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THE MENNONITES' 'GREAT TREK' FROM THE
OCCUPIED REGIONS OF UKRAINE TO WARTHEGAU
IN 1943-4

Abstract

The German troops' large-scale retreat on the Eastern Front was accompanied by a substantial population outflow from the occupied regions of the USSR. The German Mennonites (approx. 35,000 people) preferred to obey the occupiers' order and evacuate to the west in the autumn of 1943. Several thousands of them were transported in echelons directly to Warthegau and the region of Danzig. The remaining part of deportees had to sustain a difficult and dramatic route in the convoys. The Nazi leadership planned to use them as settlers or labour force on the annexed Western Polish lands. After the end of the Second World War, most of the Mennonites were forcibly repatriated to the USSR; others succeeded in emigrating to Canada or Latin America.

Keywords: Mennonite refugees, evacuation from Ukraine, Ethnic German Liaison Office, Third Reich, *Volksdeutsche*, Western Polish lands

I
TOPICALITY OF THE PROBLEM

The large-scale retreat of Nazi Germany and its allies' troops on the Eastern Front in 1943-4 was accompanied by the outflow of a particular part of the population of the western part of the occupied territories of the Soviet Union. Those movements were often carried

out under the strong administrative pressure of the occupation authorities, who were trying to obtain additional labour resources for the Third Reich economy that way.¹ At the same time, according to a Russian researcher Pavel Polyán, those who “had no sin of complicity, but who had already slurped or taken a sip from the bowl of Stalin’s repressions” also voluntarily left the Soviet Union together with the Wehrmacht.² Those included the Mennonites – representatives of the German-speaking communities, whose numerous settlements were located in Soviet Ukraine.³ The story of their survival on the occupied territories is a complicated tale that includes elements of collaboration, fruitless hopes of freedom and farming their own land, where there would be no anti-religious persecution and political repressions.

Then the time of bitter disappointments came: the occupiers’ land policy did not meet the Mennonites’ expectations; the *Volksdeutsche* status did not bring the promised privileges in practice.⁴ The former *Volksdeutsche* faced an unenviable fate when the final turning point in the war occurred, and the Red Army began to liberate Left Bank Ukraine

¹ Jan-Hinnerk Antons, ‘Flucht ins “Dritte Reich”. Wie Osteuropäer Schutz im NS-Staat suchten (1943–1945)’, *Zeithistorische Forschungen / Studies in Contemporary History*, 14 (2017), 234–5; Павел Полян, *Жертвы двух диктатур: Жизнь, труд, унижения и смерть советских военнопленных и остарбайтеров на чужбине и на родине* (Москва, 2002), 197.

² Полян, *Жертвы двух диктатур*, 134.

³ For prehistory see Наталия Осташева, *На переломе эпох* (Москва, 1998). In 1939 there were 163,000 ethnic Germans on the territory of the Reich Commissariat Ukraine: Альфред Айсфельд, ‘Великая Отечественная война’, in *Немцы России: Энциклопедия*, 1 (Москва, 1999), 337–42.

⁴ See, e.g.: Horst Gerlach, ‘Mennonites, the Molotschna, and the Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle in the Second World War’, *Mennonite Life*, 3 (Sept., 1986), 4–9; Karl Fast, *Gebt der Wahrheit die Ehre! Ein Schicksalsbericht* (Winnipeg, 1989); Marlene Epp, *Women without Men. Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War* (Toronto, 2000); Alfred Eisfeld and Vladimir Martynenko, ‘Filtration und operative Erfassung der ethnischen Deutschen in der Ukraine durch die Organe des Innern und der Staatssicherheit während des Zweiten Weltkrieges und in der Nachkriegszeit’, *Nordost-Archiv. Zeitschrift für Regionalgeschichte*, Neue Folge, xxi (2013), 104–81; Светлана Бобылева, ‘Реконструкция психологического состояния немецкого населения Украины в период фашистской оккупации’, in *Два с половиной века с Россией: Материалы 4-й международной научно-практической конференции* (Москва, 2013), 454–74; Виктор Клец, ‘Повседневная жизнь немцев Украины в условиях нацистской оккупации (1941–1944)’, in *Два с половиной века с Россией*, 474–90.

(summer–winter 1943, the Battle of the Dnieper operations), where the Mennonite and the German settlements were located. In this regard, the mass evacuation of ethnic Germans' and Mennonites from a number of occupied Ukrainian regions was to a large extent voluntary. They did not have any illusions about their future, because they still remembered Stalin's terror of 1937–8 and the deportation of 1941.⁵ According to the official data, about 350,000 ethnic Germans left the USSR during the so-called 'administrative relocations' in 1943–4, but those events had been deeply imprinted in the historical memory of the Ukrainian Mennonites, as primarily evidenced by numerous memoirs.⁶ Consideration of peculiarities of their evacuation saga makes it also possible to reconstruct a number of key aspects in more details (including the strategies of survival in extreme war conditions), which relate to the process of the entire German population moving from the Reich Commissariat Ukraine [*Reichskommissariat Ukraine*, hereinafter: RKU] to the territory of the Third Reich.

II

THE MENNONITES OF UKRAINE UNDER 1941–3 OCCUPATION CONDITIONS: BEFORE THE EVACUATION

The German attack on the USSR at the end of June 1941 provoked another round of Stalinist repressions against the national minorities (including Ukrainian Germans). The loyalty of the latter ones was called into question once again. In some areas of the right-bank part of Ukraine, German residents' forced eviction began in mid-August 1941. However, the deportation was not completed due to the German offensive. It should be recognised that after the repressions of the 1920s and 1930s, many Mennonites welcomed occupation and attempted

⁵ Альфред Айсфельд, "Большой террор" в Украине: немецкая операция 1937–1938 гг.', in "Большой террор" в Украине: немецкая операция 1937–1938 годов: сборник документов (Киев, 2018), 211–303; Виктор Дённингхаус, *В тени "Большого брата": западные национальные меньшинства в СССР 1917–1938 гг.* (Москва, 2011); Игорь Татаринov, 'Большой террор на Украине: некоторые особенности проведения немецкой операции НКВД', in *Два с половиной века с Россией*, 397–405.

⁶ See, e.g.: 'Der große Kriegstreck 1944. Rückführung und Rücksiedlung von 350000 Rußlanddeutschen – Schicksale und Erlebnisse', *Ostdeutscher Beobachter*, 201 (23 July 1944).

to sabotage the withdrawal decree:⁷ they either fled the villages or tried to slow down the movement of their convoys.⁸

Mass deportations in the summer and autumn of 1941 increased anti-Soviet sentiments among the Mennonites. Those lucky enough to avoid exile to the east usually experienced joy at the sight of German soldiers: “A German would not offend a German” [*sic!*].⁹ The occupiers’ arrival inspired hopes for a new life without fear of reprisals.¹⁰ During the occupation beginning, most of the Mennonites seriously believed that German victory would bring nothing but good to everyone.¹¹

The Nazi state considered *volksdeutsche* as “an indispensable element for the future governance of Ukraine”.¹² Many colonists willingly began to work in the occupational structures (for example, as managers or translators). Some received reasonably high positions in the new administrative hierarchy: Heinrich Wiebe was appointed as a Mayor of Zaporizhzhia, and Johann Epp became the head of the Chortitza district. A significant part of the ethnic Germans population actively cooperated with the occupiers for material reasons. Working for army structures attracted many with good wages and food provision.¹³

Ethnic Germans who entered the gendarmerie or auxiliary police services often had to participate in punitive actions against civilians, especially against the Jews. Alexander Rempel (the son of a famous repressed preacher), who worked as a translator during the occupation

⁷ Ruth Derksen Siemens (ed.), *Remember Us: Letters from Stalin's Gulag (1930–37)*, i: *The Regehr Family* (Kitchener, Ont., 2007), 19–39; Jacob J. Neufeld, *Path of Thorns. Soviet Mennonite Life under Communist and Nazi Rule*, ed. Harvey L. Dyck, transl. Harvey L. Dyck and Sarah Dyck (Toronto, 2014).

⁸ Epp, *Women without Men*, 27; Peter Epp, *Ob tausend fallen: Mein Leben im Archipel Gulag* (Bielefeld, 1997), 24–6.

⁹ Epp, *Women without Men*, 29–30.

¹⁰ Neufeld, *Path of Thorns*, 218.

¹¹ Epp, *Women without Men*, 29.

