz, 83-84.

<sup>194</sup> Naimark, 85.

<sup>195</sup> Mukhina, 39.

physicians, despite the fact that many had emigrated from Germany to escape fascism.<sup>196</sup>

Shortly thereafter, the designation of “nationalities of foreign governments” became tantamount to the term “diaspora.” Consequently, an estimated 42,000 ethnic Germans were executed during the German Operation, the majority of whom were Soviet citizens with little or no connection to the Third Reich.<sup>197</sup> The determining factor for the majority of the victims of order no. 00439 was nationality; the Soviet regime increasingly perceived potential cross-border ties as a salient form of identification, which Moscow interpreted as proof of their disloyalty.<sup>198</sup>

Indeed, one of the contributing factors of the Terror of the late 1930s was the threat of “imperialist encirclement” by Japan in the east, and Germany in the west. Stalin himself made clear that Soviet socialism was directly threatened by “the espionage and diversionist work of the Trotskyite agents of the Japano-German secret police.”<sup>199</sup> The presence of agents of foreign governments was used as justification for decimating the party leadership on all levels as well as for the NKVD national operations. The dominant theme in the majority of the show trials against prominent Bolsheviks was the charge that such individuals were spies for Germany and Japan. Indeed, the charge of “Trotskyism” equated to being an agent of imperial governments. Stalin explained that

Present-day Trotskyism is not a political trend in the working class, but a gang without principles and without ideals, a gang of wreckers, diversionists, intelligence service agents, spies, assassins, a gang of sworn enemies of the working class, working in the pay of the intelligence services of foreign state.<sup>200</sup>

The regime thus began to perceive the diasporic nationalities as disloyal categories, and sought to remove such harmful elements from the societal body.

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<sup>196</sup> “Letter from Yeva Friedlander to Presidium of Soviet, 16 May 1938,” in *Stalinism as a Way of Life: A Narrative in Documents*, ed. Lewis Siegelbaum and Andrei Sokolov (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2000), 228-229.

<sup>197</sup> Snyder, 107.

<sup>198</sup> Martin, “Origins of Soviet Ethnic Cleansing,” 855.

<sup>199</sup> Joseph Stalin, “Report and Speech in Reply to Debate at the Plenum of the Central Committee of the C.P.S.U., 3-5 March 1937- Defects in Party Work and Measures for Liquidating Trotskyites and other Double-Dealers.” *Works: Volume 14, 1934- 1940* (London: Red Star Press, 1978) 249.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

The German Operation was followed NKVD Order no. 00485 (also known as the Polish Operation), which led to the execution of approximately 110,000 Soviet citizens of Polish descent, and similar smaller-scale operations towards Finns, Kurds, Romanians, Latvians, and more. Though these engagements were collectively known as the “national operations,” each one had its own decree to distinguish them from the other mass operations during the Stalinist Purges, most notably NKVD Order no. 00447, which sought to remove former kulaks, criminals, and other anti-Soviet elements.<sup>201</sup> Such initiatives demonstrate that following the 1936 Constitution, Soviet xenophobia had become ethnicized when national categories became classified as “enemy nations.”

Such a stance towards the “enemy nations,” however, predated the enactment of the NKVD’s national operations, as 1936 witnessed the “resettlement” of ethnic Poles and Germans inhabiting Western Ukraine. Plans were drawn by the Ukrainian NKVD leadership to resettle all Polish and German households within 800 meters of the frontier zone—in the area where the construction of military fortifications was beginning. In September of that year, Genrikh Yagoda, director of the NKVD, confirmed that 12,975 Polish and German families (59,518 persons) had been successfully resettled from Western Ukraine to Northern Kazakhstan.<sup>202</sup> Similar operations were conducted in the South and in the East towards diasporic categories, most significantly the 1937 decision to “resettle” the Soviet Union’s Korean population to the interior. As the first example of a wholesale deportation of a nationality in the USSR, 171,781 Soviet Koreans were “ethnically cleansed” by October of 1937.<sup>203</sup> It is estimated that approximately 260,000 people were deported in 1933-1937 as a result of the “frontier cleansing operations.”<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> Martin, “Origins of Soviet Ethnic Cleansing,” 854.

<sup>202</sup> “To the People’s Commissary of Internal Affairs of the USSR, Commissary- General of the State Security G.G. Yagoda” (26 September 1936) in Polian, 97.