¹² Klaus-Michael Mallmann et al. (eds), *Die “Ereignismeldungen UdSSR” 1941. Dokumente der Einsatzgruppen in der Sowjetunion*, 1 (Darmstadt, 2011), 625.

¹³ Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde (hereinafter: BArch), R 6/109. Abschrift, Dr. Rempel, Die Bodenfrage in den deutschen Siedlungen in der Ukraine, Bericht über meine Dienstreise in der Ukraine in der Zeit v. 11. Oktober bis 11. November [19]42, ohne Unterschrift, 56.

years, was one of the first to speak in 1984 about the Mennonites' involvement in Nazi crimes.¹⁴

However, the relations between the occupiers and the Mennonite Germans were not ideal. For example, some colonists were dissatisfied with the lack of a solution to the land problem. Nevertheless, despite inevitable disappointments, most ethnic Germans remained loyal to the Third Reich, realising there was no alternative to their situation.

III

EVACUATION PROJECTS VS SPONTANEOUS ESCAPE ATTEMPTS

The Nazi leadership seriously considered carrying out the large-scale resettlements of ethnic Germans from certain Ukrainian regions for the first time after the military catastrophe near Stalingrad. Thus, active counter-offensive actions of Soviet troops in the southwestern direction at the end of February 1943 forced the SS-Reichsführer Heinrich Himmler to approve the Mennonites' evacuation plan from Halbstadt [Molochansk] and adjacent territories to Galicia.¹⁵ The document authors believed that Ternopil, Zboriv, Trembovlya and Skalat areas (today Ternopil district, west Ukraine) would be most suitable for the settlers' successful economic adaptation. Settling them in villages with a German population until 1939 was also considered an alternative option. The plan's logic implied local deportations of the Ukrainian and, possibly, Polish population. However, it was necessary to overcome the objections of the authorities responsible for the security in a region before meeting that fundamental condition. According to the authorities' opinion, the arrival of thousands

¹⁴ Gerhard Rempel, 'Mennonites and the Holocaust: From Collaboration to Perpetuation', *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, lxxxiv, 4 (2010), 530–5.

¹⁵ BArch, R 69/704, Der Chef der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD, Einwandererzentralstelle, Kommission XVI Sonderzug, Tgb-Nr. 513/43, 26/32-23/Wa/Dr., Lemberg, 6. März 1943, Postschliessfach 181, An die Einwandererzentralstelle, Abtl. II A, Litzmannstadt, Betr.: Geflüchtete Volksdeutsche aus der Ukraine, SS-Obersturmbannführer, 218; BArch, R 69/864. Amt I Dr. St./Ha, I-1/1-8, 4.3.43, Vermerk zum Vertrag beim Reichsführer-SS, Betrifft: Ansiedlung der Schwarzmeer-Deutschen, 32; Institut für Zeitgeschichte-Archiv, München (hereinafter: IfZ-Archiv), MA 330, Der Reichsführer-SS, 1511/43, Feld-Kommandostelle, 24. Februar [19]43, Geheime Reichssache!, An das Stabshauptamt beim Reichskommissar für die Festigung Deutschen Volkstums, Berlin, Anordnung, gez. H. Himmler, 3711.

of ethnic Germans to Galicia would have caused land expropriation. As a result, a large number of local Ukrainians would have joined the ranks of Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists [*Організація українських націоналістів*] (OUN) supporters. Therefore, with its great swaths of fertile land, Lublin could have become an alternative recipient region. In addition, the local Ukrainians' eviction was not a significant threat to the Third Reich's political interests.¹⁶ However, they decided to postpone the evacuation of Mennonites from the left bank of the Dnieper thanks to the stabilisation of the southern sector of the front, a result of Wehrmacht's successful counterattacks.¹⁷

Since the end of the summer of 1943, the evacuations of the German population from the occupied Ukrainian regions gradually acquired a massive and planned character. According to Himmler's order, the main responsibility for their implementation was assigned to the Ethnic German Liaison Office [*Völkische deutsche Mittelstelle*, hereinafter: VoMi], which was headed by SS-Oberführer Horst Hoffmeyer.¹⁸

At first, the SS command did not correctly assess the severity of the situation at the front and therefore decided to evacuate just ethnic Germans, as before, from the very territories that, in the forthcoming weeks or months, could be subjected to the Red Army attacks. Thus, as is known from Hoffmeyer's report dated 3 August 1943, in autumn, the occupation authorities intended to carry out the resettlement of German colonies inhabitants from the Grunau and Melitopol regions to the very close Halbstadt area (Molochna colonies).¹⁹ However, the further course of military events forced them to make severe adjustments to this plan.

¹⁶ BAArch, R 69/864, Amt I Dr. St./Ha, I-1/1-8, 4. März [19]43, Vermerk zum Vertrag beim Reichsführer-SS, Betrifft: Ansiedlung der Schwarzmeer-Deutschen, 32–3.

¹⁷ Ingeborg Fleischhauer, *Das Dritte Reich und die Deutschen in der Sowjetunion* (Stuttgart, 1983), 205.

¹⁸ Horst Hoffmeyer (1903–1944) – SS-Brigadeführer (since 1943). Headed the Sonderkommando 'Russia' [Sonderkommando Russland; often referred to as Sonderkommando 'R'], which was subordinate to VoMi. The unit acted as the main curator in the registration and guardianship of ethnic Germans on the Nazi-occupied Soviet territories.

¹⁹ IfZ-Archiv, MA 303, Rowno, Nr. 784, 8.9., 2330, 10. September [1943], Geheim, an Reichsführer-SS, Feldkommandostelle, gez. Prützmann, SS-Obergruppenführer, 9137.

The news of the Red Army troops' approach motivated some colonies' inhabitants to decide to leave the territory without a prior order from the occupation authorities. The latter, although they tried to conceal the truth about the situation at the front from the local population, still could not cover up the fact of a large-scale retreat – the best confirmation of which were the columns of German troops and refugees retreating in the western direction. The commander of one of the military units, withdrawing westward through the Steinfeld Mennonite colony (Zaporizhzhia region), tried to assure its inhabitants that the German army would not leave anyone stranded, face to face with the Bolsheviks. However, the colonists gathered and decided to prepare for a hasty departure immediately after the soldiers had left. The Mennonites fled from their colony in 64 carts the same day. Soon their group increased significantly due to the Grunfeld colony inhabitants, who also decided to leave. Sometime later, one of the military administration authorised representatives tried to stop this migration, ordering the Mennonites to return immediately. At first, he tried to convince the colonists with the help of some stereotypical phrases about the 'invincibility of the German army', but then he resorted to threatening them with harsh measures for disobeying the order.²⁰ However, the occupying authorities soon realised the need for more decisive action.

IV THE START OF THE ORGANISED EVACUATION

In early September 1943, the residents of Molochansk colonies in Zaporizhzhia region, which formed a sizeable German enclave in the south of Ukraine, were among the first to be evacuated to the right bank of the Dnieper. Despite the Soviet troops' rapid approach, the resettlement of many groups was carried out in a relatively organised manner. Thus, the heads of the colonies received an order from the German authorities on 9–10 September to prepare all residents for an urgent evacuation, which was to be carried out by horse-drawn vehicles. In some instances, Ukrainian peasants had to provide the Mennonites with carts. Despite this, offering a carriage to each family was still not possible. Therefore,

²⁰ Fast, *Gebt der Wahrheit*, 74–5.

it was common for two or more families to put all the most valuable and necessary possessions on a single cart.²¹ Special attention was paid to the preparation of provisions before the evacuation. According to VoMi's instructions, the colonists had to stock up on food supplies for an extended period. Many families tried to take at least one cow or sheep flock. But still, a part of the livestock had to be slaughtered to procure a meat supply. All in all, the German authorities allotted only three days to prepare for the trek.²²

Archival documents, supported by numerous memoirs, leave almost no doubts that the overwhelming majority of colonists agreed to leave their homes and to rush towards their fate (towards the unknown) out of their own will because of the fear of the Soviet regime's reprisals. But from time to time, the invaders still had to use administrative pressure against those who tried to evade evacuation. The coercion had different manifestations. "Was it possible not to go? No, it wasn't: they would have shot you for disobeying the order", Hedwig Galblaub, the colonist from Weinau (Prishib area), recalled.²³ However, according to her words, the occupation authorities made exceptions for some people and allowed them to remain, for example, German women married to men of different nationalities. However, "if the husband was German and the woman had a German surname, she could not refuse".²⁴ And yet, despite the strict order, some tried to sabotage evacuation for personal reasons. Hedwig Galblaub recalled one of such episodes:

Vera Moiseenko ... was married to Emil Kukenheimer from Alt-Nassau. He was taken to the Labour Army in 1941, and she went along with the rest. Then she warned our women and hid during the first overnight stay (in Kronsfeld); she stayed in the village and then returned home. ... Vera's absence was covered up, so she managed to escape.²⁵

In addition to the threat of execution, other measures were taken against those who hesitated. According to some circumstantial evidence, the occupiers sometimes forced the colonists to make almost impossible choices: they were allowed to stay, but their children were to be

²¹ Jacob A. Neufeld, 'Die Flucht – 1943–46', *Mennonite Life* (Jan. 1951), 8.