<sup>203</sup> Martin, “Origins of Soviet Ethnic Cleansing,” 851.

<sup>204</sup> Polian, 102.

Moreover, in December on 1937, the Organizational Bureau of the Central Committee (Orgburo) issued a decree stating that the majority of national districts and village Soviets belonging to the diasporic nationalities throughout the USSR were to be liquidated. It was declared that these institutions were artificial creations headed by bourgeois nationalists and agents of foreign governments.<sup>205</sup> This decree served the purpose of attempting to desist any potential mobilization of extra-territorial diasporic categories by foreign states, while simultaneously solidifying the Russian core. Continuing the trend that had been gaining momentum for the previous two years, the 4,598 national minority schools in the Russian regions of the RSFSR were abolished.<sup>206</sup> This, for the first time, created the notion of a formal Russian space for cultural expression within the Soviet Union. By 1940, this institutional Russification of the RSFSR had been completed, though this did not apply to larger national territories within the federation such as ASSRs and autonomous oblasts.<sup>207</sup>

This suspicion of nationalities as static and coherent entities quickly spread to the Volga River, and inhabitants of the autonomous republic were similarly targeted for repression based solely on their nationality, which provides an excellent example of the Soviet regime's perception of nationality as a basic constituent of social life and of self-identification. It must be stressed, however, that the NKVD German Operation was directed primarily towards Germans in the western border regions and those residing in urban centers. Indeed, in some regions in the west, arrests, deportations, and executions virtually eliminated the German (and Polish) populations. That is not to say that it didn't gravely affect the Volga Republic. Indeed, much like most national territories, the leadership was nearly entirely decimated by the political purges, though this was especially apparent among the upper-strata in the ASSR as they continued to be comprised primarily of former POWs, and therefore "Old Bolsheviks." Much like in the Western borderlands, many in the ASSR were arrested,

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<sup>205</sup> Weiner, 145.

<sup>206</sup> Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 410.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 411.

deported, or executed simply due to their nationality, being accused of “undermining collective farms in the Volga Republic.”<sup>208</sup> Similarly, many Volga Germans were arrested if they had received aid from Germany’s “Brothers in Need” food assistance program in the early 1930s.<sup>209</sup> In the eyes of the Soviet regime, such individuals held a veritable link to Nazi Germany, and were therefore considered disloyal citizens and agents of a foreign government.

## 8.2: The Eradication of the Evangelical Lutheran Church

One of the more detrimental aspects of the national operations of the Great Terror for the Volga Republic was the resurgence of anti-religious campaign against the Protestant clergy. While the iconoclasm of the Bolsheviks had become a point of policy following the October Revolution, the extirpation of idolatry up to this point had been directed primarily against the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Evangelical-Lutheran Church was granted a fairly substantial degree of freedom throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s. While approximately 70% of Volga Germans adhered to the Lutheran faith, perhaps 20% belonged to the Catholic Church. Though an anti-Catholic campaign had been fiercely carried out in the early 1920s, including the show trial of clergy in 1922 and the closing of the theological seminary in Saratov the same year, the Lutheran Church, by creating a new structure of the church that was congruent with Soviet Policy, was allowed to continue its activity in the Volga region.<sup>210</sup> Indeed, until the late 1930s, the most detrimental actions of the Soviets towards the Lutheran church was the publication of anti-religious propaganda and newspapers, such as *Neuland* and *Der Gottlose an der Drehbank*. Protestant clergy were gradually seen as inimical to

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<sup>208</sup> “12 More to Die in Russia: Collective Farmers in Volga and Urals Convicted of Sabotage,” *The New York Times* (October 24, 1937), 33.

<sup>209</sup> Mukhina, 38.

<sup>210</sup> Fleischhauer and Pinkus, 49.



Marxist-Leninist ideology. As a report on religious activity in the Volga Republic in 1936 reveals, members of the clergy “tried to teach kolkhoz farmers to demand for themselves from the kolkhoz board a seven-hour workday and ten to fifteen rubles pay per day, and at least six kilograms of bread per work-day.”<sup>211</sup>

Despite the fact that Article 124 of the 1936 Constitution stated that “freedom of religious worship and freedom of antireligious propaganda is recognized for all citizens,”<sup>212</sup> an integral aspect of the nation-based repression of the late 1930s against the Volga Germans was the anti-religious campaigns directed against the Evangelical-Lutheran Church. Indeed, of the 346 Lutheran churches in 1932, nearly all had been closed down after 1936.<sup>213</sup> In January of 1938, the *New York Times* reported that “there has been a wholesale ‘cleansing’ of the German Lutheran clergy, who ministered to a considerable Protestant population composed of ‘Volga Germans.’”<sup>214</sup> The bias of American newspapers at this time notwithstanding, the Lutheran leadership was decimated in the late 1930s both as facets of the national-based repression as well as the revival of the anti-religious campaigns in general after 1936. The Volga German clergy were officially accused of carrying out a series of crimes varying from terrorist plots against the party leadership to espionage for foreign powers (i.e. Germany). By 1939, the Evangelical-Lutheran Church, the traditional cornerstone of Volga German identification, had been eliminated.

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<sup>211</sup> “Except from Summary Report on Religious Activity among Germans in Volga Region, 1936” in *Stalinism as a Way of Life: A Narrative in Documents* ed. Lewis Siegelbaum and Andrei Sokolov (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 200), 185-186.

<sup>212</sup> Stalin, “Constitution (Fundamental Law) of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics,” 231.

<sup>213</sup> Fleischhauer and Pinkus, 52.

<sup>214</sup> Harold Denny, “Soviet Denounces Bishops as Spies: Both Orthodox Leaders among Those Accused in Drive on Terrorism and Wrecking,” *The New York Times* (January 11, 1938), 1.

### 8.3: The “Russification” of the Volga Germans

Additionally, the Soviet regime enacted an acculturational Russification policy towards the Volga Germans in the late 1930s. This policy, however, was part of a larger trend throughout the Soviet Union, as Russian language and literature were made obligatory subjects in non-Russian schools throughout the Soviet Union in March of 1938. The decree, however, was not implemented to obtain an ultimate goal of assimilation towards the non-Russians; rather, it was issued as an acculturational measure in an attempt to affirm the loyalty of the peripheral nationalities. Indeed, the decree explained that the policy was issued due to the need for a common language to further economic and cultural development; to promote the training of non-Russian cadres; and to ensure the success of military measures.<sup>215</sup> Nevertheless, the directive proved to be difficult to execute, and Stalin (as well as other party leaders) were unable to coherently signify a balance while implementing such a policy. Indeed, as Peter Blitstein suggests, the examination of the decree “reveals that contradictions and conflict beset the regime’s language policy in non-Russian schools after 1938 and that the very nature of the Soviet multinational state remained ambiguous to its rulers.”<sup>216</sup>

While the diasporic nationalities’ native language institutions were abolished, and the members of these communities were subject to de facto assimilation, it must be stressed that paradoxically, this did not apply to the Volga German ASSR. Instead, the Volga Germans were subject to acculturational Russification, and though this policy officially applied to all non-Russian nationalities, it soon became clear that the Kremlin was unable (or unwilling) to provide the funding to all Union Republics and ASSRs to implement this measure.<sup>217</sup> Nevertheless, unlike in many national territories, the Volga Republic received sufficient

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<sup>215</sup> Blitstein, 258.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 259.

financial backing to begin the process of implementing the mandatory study of Russian language and literature. Indeed, in 1939, the Kremlin earmarked 48 million rubles for the development of education in the Volga ASSR,<sup>218</sup> which suggests that the acculturation of the Volga Germans was high on the agenda for the Soviet regime at this time. Though acculturational Russification through education policy was applied more fervently to the ASSR than other national territories, the basic internal elements behind the policy of *korenizatsiia* continued throughout this period, though at a significantly reduced pace.

German, therefore, continued to be the official language of the national territory, and the promotion of German culture continued until the autonomous republic's liquidation in September of 1941. In the midst of the NKVD's German Operation and while Soviet Germans in the western borderlands were being deported to the interior, 1.3537 million rubles were allocated to the construction of six new German-language cinemas in the Volga Republic.<sup>219</sup> While all German-language newspapers outside the territory of the ASSR were closed down, the majority of the Volga Republic's publications continued throughout this period. Indeed, some such as *Stalins Brigade* and *Roter Stürmer* began publishing as late as 1936, and the main newspaper of the ASSR, *Nachricthen*, continued publication until September of 1941. Official government documents, including birth certificates, continued to be issued bilingually into 1941.<sup>220</sup> Thus, contrary to the claims of certain historians, German language and culture continued to be promoted in the Volga Republic following the 1936 Constitution, though the usage of Russian was introduced at this time in order to integrate the region into the new notion of a multinational unitary state and to instill a sense of loyalty towards the center.