²² *Ibid.*; Neufeld, *Path of Thorns*, 238.

²³ Елена Логвенова, *Вейнау. По следам погибшей цивилизации* (Augsburg, 2009), 124.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

taken to Germany.²⁶ Explanatory work also had a powerful moral and psychological impact: “We were told: ‘if you don’t go, the Russians will shoot you or send you to Siberia’, so we went”, recalled Johann Kempf, who was 11 years old in the autumn of 1943.²⁷

On 12 September 1943, the groups of Molochansk migrants set out in the direction of Dnieper on covered carts. The German authorities’ plan also included the evacuation of the residents of the cities or urbanised settlements by rail. For example, elderly and sick people, hospital patients, as well as mothers with small children were partially evacuated this way from Halbstadt and some other large colonies. However, many of them still had to be evacuated in covered wagons due to the lack of seats on the trains. As a result, the elderly and the seriously ill often died during the trip, having no strength to endure all the difficulties of a long journey.²⁸

It is worth mentioning that some of the refugees entirely or partially destroyed their villages before the retreat. Sometimes it was done on the occupiers’ direct order. For example, the Hierschau Mennonite colony was wholly burned down this way.²⁹ But one cannot affirm that such cases were widespread (although they corresponded to the “scorched land” tactics). According to some reports, unconfirmed as of now, the army units were also partially involved in the destruction of deserted German colonies.³⁰ Sometimes the initiators of houses’ destruction were the colonists themselves, who were apparently trying to strengthen their inner psychological readiness for evacuation.³¹

V

EVACUATION PROCEDURE

All the residents of the Molochansk colonies were evacuated in five columns (groups). The responsibility for organising the crowd and overall leadership during the trek was assigned to VoMi district

²⁶ Светлана И. Бобылева (ed.), *Живи и помни... Истории меннонитских колоний Екатеринославщины* (Днепропетровск, 2006), 306, 312.

²⁷ Логвенова, *Вейнау*, 124.

²⁸ Neufeld, *Path of Thorns*, 239.

²⁹ Helmut T. Huebert, *Hierschau: An Example of Russian Mennonite Life* (Winnipeg, 1986), 329.

³⁰ Martin Durksen, *Die Krim war unsere Heimat* (Winnipeg, 1977), 239.

³¹ Бобылева, *Живи и помни*, 93.

commands [*Bereichskommando*]. As a rule, one column consisted of several groups (15 or more), each mainly composed of the inhabitants of a particular colony. These groups were further headed by the headmen, who bore their share of the responsibility. In turn, each colony's inhabitants were divided into several separate groups (each consisting of 20 families). The German Red Cross [*Deutsches Rotes Kreuz*, hereinafter: DRK] nurses provided migrants with medical assistance.³² A SS cavalry regiment formed from the Mennonites during the occupation³³ served as the armed convoy.

The refugees' transition to the right bank of the Dnieper took place along two pontoon crossings, which the German army installed between Kakhovka and Berislav [Kherson Oblast now]. After that, the groups of evacuated Germans continued their way to the north.³⁴ By the German authorities' decision, the entire contingent was to be resettled in Ukrainian villages on the territory of Novy Bug and Alexanderstadt [Generalbezirk Mykolaiv³⁵].³⁶ It should be noted that other ethnic groups' representatives arrived along with the Germans (for example, Russians, Ukrainians, Turkmen, etc.). They had their reasons to escape. Many of them provided migrants with various types of assistance during the evacuation. German families without adult men present needed it most of all. The foreign contingent was heterogeneous in social and legal terms as well. For example, the Soviet war prisoners, a certain number of whom worked on the German colonists' farms during the occupation, formed a separate category.³⁷

Having crossed the Dnieper, all refugee groups were initially sent to hastily set up meeting points [*Treckstationen*], from where they were further distributed between the surrounding villages. One such point was established in a machine tractor station in Volodymyrivka village [Generalbezirk Mykolaiv]. The refugees who arrived there received hot meals and medical assistance. Their further settlement in Ukrainian

³² Neufeld, *Path of Thorns*, 239–40.

³³ Fleischhauer, *Das Dritte Reich*, 209.

³⁴ Neufeld, *Die Flucht*, 9–10.

³⁵ The Reichskommissariat Ukraine was divided into general districts [*Generalbezirke*], districts [*Gebiete*] and sub-districts. The boundaries of the general districts did not correspond to the former Soviet administrative-territorial division into oblasts.

³⁶ BArch, R 57/1660, Abschrift!, Aus dem Einsatzbericht cand. Iur. Helene Welke, 1. November 1943, 245.

³⁷ Neufeld, *Path of Thorns*, 245.

villages was carried out through compacting living space for residents. It meant the following: the occupant authorities demanded that the Ukrainian peasants completely vacate nearly half of the houses and move to their neighbours in all the inhabited localities to which the evacuated Germans were sent. In addition, the compaction had to be carried out so the Germans could live apart. At the same time, the German officials obviously did not want to aggravate relations with the Ukrainian peasants too much, allowing them to take all property from their houses, including furniture, with them. Thus, the refugees often entered completely empty dwellings. Their living conditions were mainly very cramped. Typically, two German families, or 15 people on average, huddled in a small peasant hut.³⁸ According to other sources, even three or four families were forced to live under one roof.³⁹ After leaving their spacious family houses in the native colonies, the settlers felt uncomfortable. Soon after the resettlement, some refugees were involved in farm work.⁴⁰

According to the documents, most refugees were in a very depressed state of mind. Many of them refused to believe the authorities' assurances that they would be finally settled in that region from then on. On the contrary, many colonists openly declared their desire to continue retreating in the western direction, as close to the German borders as possible. That attitude was only explained by the fact that they did not feel entirely safe on the other bank of the Dnieper.⁴¹

The evacuation of the German colonies from the left bank of the Dnieper went on until October 1943. For example, some of the colonists who lived in northwest Mariupol were sent by the occupation authorities to build fortifications of the 'Wotan' defensive line for some time. The order on their evacuation followed in the middle of October.⁴² As the Soviet troops' approach became increasingly inevitable, that phase of resettlement acquired even more alarming and extreme character. For instance, the Rozivka colony inhabitants

³⁸ BArch, R 57/1660, Abschrift!, Aus dem Einsatzbericht cand. Iur. Helene Welke, 1. November 1943, 1–2.

³⁹ IfZ-Archiv, MA 831, Abschrift, Nikolajew, 17. Oktober [19]43, gez. Staub, 0295.

⁴⁰ Neufeld, *Path of Thorns*, 256.

⁴¹ BArch, R 57/1660, Abschrift!, Aus dem Einsatzbericht cand. Iur. Helene Welke, 1. November 1943, 3.

⁴² Friedrich Breiß, *Hass und Liebe* (Wien, 1979), 119.

were almost overtaken by the Soviet tanks on the very first day of their evacuation. This group of refugees' departure was timely covered by the German troops and the soldiers of the previously mentioned SS cavalry regiment.⁴³ Thus, in some cases, German troops provided military cover for the evacuation.

VI

CHORTITZA MENNONITES EVACUATION

Due to the unfavourable course of events at the front, the occupation authorities were forced to notify the Chortitza colonies' inhabitants about the evacuation preparations on 24 September 1943.⁴⁴ One of Karl Stumpp's team members, Gerhard Fast, wrote in his diary that the colonists spent several days preparing for a long journey.⁴⁵ Again, special attention was paid to food provisions. The slaughter of pigs and supplying various meat products were observed almost everywhere. According to Fast, the absolute majority of Chortitza colonists thought only about one thing those days: they wanted to evacuate in the western direction as quickly as possible since many of them were seriously afraid for their lives after the eventual return of the Soviet regime.⁴⁶

Generally, the evacuation of Chortitza colonies' residents from their places of residence lasted more than two weeks. Active use of railway transport was a distinctive feature of this action, and thanks

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁴⁴ George K. Epp, 'Die Große Flucht. Vom Dnjepr zur Weichsel – Von der Weichsel zur Elbe 1943–1945', *Mennonitisches Jahrbuch* (1985), 69–74.