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<sup>218</sup> *Yubileynaya Sessiya Verhovnogo Soveta ASSR Nemcev Povolzhya, Stenograficheskij Otchet, Izdanie Verhovnogo Soveta ASSRNPasrnp*, (1939), 14.

<sup>219</sup> *Beschluss- der 8 session des zentralvollzugskomitees der ASSR der Wolgadeutschen- Uber den Volkswirtschaftsplan der ASSR der Wolgadeutschen fur 1937*, (Engels, 1937), 13.

<sup>220</sup> Volkskommissariat des Innern der U.d.S.S.R., "Geburtsschein," (January 10, 1941).

#### 8.4: The End of *Korenizatsiia*

Though the nationally determined repression that had been carried out against Soviet-Germans was generally implemented in the Western borderlands, the standing of the Volga Germans had undoubtedly deteriorated as a result of the turn towards Stalinist primordialism. Indeed, in the late 1930s, in addition to being perceived as a member of an “enemy nation,” an individual whose passport stated that they were German would be denied access to resources and opportunities.<sup>221</sup> Upward mobility in the late 1930s for Volga Germans was therefore extremely difficult if not impossible outside the territory of the ASSR. Nevertheless, *korenizatsiia* of the labor force continued, and by 1939, Volga Germans comprised 53.1% of total white-collar positions in the Volga Republic, an improvement from 52.1% in 1926, despite the fact that the number of Germans in the republic had declined between those years, both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of the ASSR’s population.<sup>222</sup> Though anti-German sentiments had once again become widespread throughout the polity, it cannot be said that *korenizatsiia* was abandoned in the Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in the late 1930s. However, the nationally determined repression and acculturational Russification of the Volga Germans in this period can be used to demonstrate a larger process throughout the Soviet Union; a shift from class-based to nation-based repression.

Such sentiments would culminate following the Nazi invasion in June of 1941, when the diasporic nationalities (and others who were deemed to be incongruent with Marxist-Leninist ideology) were deported wholesale from their places of residence. On August 27, 1941, Laventiy Beria, head of the NKVD, issued a decree ordering the deportation of all Germans in the Volga Republic, without exception. The order stated that “all ethnic Germans

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<sup>221</sup> Weitz, 83-84.

<sup>222</sup> Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 381.

residing in the Volga German ASSR and in the Saratov and Stalingrad Oblasts are subject to resettlement. Communist Party and Komsomol members are to be resettled simultaneously with all the others. Germans residing in the mentioned regions are to be resettled to the territory of the Kazakh SSR, Krasnoyarsk and Altai Krai, and the Omsk and Novosibirsk Oblasts.”<sup>223</sup> The Volga Republic was formally abolished, and the territory was distributed between Saratov and Stalingrad Oblasts.<sup>224</sup> Wholesale deportations would later be carried out against Finns, Karachais, Kalmyks, Chechens and Ingushetians, Balkars, Crimeans, Tatars, Meskhetian Turks, and others. Though examination of the wartime deportation of Soviet nationalities is widespread in scholarship and is outside the scope of this thesis, suffice to say that the controversies surrounding these events and their implications continue to be relevant in post-socialist Russia.

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<sup>223</sup> “Excerpt from the NKVD Instruction for Resettling Germans in the Volga German ASSR and in the Saratov and Stalingrad Oblasts- 27 August, 1941,” In Polian, 129-130.

<sup>224</sup> Polian, 131.

## Conclusion

Thus, the repression of the Volga Germans was not based on ethnically determined criteria until the mid-1930s. Prior to this point, the Soviet regime sought to remove “elements” from the societal body which were deemed to be inimical to Marxist-Leninist ideology, and though these processes possessed an ostensibly national dimension at times, in the case of the Volga Germans, this was due to their status as privileged subjects of the tsarist empire. Indeed, the favored position of German settlers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century lasted until the 1860s, when the reforms of Alexander II led to a deterioration of the standing of Russian-Germans. Nonetheless, the settlers continued to accrue vast amounts of wealth and landholdings in the Volga region, and by the First World War, they were among the wealthiest categories of peoples in the Russian Empire. While anti-German sentiments became widespread as a result of the war, after taking power, the Bolsheviks sought to halt the trend which viewed the Russian-Germans as “enemy aliens.”