⁴⁵ Gerhard Fast (1894–1974) – Mennonite church pastor, pedagogue, academic researcher. Born in Lugovsk colony, Samara province. He tried to emigrate from the USSR together with his family as part of the Mennonite group in 1930, for which he was promptly arrested and exiled for 5 years to a forced labour camp on the Northern Dvina. Two weeks after arriving at the camp, he escaped, hiding on a cargo ship that was heading to England. Once in England, Fast received permission to move to Germany, where after some time he began to work as a teacher, and also became a member of the missionary organisation 'Licht im Osten' [Light in the East]. At the beginning of 1942 he was appointed an employee of Stumpp sonder team, which was mainly engaged in collecting genealogical information and various statistical data about the German colonies on the Ukrainian territory. In 1952 he emigrated to Canada, where he spent the rest of his life, being engaged in religious, educational, and social activities.

⁴⁶ Gerhard Fast, *Das Ende von Chortitza* (Winnipeg, 1973), 90.

to it, a significant part of the refugees could leave the region quickly and in a relatively safe way. In addition, the echelons did not go to the nearby rear but directly to the Reich. This evacuation method became the only measure available since most Mennonites did not have horse-drawn transport.⁴⁷ Chortitza residents were the first to be evacuated. Army trucks took them to Kantserivka (Rozenal colony) station on 1 October 1943, and they were dispatched from there that very day. According to the testimony of Anna Sudermann, who rode that echelon, the German civil administration took almost no care of supplying the refugees with food. Therefore, many of them were depressed because no one knew how long their journey might take.⁴⁸ In total, nearly 1,500 people (according to other sources – 1,200⁴⁹) arrived in the territory of West Prussia in freight wagons on 11 October 1943.⁵⁰ The residents of numerous other German settlements were also dispatched through Kantserivka. For example, two groups of refugees from Neuendorf [Shiroke] (more than 1,600 people) were evacuated from there on 9–11 October.⁵¹ Another train departed from that station on 12 October (nearly 1,500 people), which included mainly the residents of Schönhorst [Ruchiayvka], as well as almost 500 people of Neuendorf.⁵² The train with the Blumengart refugees departed from Kantserivka on 20 October.⁵³ The echelons were also dispatched from Nove Zaporizhzhia and Mirova stations. These and other groups of the Mennonites were brought to the territories of several German districts: Warthegau,⁵⁴ Danzig – West Prussia and Upper Silesia.

Yet, in some cases, the evacuation by rail could have lasted longer. First of all, it depended on the ferocity of hostilities, the availability

⁴⁷ BAArch, R 6/111, 26. Oktober 1943, I/1925/43g, Geheim! Betr.: Benachrichtigung über den Stand der gegenwärtigen Ansiedlung der Volksdeutschen aus dem Schwarzmeergebiet, 8.

⁴⁸ Fast, *Das Ende von Chortitza*, 102.

⁴⁹ Marlene Epp, 'Moving Forward, Looking Backward: The "Great Trek" from the Soviet Union, 1943–1945', *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, xvi (1998), 61.

⁵⁰ Fast, *Das Ende von Chortitza*, 103–4.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 142.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁵⁴ Warthegau – the region which included part of the Western Poland annexed by the Third Reich.

of free cars, as well as on the condition of the railway tracks and their capacity. Thus, the route of the Kronstal and Rosengart colonies' inhabitants turned out to be instead winding and time-consuming; they were delivered to the outskirts of Nikolayev in the second half of October 1943. The refugees had to dwell in one of the shipyard buildings for some time, as the military suddenly required their echelon.⁵⁵ As a rule, VoMi was responsible for resolving issues related to their temporary arrangement and food supply. The civil administration authorities also provided some assistance from the very beginning of the operation, but at that point they preferred to abstain from any responsibility.⁵⁶ Many refugees had to cook meals on their own, stealing coal from the nearby freight wagons. As a result, the port commandant took rather drastic measures and ordered the guards to open fire at anyone who approached the coal wagons without exceptions. The delicacy of the situation was that mainly women or children could have become potential victims of that order. But thanks to an intervention by the civil administration representatives, the German commandant agreed to call it off since the offences committed by ethnic Germans fell only under the criminal jurisdiction of Germany.⁵⁷ Sometime later, the groups mentioned above of refugees were delivered to Odessa by trucks, from where they continued their journey through Romania to Warthegau.⁵⁸

Many other Chortitza Mennonites, like their coreligionists from the left bank of the Dnieper, still had to be evacuated on covered carts. However, some of the refugees (mainly elderly people, women and children) left their carts in October 1943 at the Apostolovo (not far from Dnipropetrovsk city) station and moved to the trains, which soon departed for the Reich. It was done according to German authorities' decree. Some groups of Mennonites had to wait for a dispatch for several days, because the control over some of the railroad lines was

⁵⁵ IfZ-Archiv, MA 831, Staub, Berlin, 27. November 1943, An SS-Brigadeführer Dr. Kinkelin, Führungsstab Politik, im Hause, Bericht über meinen Einsatz als kommissarischer Leiter Abteilung Deutschtum im Generalbezirk Nikolajew, 0199-0200.

⁵⁶ Fast, *Das Ende von Chortitza*, 98.

⁵⁷ IfZ-Archiv, MA 831, Staub, Berlin, 27. November 1943, An SS-Brigadeführer Dr. Kinkelin, Führungsstab Politik, im Hause, Bericht über meinen Einsatz als kommissarischer Leiter Abteilung Deutschtum im Generalbezirk Nikolajew, 0200.

⁵⁸ Fast, *Das Ende von Chortitza*, 99-100.

partially lost due to fierce fighting.⁵⁹ Further route of Chortitza carts, which later on transported mainly of men, was in Proskuriv direction [Khmelnyskyi city at present].⁶⁰ Of course, sudden separation of families had an additional stressful effect on the refugees' moral and psychological state.

VII NEW PLANS, NEW DIFFICULTIES

At the end of September 1943, SS-Obergruppenführer Wilhelm Kinkelin, an employee at the Führungsstab Politik in Berlin, shared some considerations with his boss Gottlob Berger regarding the further fate of thousands of German refugees who were evacuated by carts. Kinkelin believed in the necessity of creating large German settlement enclaves on Ukrainian territories which remained under the German control. That idea was not new in general, as it was quite consistent with the SS head Himmler's conceptual vision. The main intention consisted in the following: numerous militarised German 'settlements-pearls' [*Siedlungssperlen*] had to become a reliable defense for the railway junctions and lines in the occupied regions.⁶¹

The evacuated colonists' future resettlement questions were substantively discussed on 13 October 1943 at the staff meeting of the higher SS officers and Hans-Adolf Prützmann, the Police Head of Russia-South. According to the meeting results, the plan was to form three large German enclaves in total: the first one – in the area of Proskuriv, the second one – along the Uman-Pervomaik-Voznesensk line, and the third one – in the area of Kirovohrad (all mentioned above in Generalbezirkes Kyiv and Mykolaiv), which was considered to be strategically important railway junction. The officials decided to start to implement that plan as soon as possible. The area around Proskuriv was supposed to become populated by Chortitza colonists. Those of them who were already in Warthegau were sent back. The rest of the enclaves were assigned to Mennonites from the Grunau and Halbstadt regions.⁶²

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 106–7.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁶¹ Fleischhauer, *Das Dritte Reich*, 214.

⁶² IFZ-Archiv, MA 303, Abschrift, Fernschreiben, An den Reichsführer-SS, Hochwald, Geheim!, 13. Oktober [19]43, gez. Prützmann SS-Obergruppenführer, 9120.