Indeed, throughout the interwar period and especially in the 1920s and early 1930s, the Soviet regime actively promoted German language and culture in the Volga Republic. In order to control what the Bolsheviks saw as the inevitable process of decolonization in the former Russian Empire, the regime enacted the policy of *korenizatsiia* which granted the Volga Germans a national territorial unit which was meant to emulate a modern nation-state. Though this process was initially inhibited by numerous factors, the project became increasingly successful throughout the 1920s, and pinnacle in the Volga Republic in the early 1930s, despite the fact that much of the region had been subject to abhorrent repression during the dekulakization campaigns. Indeed, the Volga Germans disproportionately suffered as a result of the war against class enemies. However, this was due to the prerevolutionary socioeconomic status of the German settlers, and the Bolshevik regime’s obsession with

categorizing the population according to class (and nationality) facilitated the process of eradicating “capitalist elements” from the countryside.

Though *korenizatssia* would continue throughout the Volga Republic’s existence, the policy was altered in the mid-1930s due to the ethnicization of Soviet xenophobia. As Nazi Germany increasingly imposed a diasporic claim on the *Volksdeutsche* of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, the Kremlin adjusted the nationalities policy in an attempt to mobilize the population in the event of a potential foreign invasion. The “Friendship of the Peoples” thus promoted the Russian language and culture in order to provide a unifying bond between the many nationalities of the policies. Though the titular language in each national territorial unit continued to be the official language of administration in each region, Russian language and culture was celebrated and promoted in order to serve as a centerpiece of the multinational Soviet state. The Constitution of 1936 is emblematic of this turn from class to people in the Soviet Union. Stalin had proclaimed that the polity had been eradicated of class-enemies, and the regime instead began to focus on the peoples of the Soviet Union by stressing the “rootedness” and sovereignty of the national republics. As the diasporic nationalities such as the Volga Germans could not adopt a primordial stance, their loyalty increasingly came into question in the mid-1930s, and it became a widely held belief among the Party leadership that such national categories held an ultimate allegiance towards external states.

Consequently, an integral component of the Great Terror of the late 1930s was the effort to remove “citizens of foreign governments,” which eventually equated to the diasporic nationalities, despite the fact that their ancestors had resided in the territory for more than a century. Though the NKVD national operations were carried out primarily against Germans in the western borderlands, the Volga Germans also became subject to repression based solely on their nationality. At this time, all German national institutions and territories outside the ASSR were liquidated, and their inhabitants were subject to de facto assimilation.

Simultaneously, Russian language and literature were made obligatory subjects in all non-Russians schools, and though this policy was not applied consistently throughout the polity, it was strongly implemented in the Volga Republic. The territory was thus subject to acculturational Russification, though it must be stressed that *korenizatsiia* continued in the ASSR, though at a significantly reduced pace. The perception that Soviet-Germans were potentially disloyal subjects led to their deportation to Siberia and Kazakhstan and the liquidation of the ASSR following the invasion of Nazi Germany in 1941.

This thesis has sought to clarify the victimhood narratives which claim that repression against the Volga Germans was nationally determined throughout the interwar period. Instead, as this thesis has demonstrated, by constructing what was meant to emulate a modern nation-state in the Volga Republic, the Bolsheviks actively promoted German identification, and granted Soviet-Germans preferential treatment. This policy ardently continued into the mid-1930s, when due to a number of convergent factors, the Volga Germans began to be perceived as disloyal citizens. In response to these circumstances, the regime implemented a policy of acculturational Russification towards the Volga Germans, though contrary to many narratives, this did not entail forced assimilation. Rather, *korenizatsiia* continued, albeit at a reduced pace. Nevertheless, by the middle of the decade, Soviet repression had taken on an overt national dimension, specifically in regards to the diasporic nationalities. Such sentiments culminated following the invasion of Nazi Germany in 1941, when the approximately 400,000 Volga Germans were forcibly deported from the homes, and the Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was formally abolished



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