However, the Reichskommissar Erich Koch proposed concentrating them in the vicinity of Alexanderstadt [Bolshaya Alexandrovka; Generalbezirk Mikolaiv].⁶³

However, due to a rapid deterioration of the situation in the southern sector of the front, the mentioned plan lost its relevance almost in a few days. Therefore, the German authorities had no choice but to continue evacuating the German population. The decision to prepare for the next phase of the operation was announced by SS-Oberführer Horst Hoffmeyer on 21 October 1943 after preliminary consultations with Field-Marshal-General Ewald von Kleist. At that time, the resettlement included not only the refugees who left the Zaporizhzhia region in September 1943 but also a significant part of the German population who lived on the right side of the Dnieper. The whole contingent was planned to be redeployed to the territory of Generalbezirk Volyn-Podillya.⁶⁴

It should also be mentioned that on 29 October 1943, the 1st Directorate of the Reich Commissioner for the Consolidation of German Nationhood [*Reichskommissariat für die Festigung deutschen Volkstums*, hereinafter: RKFDV], which was in charge of resettlement policy issues, proposed to transfer part of the refugees by water to the Serbian Banat (an area in Central Europe between Serbia, Romania and Hungary). The officials who came up with this initiative primarily referred to numerous difficulties with the contingent's further arrangement on the Western Ukrainian region territories. In addition, they declared that it would be easier for German refugees from Ukraine to find common ground with the Banat colonists rather than with the 'imperial Germans' [*Reichsdeutsche*]. However, this proposal, addressed to VoMi central headquarters chief Werner Lorenz,⁶⁵ apparently remained unanswered.⁶⁶

⁶³ Fleischhauer, *Das Dritte Reich*, 214–15.

⁶⁴ IfZ-Archiv, MA 831, Abschrift, Nikolajew, 23. Oktober 1943, gez. Staub, 0274.

⁶⁵ Werner Lorenz (1891–1974) – SS-Obergruppenführer (since 1936). After 1937 he became the permanent head of the General Directorate for Ethnic Germans [*Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle*]. In 1948, he was sentenced to 20 years in prison, by the verdict of the tribunal in Nuremberg. Released after 15 years.

⁶⁶ BAArch, R 49/671, 29. Oktober 1943, I-1/1-8 – Dr. St/Ha, Betrifft: Vorübergehende Unterbringung von Rußlanddeutschen, Bezug: Besprechung zwischen SS-Obersturmbannführer Riemann und SS-Sturmbannführer Dr. Stier vom 29. Oktober [19]43, An den Chef des SS-Hauptamtes Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle, Berlin W 62, Keithstr. 29, SS-Sturmbannführer, 2.

The larger half of evacuated Germans (totalling 128,100 people) was deployed on the territory of Generalbezirk Volyn-Podillya by the middle of November 1943. It's very difficult (if possible) to determine more or less accurate quantitative data on the resettlement of the Mennonites in the districts of that area since they were not always singled out in a separate category in the German authorities' statistical reports. Only information concerning the Kamianets-Podilskyi region deserves a certain degree of trust – for some time, it became a shelter for the refugees from Halbstadt (7,000 people), Waldheim (3,400), Gnadenfeld (6,000) and Orlovo (6,000). Other regional groups of Mennonites were settled around Yarmolintsevo and Proskuriv.⁶⁷

The occupation authorities tried to settle the evacuated Germans on the territory of Generalbezirk Volyn-Podillya using the already tested scheme (resettlement to the Ukrainian villages' houses vacated by local residents). The village headmen executed the occupation administration's orders. The German officials tried to reassure Ukrainian peasants by announcing that the refugees would stay in their houses only temporarily and would not lay claim to their land, livestock and food supplies. At the same time, the villagers had to temporarily give up the use of their home furnishings to German colonists since the latter lost most of their property during the evacuation. One of the representatives of the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories' [*Reichsministerium für die besetzten Ostgebiete*] reported that many refugee families were able to take only food supplies, their best horses and one cow with them.⁶⁸ Therefore, the improvement of social services for the evacuated colonists became one of the priority tasks for the occupation administration representatives. The National-Socialist People's Welfare [*Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt*] office in Rivne was responsible for providing refugees with clothing and footwear,

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, R 69/222, Übersicht über die Herkunft und den jetzigen Aufenthalt der Volksdeutschen nach dem Stand v. 15. Dezember [19]43, 13.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, R 57/1660, Der Reichsminister für die besetzten Ostgebiete, Berlin W 35, 10. November 43, Kurfürstenstraße 134, Fernsprecher: 21 99 51, Drahtanschrift: Ostministerium, Nr. P 2/2525/43, Dr. Hermann Maurer als Verbindungsmann zwischen Dt. Ausland-Institut, Stuttgart, und Reichsministerium für die besetzten Ostgebiete, An den Präsidenten des Deutschen Ausland-Instituts, Stuttgart, Herrn Oberbürgermeister Dr. Strölin, Stuttgart, Rathaus, 2–3.

as it had been before. In turn, food supplies were assigned to several regional agricultural administrations [*Gebietslandwirte*].⁶⁹

The contingent's food supply was relatively stable. Many products were delivered from a large warehouse in Kamianets-Podilskyi. The refugees periodically received potatoes, meat, jam, butter and sugar from there.⁷⁰ As before, there was a rather acute shortage of bread, and many colonists tried to trade for it with local peasants, giving their livestock in exchange. The situation with the clothing, footwear and medicines supply was even more dire. The reason was not always just a lack of resources; the bureaucratic speculations also led to many problems. For example, it was for that the latter reason that the DRK employee, who arrived in Rivne in December 1943, was unable to obtain anything from VoMi clothing warehouse since the official responsible refused to give anything out without additional verification of the refugees' material and household needs. However, thanks to the local DRK office's assistance, the transport with clothes and medicines soon departed from Rivne to the Kamianets-Podilskyi region.⁷¹

Despite the SS demands, the civil administration was clearly not in a hurry to evict thousands of Ukrainian peasants from their houses. There was an apparent motive: at the end of the day, the German officials did not want to aggravate relations with the local population further. As a result, many refugees were simply sent to stay with Ukrainian peasants. The SS-Sturmbannführer Karl Götz,⁷² who visited the Kamianets-Podilskyi region at the end of November 1943, wrote that, on average, about six members of peasant families and the same number of refugees often huddled in relatively small houses in the

⁶⁹ IfZ-Archiv, MA 831, Abschrift, Nikolajew, 23. Oktober 1943, gez. Staub, 0275.

⁷⁰ Neufeld, *Path of Thorns*, 284.

⁷¹ Martin Pfeideler, *Sieger ohne Waffen: das Deutsche Rote Kreuz im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Hannover, 1962), 165–6.

⁷² Karl Götz (1903–89) – German writer and teacher. In the early 1930s joined the NSDAP. During the interwar period, he was engaged in cultural, educational and propaganda activities. The member of the SS (since 1941). On behalf of Himmler, Götz got the status of VoMi assistant and was responsible for overseeing German colonies' education on the territory of the Reichskommissariat Ukraine and Transnistria. One of the results of his activities was the establishing of two teacher training centers (in Selz and Prishib). After the Second World War Götz continued his writing and teaching career.

surrounding villages. Due to cramped conditions, it was difficult for the evacuated colonists to maintain basic personal hygiene. The sanitary and epidemiological situation only worsened since many became infected with head lice during their long transition. The refugees' livestock accommodation and feeding also caused many difficulties.⁷³

But perhaps the feeling of uncertainty had an even more negative effect on the entire contingent's moral and psychological state. The following question worried many people: what would happen to them further? Yet, the German authorities were unable to say anything definite at first, since they obviously were confused as well. "Many plans are up in the air" – the SS-Sturmbannführer Götz wrote about the situation. The VoMi leading officials pondered how to save the German contingent and, at the same time, to preserve its integrity to ensure their survival in the future. There were two ways to achieve that, according to Götz: to leave the refugees in a Western Ukrainian region or to take them to the General Government.⁷⁴

The local peasants' reaction to the German refugees' temporary settlement in their houses was ambiguous: it ranged from friendliness to hostility. As a rule, Ukrainian families with many children were most outraged.⁷⁵ The refugees themselves instigated some conflicts. For example, there were cases when they appropriated part of the food supplies that belonged to local peasants without any permission (literally stole it). Moreover, some German families occupied the houses of the Ukrainians without waiting for their departure. Such excesses led many peasants to direct their resentment towards all the refugees who, in their opinion, were brazenly making use of the occupation authorities' patronage.⁷⁶

Guerrilla activity was detected in some areas where the refugees were sent. The danger could be expected from both the Soviet partisans and the Ukrainian nationalists' units. In this regard, the question of using the colonists for organising self-defence units was raised at the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories' level

⁷³ BArch, R 57/1299, Abschrift, Mit der Bitte um Weitergabe an Herrn Hirzel, Dr. Könekamp, Dr. Rüdiger, Dr. Cuhorst, die Ratsherren, zu vertraulicher Kenntnisnahme, Auf dem Weg des grossen Trecks, am 27. Oktober [19]43, gez. Karl Götz, 1.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Neufeld, *Path of Thorns*, 284.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 286.

at the end of October 1943.⁷⁷ The results of this assignment are unknown. However, there were no targeted partisan attacks towards the evacuated Germans during their short stay on the territory of Generalbezirk Volyn-Podillya. One of the Mennonite women who lived in the area of Proskuriv recalled: “The partisans were there, but they did almost no harm to anyone. They came to eat and to get some food”.⁷⁸ At the same time, the ethnic Germans’ formations, created even before the evacuation (such as the SS cavalry regiment from the Halbstadt area), sometimes took part in skirmishes with partisans, carrying out security functions.⁷⁹

It became apparent by the end of 1943 that the situation at the front would only get worse for the German troops in the forthcoming months. The Soviet forces resumed active offensive operations in the Zhytomyr direction in December. Therefore, the question of the fate of the German refugees located in the Western Ukraine region soon came to the fore again. The retreating German troops’ columns caused anxiety concerning the future among many colonists, despite the occupation authorities’ attempts to conceal information about the true state of affairs at the front.⁸⁰ Although the colonists avoided open discussions on the topic, they wanted to make their way westward.

The current situation was discussed at several levels throughout December 1943. The VoMi leadership announced that it was impossible to evacuate the entire contingent to Warthegau because of the overcrowded camps, which continued to accommodate ethnic Germans transported from Ukrainian cities.⁸¹ That is why Himmler insisted on approximately 140,000 refugees’ relocation to the territory

⁷⁷ BAArch, R 6/114, RMfdbO, P/1993/43g, Bearb.: Dr. Kinkel, 29. Oktober 1943, Geheim! An den Herrn Reichskommissar für die Ukraine, Rowno, Betr.: Bewaffnung der Volksdeutschen, Bezug.: Lagebericht des Gen. Kom. Wolhynien-Podolien – P I – vom 31. August [19]43, Bl. 10; BAArch, R 6/114, RMfdbO, P 2 1993/43g, 29. Oktober 1943, Geheim! An die Reichsleitung der NSDAP, Arbeitsbereich Osten, z. Hd. Stabsleiter Schmidt, Berlin-Wilmersdorf, Westfälische Str. 1–5, Betr.: Bewaffnung der Volksdeutschen, 11.

⁷⁸ Логвенова, *Вейнау*, 127.

⁷⁹ Breiß, *Haß und Liebe*, 122–3.

⁸⁰ Neufeld, *Path of Thorns*, 289.

⁸¹ BAArch, R 59/68, Amt VII, Templin, 19. Februar 1944, Dr. Wo/KE, Monatsbericht, Januar 1944, 6.

of the Białystok district. However, the Reichskommissar Koch opposed that initiative categorically due to the lack of land for such a large resettlement.⁸² According to him, the district could take in no more than 50 to 60 thousand people.⁸³ On the other side, the Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories' considered Koch's idea very strange since that region's natural and climatic conditions could hardly be suitable for the South Ukrainian colonists and their agricultural traditions.⁸⁴ Those remarks were considered in the RKFDV General Staff Directorate, which proposed another plan. Its essence was in the following: ethnic Germans from Eastern Volyn were to be evacuated to the Białystok district, and the Black Sea region Germans had to be resettled on the Galicia district's territory. However, that idea was categorically rejected by the General Government leadership.⁸⁵ Himmler himself disapproved of it as well.⁸⁶

After that, the RKFDV General Staff Directorate put forward an alternative plan, which implied the active use of German refugees as a labour resource for the Reich agricultural sector. Most of them (around 100,000 people) were supposed to be relocated to Warthegau. Two other contingents equal in quantity (10,000 people each) were to be settled in Upper Silesia and in the Sudetenland eastern part.⁸⁷

On 19 December 1943, Hans-Adolf Prützmann sent a proposal to Himmler's field headquarters in Hochwald (East Prussia), concerning the terms of the German refugees' evacuation from the RKU. The middle of January 1944 was chosen due to the heavy load of the railway lines. In addition, such preparatory measures as loading the horses, cattle,

⁸² *Ibid.*, Amt VII, Templin, 11. Januar 1944, Dr. Wo/KE, Aktz.: VII/G, Monatsbericht für Dezember 1943, Dr. Wolfrum, SS-Obersturmführer, 2.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, Amt VII, Templin, 19. Februar 1944, Dr. Wo/KE, Monatsbericht, Januar 1944, 6.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, R 6/111, Führungsgruppe P 2, P/2182/43g, Berlin, 14. Dezember 1943, Geheim! Betr.: Weiteres Schicksal der Volksdeutschen aus dem Reichskommissariat Ukraine, gez. Kinkelin, 11.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, R 59/68, Amt VII, Templin, 11. Januar 1944, Dr. Wo/KE, Aktz.: VII/G, Monatsbericht für Dezember 1943, Dr. Wolfrum, SS-Obersturmführer, 2.

⁸⁶ IfZ-Archiv, MA 303, Fernschreiben, An Standartenführer Ehlich RSHA III B, Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamt, Berlin, gez. Berg, SS-Obersturmführer, 9082.

⁸⁷ BAArch, R 59/68, Amt VII, Templin, 11. Januar 1944, Dr. Wo/KE, Aktz.: VII/G, Monatsbericht für Dezember 1943, Dr. Wolfrum, SS-Obersturmführer, 2.

carts and other property took up much time as well. The authorities planned to complete the operation by mid-April 1944.⁸⁸

The Army Group 'South' command assisted in setting up the evacuation – their transport services were preparing the echelons for departure. The cooperation between the SS representatives and the RKU officials was often formal, and according to Prützmann, it usually turned into lengthy discussions about the division of responsibilities. The Proskurov Gebietskommissar Karl Schmerbeck was the sole exception, as he proved very helpful. Therefore, the Wehrmacht agreed to supply food rations for the refugees because of the actual sabotage by the RKU administration.⁸⁹

Early January 1944, SS-Brigadeführer Hoffmeyer issued an order which specified the plan of evacuation of ethnic Germans who were concentrated on the territory of Generalbezirk Volyn-Podillya, to the Reich. The resettlement started on 10 January because the situation on the Soviet-German front became increasingly alarming. The majority of the contingent (64,632 people), which consisted mainly of the Black Sea region Germans, was supposed to be sent to Warthegau. They planned to distribute nearly 15,000 refugees (including the Grunau, Pryshyb and Melitopol vicinity residents) between the Eastern Sudetenland, Upper and Lower Silesia. The Białystok district became the destination for the remaining 42,000 people evacuated from Eastern Volyn. The further evacuation had to be carried out by rail. The Wehrmacht was responsible for the echelons' delivery and dispatch. According to the approved plan, it was supposed to provide all the refugees with food rations and to carry out their disinfection as far as possible. A commandant from among the Sonderkommando 'R' employees was assigned to each echelon; his duty was to control the wagons' occupancy and to compile the evacuees' lists. Those lists helped to clarify the amount of food that was required. In addition, commandants were responsible for order and discipline during the echelon movement.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ IfZ-Archiv, MA 303, 19. Dezember 1943, Nr. 771, 18/12, 0940, An SS-Obersturmbannführer Brandt, Hochwald, gez. Prützmann, SS-Obergruppenführer, 9087.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 9087.

⁹⁰ BArch, R 186/8, Abschrift, Stabsbefehl, gez. Hoffmeyer, SS-Brigadeführer und Generalmajor der Polizei [n.p.].

The DRK staff was responsible for providing medical care to the refugees. Its quantity was not specified in the decree. It was only stated that at least one nurse should be assigned to each echelon. There was also a plan to equip three separate heated wagons for the transportation of people who were still in hospitals by the departure time. The DRK personnel had to notify about the echelon's arrival during the stops to ensure that the patients who had been examined entered into separate lists.⁹¹

Himmler decided to use the Soviet Germans' majority in the German agricultural sector (without preliminary selection). It was primarily dictated not by economic considerations but rather by overcrowding assembly camps in the Warthegau territory. Those located in the region of Litzmannstadt [Łódź], could accommodate only four to five thousand people.⁹²

VIII

WARTHEGAU IS THE FINAL DECISION, AT LAST!

According to VoMi reports, the dispatch of German refugees to Germany took place mainly from Antoniny, Veliki Borki, Victoria and Kamianets-Podilskiyi stations in January 1944.⁹³ Whenever possible, many refugees tried to take practically all their property with them, especially household items and livestock. However, the representatives of some German economic authorities had slightly different plans in that regard. In particular, the Reich Ministry of Food and Agriculture [*Reichsministerium für Ernährung und Landwirtschaft*] proposed to export mainly cattle and some horses to Germany. The RKU leadership, on the contrary, demanded to leave most of the property, including the carts, in the Kamianets-Podilskiyi region, hoping to find an application for it in the local agricultural sector. As a result, the Nazi authorities made a different decision: fearing the epidemic outbreak,

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*, R 69/222. Abschrift, Litzmannstadt, 10. Jan. 1944, An den Reichskommissar für die Festigung des deutschen Volkstums, Hauptamt Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle, Amt IX – zu Hd. SS- Standartenführer Ellermeier, Berlin – Grünewald, Lassenstraße 11, Betrifft.: "Der Große Treck", Az.: F-I/a/82 H/Ne. v. 10. Januar [19]44, Der Leiter des Einsatzstabes, gez. Hangel, SS-Sturmabführer und Stabsführer, 14.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, R 59/68, Amt VII, Templin, 19. Februar 1944, Dr. Wo/KE, Monatsbericht, Januar 1944, 6.

they ordered to transport of cattle in closed wagons through the territory of the General Government to Litzmannstadt, where it was supposed to be slaughtered. The horses were to be sent to quarantine. Before leaving for Germany, the livestock owners were given the quitances, according to which they supposedly could receive compensation sometime later.⁹⁴

Unsanitary conditions were still observed in the echelons despite the cleaning carried out there. One of the eyewitnesses recalled: "We moved further by train in February 1944. Oh, what a train it was: it was full of lice. When we arrived 1.5 days later, we got lice as well".⁹⁵ The transportation became even more extreme since not all wagons were equipped with heaters.⁹⁶

Further amends were made to the plan for Soviet Germans' evacuation in February 1944. That time it stemmed from the fact that the Upper Silesia and the Sudetenland administrations' heads suddenly refused to accept refugees due to unforeseen circumstances; that development complicated their settlement and arrangement. Thus, Gauleiter Arthur Greiser⁹⁷ proposed to move the entire contingent to Warthegau.⁹⁸ As a matter of fact, he reported about the readiness to accept nearly 100,000 new settlers on the territory of his district as late as January 1944.⁹⁹ Sometime later, Himmler also supported that initiative. He signed a decree (dated 19 February 1944), according

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5–10.

⁹⁵ Логвенова, *Вейнау*, 128.

⁹⁶ Durksen, *Die Krim war unsere Heimat*, 302.

⁹⁷ Arthur Greiser (1897–1947) – one of the NSDAP leaders, SS-Obergruppenführer. In October 1939 he became the Gauleiter of Warthegau. He fled to Frankfurt an der Oder when the Red Army seized this territory in January 1945. After Germany's surrender, he was able to hide in the Bavarian Alps but was detained by the U.S. military and handed over to Poland. On 9 July 1947, the Supreme National Tribunal in Poznań sentenced him to death. The verdict was carried out on 21 July 1947.

⁹⁸ BArch, R 59/68, Amt VII, Templin, 19. Februar 1944, Dr. Wo/KE, Monatsbericht, Januar 1944, 6–7.

⁹⁹ BArch, R 69/222, Abschrift, Litzmannstadt, 10. Jan. 1944, An den Reichskommissar für die Festigung des deutschen Volkstums, Hauptamt Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle, Amt IX – zu Hd. SS- Standartenführer Ellermeier, Berlin – Grünewald, Lassenstraße 11, Betrifft.: "Der Große Treck", Az.: F-I/a/82 H/Ne. v. 10. Januar [19]44, Der Leiter des Einsatzstabes, gez. Hangel, SS-Sturmbannführer und Stabsführer, 14.

to which all ethnic Germans who lived in the RKU were to be sent to Warthegau from then on.¹⁰⁰

A large number of ethnic Germans' resettlement from the USSR to Warthegau was used by the Reich authorities for propaganda purposes. On 14 March 1944, there was an assembly at which Gauleiter Greiser addressed workers from the Litzmannstadt industrial enterprises. He spoke enthusiastically of 1,000,000 rescued ethnic Germans. Their arrival was considered an undoubted success on the path to the Germanisation of the region.¹⁰¹

Litzmannstadt became the destination for all the trains which headed to Warthegau. The communication headquarters [*Verbindungsstab*] was set up there at the beginning of 1944. It controlled the initial operation's phase: the unloading of echelons, medical inspection, disinfection and further refugees' dispatch to assembly camps [*Kreisauffanglager*], located in various districts of the region.¹⁰²

At the beginning of 1944, the German authorities could not steadily supply food for the evacuees, whose number was constantly growing. Jakob Neufeld from Gnadenfeld wrote that during the first weeks of their stay in Warthegau, the refugees experienced a shortage of nutrition: "One small piece of bread a day is poor food. Fortunately, most of our people still have small supplies from home to meet their needs".¹⁰³ In cases concerning larger supplies, the local authorities had a right to withdraw part of brought food in exchange for cash, with the purpose of further distribution among other settlers.¹⁰⁴ The refugees who managed to receive meal tickets were in a more or less stable situation. One recalled years later: "There was enough

¹⁰⁰ Fleischhauer, *Das Dritte Reich*, 219.

¹⁰¹ 'Der ein millionste Deutsche im Reichsgau', *Ostdeutscher Beobachter*, 74 (15 March 1944).

¹⁰² BArch, R 49/671, Abschrift, Organisationsbefehl Nr. 1, Betr.: Sofortaktion zur Unterbringung von Schwarzmeerdeutschen, Posen, 15. Januar 1944, gez. Unterschrift, SS-Standartenführer, 17.

¹⁰³ Neufeld, *Path of Thorns*, 297.

¹⁰⁴ BArch, R 49/671, Der Reichsstatthalter im Reichsgau Wartheland, Beauftragter des Reichskommissars f.d. Festigung deutschen Volkstums, Posen, 19. Januar 1944, Kaiserring 13, An sämtliche Kreisleiter, sämtliche Landräte, sämtliche Leiter der Ansiedlungsstäbe und Außenstellen, Vierte Durchführungsbestimmung zur Ansetzung von Schwarzmeer-Deutschen, Vorg.: Anordnung des Gauleiters und Reichsstatthalters vom 11. Januar 1944, gez. Hübner, SS-Standartenführer, 30.

of everything except the bread in the meal tickets. We went mad with joy to receive all that. But we had to share it. If everything was eaten up quickly, we had to wait for the new meal tickets".¹⁰⁵

All Soviet Germans were subject to mandatory registration through the Central Office for Immigration [*Einwanderungszentralstelle*]. This complex step-by-step procedure made it possible to determine the level of ethnocultural identity and the racial characteristics of every newcomer. A decision concerning naturalisation was made according to its results.¹⁰⁶

It should be noted that the Nazi authorities, despite their hostile attitude towards Christianity, did not forbid the settlers to follow their religious traditions. The Mennonite communities' representatives from Ukraine received special privileges in that regard. Benjamin Unruh, a well-known Mennonite public figure whose activity was sanctioned by Himmler, was involved in organising their spiritual life since the end of 1943. Two main questions concerned Unruh: conducting the church services and ordaining new pastors. In March 1944, he visited several assembly camps in Warthegau, where his coreligionists stayed. In addition to that, he managed to meet several influential district administration representatives. The latter demonstrated a very loyal attitude towards the Mennonite community, which had a political subtext. For example, the SS-Sturmbannführer Hepner, who participated in negotiations, said he was impressed by the Mennonite perseverance rooted in religion.¹⁰⁷ As a result, thanks to Unruh's efforts, his coreligionists received the right to hold prayer meetings without fearing obstruction from the local NSDAP authorities.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Durksen, *Die Krim war unsere Heimat*, 304.

¹⁰⁶ See also Stephan Döring, *Die Umsiedlung der Wolhyniendeutschen in den Jahren 1939 bis 1940* (Frankfurt am Main, 2001), 202–6; Andreas Strippel, *NS-Volkstumspolitik und die Neuordnung Europas: Rassenpolitische Selektion der Einwandererzentralstelle des Chefs der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD (1939–1945)* (Paderborn, 2011), 267–85.

¹⁰⁷ Heinrich B. Unruh, *Fügungen und Führungen. Benjamin Heinrich Unruh. 1881–1959. Ein Leben im Geiste christlicher Humanität und im Dienste der Nächstenliebe* (Detmold, 2009), 418–20.

¹⁰⁸ BArch, R 59/47, NSDAP Kreisleitung, Konin, Der Kreisleiter, Konin, 10. Juni [19]44, Gi/Er., An die Ortsgruppenleiter des Kreises, Bürgermeister und Amtskommissare des Kreises, Konin, Betr.: Ansetzung der Russlanddeutschen, Kreisleiter. Gissibl Kreisleiter, 20.

In all other aspects, the Mennonites led a life similar to that of the rest of the settlers. Officially, most of the Soviet Germans involved in the Warthegau agricultural sector were supposed to be used as the 'Deputatarbeiter' (workers paid in kind). Small allotments of land were supposed to be their remuneration (their size could amount to between 0.5 and 0.75 hectares, as in the case of settlers who were accommodated on Polish farms) and the livestock.¹⁰⁹ However, due to the lack of resources, the implementation of the plan proved to be impossible. In addition, the local social and labour relations system often assigned migrants the role of day labourers and part-time workers, which was considered a cheap labour force. The level of Soviet Germans' remuneration (men were paid 58, women 41 pfennigs per hour) was usually insufficient even for covering basic living necessities, which soon became one of the critical factors of their growing discontent.¹¹⁰

After receiving Reich citizenship, many male Soviet Germans became automatically bound to military service. According to archival documents, starting in the spring of 1944, the list of potential recruits for service in the SS troops was made in the assembly camps, where German refugees from the USSR were placed. The successfully selected migrants subsequently received the corresponding green certificate [*SS-Geeignet-Schein*],¹¹¹ and the rest were given the red

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, R 49/3041, Der Reichsstatthalter im Reichsgau Wartheland, Gauarbeitsamt, VA 560/5470, Posen, 11. Februar 1944, Runderlaß 5/6, An die Herren Leiter der Arbeitsämter, im Bezirk, Betr.: Ansetzung der Schwarzmeerdeutschen im Reichsgau Wartheland, Im Auftrage: gez. Kendzia, Beglaubigt: gez. Tengler, 68.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, R 49/2409, I-1/1-8, Dr. St/Hy, Schweiklberg, 15. August 1944, Vermerk, Betr.: Stimmung und Betreuung der Russlanddeutschen im Warthegau, Bezug: 1. Besprechung mit SS-Staf. Streit und Dr. Wolfrum am 7. August [19]44, 2. Besprechung mit SS-Staf- Ehlich am 9. August [19]44, 3. Besprechung mit SS-Staf. Hübner, RA Berns, Besuch der Ansiedlungsstäbe Grätz und Kosten sowie einiger russlanddeutscher Umsiedler am 6. und 8. August [19]44, 394; Fleischhauer, *Das Dritte Reich*, 232.

¹¹¹ BArch, R 69/413, Der Chef des Rasse- und Siedlungshauptamtes-SS, RA Cl a Allg. 7 Ha/O., 35/44, Prag, 17. April [19]44, Postleitstelle, Betr.: Musterung von Schwarzmeer-Deutschen zur Waffen-SS, 1) An die Höheren SS- und Polizeiführer, SS-Führers im Rasse- und Siedlungswesen - Nordwest, Südost, Warthe, Danzig-Westpreussen, 2) An die Aussenstelle des RuS-Hauptamtes Litzmannstadt, 3) Verteiler: III zur Kenntnisnahme, Der Chef des Rassenamtes im RuS-Hauptamt-SS, i. V. gez. Klinger, SS-Obersturmbannführer, 52-3.

certificate [*Ungeeignet-Schein*]. Authorities took into account the recruits' physical and racial characteristics during the checks. According to our observations, those procedures often acquired a very formal character. Joining the SS troops voluntarily also played a significant role in obtaining the green certificate.

It is important to note that the new settlers lacked motivation for military service. The testimonies of ethnic Germans captured by the Americans in January 1945 provide definitive evidence about that fact in particular.¹¹² They reported that they were taken to one of the SS troops' assembly points together with another 150–200 men. The whole group received military uniforms and departed for the front, despite nobody expressing a desire to fight for Germany voluntarily. The lack of enthusiasm for military service was often reinforced not only by the self-preservation instinct among many recruits but also by the reaction of their family members, who were afraid of losing their breadwinners. For example, Peter Epp, the Zaporizhzhia region native, recalled that the short-term reprieve that he received after passing the draft board in June 1944 made his wife especially happy “because it was not easy for her to stay in a Polish village with five children and to face the uncertain future”.¹¹³ The military service became a tough moral and psychological test for the Mennonite settlers with strong religious convictions. But even they were forced to adapt to difficult wartime conditions, which contradicted their principles. It should also be recognised that for a particular section of Mennonites (especially for those who suffered most from the Bolsheviks' policy), the postulate of non-violence practically lost its former significance. Therefore, the participation of some of them in the war on the Nazi Germany side became a conscious choice, as well as an act of personal revenge on the Soviet regime. However, the decision to join the army could sometimes be an element of the survival strategy. In this sense, the case of Mennonite Peter Derksen is very indicative, as he volunteered for the Wehrmacht at the beginning of 1945 to avoid getting into the Volkssturm (because of the high chances of being immediately sent to the front). His calculation was simple: anticipating the Third

¹¹² The Mennonites were mostly pacifist and they had not lost their faith – their moral universe. Even though some of them allowed military service under those conditions, the rest kept away far from armament.

¹¹³ Epp, *Ob tausend fallen*, 34.

Reich's inevitable defeat, he hoped to greet the war's end at some training ground.

Only a small part of them (12,000) managed to get over to the allies' territory, by hook or crook, and then to consolidate in the western zone of occupation or move to the United States and Canada. Most of them (23,000) were repatriated during that same year, as well as sent to the NKVD camps and to special settlements. They could not avoid the repressions previously suffered by their relatives, and none of them was allowed to return to their native villages. According to data for 1953, there were about 208,000 of German repatriates on the USSR territory (mainly in the Urals, the European north of the RSFSR and Western Siberia).

CONCLUSIONS

Even though the Great Trek memories have been firmly imprinted in the Mennonites' and the ethnic USSR Germans' historical mythology as one of the turning points in their history, the scientific understanding of these events still requires historians' attention. The private sources and the archival materials we studied show many vital aspects of the so-called administrative resettlements (difficulties and peculiarities of organising emigration in certain localities, the specifics of authorities' and the colonists' behaviour, the ratio between the spontaneous and organised evacuation) remain practically unexplored. Moreover, this topic also raises other pertinent problems: collaboration with the occupation regime, the refugees, regulation of economic and social processes by the occupation authorities on the seized territories, and the mood of the Ukrainian population.

Regardless of the particular narrative chosen by us, two components coordinated in the process of emigration are invariably present in the considered program implementation: namely, the organisers (the 'administrative resettlement' project authors and implementers) and its direct participants (the Soviet/Ukrainian Germans, who also included Ukrainian Mennonites). As the plan of ethnic Germans' evacuation was linked with 'The General Plan Ost', it received attention at the highest political level. The resettlement program was a consequence of considering ethnic Germans to be the *Volksdeutsche*, who were important in a common German state sense and who were to be preserved as a possible social resource. The Third Reich had hoped

for the events to turn in its favour in 1943 (the year the evacuation began), as at the time the USSR allies did not enter the war yet and the 'second front' was not opened. While criticising certain points of how the evacuation program was implemented, we cannot deny its positive aspects. In particular, it is wrong to ignore the evacuation's financial, organisational and sometimes military support, which was efficient in its own way in war conditions. Separate programs (including medical and food ones), routes, transportation methods were proposed for the population of certain colony groups (Mariupol, Melitopol, Chortitza), and in the case of changing conditions the methods were promptly adapted, and then carried out as clearly as possible.

On the other hand, for an overall understanding of the events, it is important to consider the ethnic Germans' attitude. They believed their departure from the country to be an 'outcome', the evacuation. The 'Great Trek' was the uncontested opportunity for them, an escape from the regime, which had been exterminating, crushing down and repressing members of their nation for more than 20 years. According to the recollections, the settlers faced all adversities courageously and consciously. In general, they did not make demands of the invaders. Still, they just endured the everyday difficulties that would have been much more gruesome if they had met the Soviet government and the Red Army representatives on the territory of Soviet Ukraine. The further fate of the Ukrainian and the Soviet Germans (repatriation and indefinite exile) turned out to be a sad confirmation of their predictions.

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