



The Massive Deportation of the Chechen People: How and why Chechens were Deported

Campana, Aurélie

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A. Context

The Chechen deportation had a lot in common with [other massive deportations carried out by the Stalinist regime](#). The deportation occurred during the Second World War, right after the Red Army reconquered the territories occupied by the German army. The Stalinist regime fallaciously accused the Chechens (and the Ingush) of massive collaboration with the German invaders, and then deported them en masse on February 23, 1944. The Chechens were scattered throughout the entire Soviet Union territory and became special settlers. In the official Soviet terminology this term refers to a particular category of people forcibly removed from their natal territory, for economic, ethnic or religious purpose, and deprived of any constitutional or collective rights.

Although they represent two distinct ethnic groups, Chechens (a Muslim North Caucasian people) and the Ingush are ethnically related and often compared. In 1934, the Soviet government artificially merged these two groups into one political-administrative entity: the Autonomous Chechen-Ingush Region, which became an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) in 1936. Chechens represented up to 50% of the total population of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR. An overwhelming majority of them lived in rural zones and followed traditional ways of life.

Chechens remained impervious to the numerous attempts to Sovietize them. Their clan-system was quite strong and governed the main social aspects of life. The Communist Party had little influence given that religious leaders and elders retained their social positions. The traditional and the Soviet systems were superimposed one onto the other, and most of Moscow's decisions gave rise to resistance and revolts. Thus, Chechens met the Soviet authorities with strong opposition when they imposed brutal collectivization tactics. Several uprisings occurred in the Republic during the 1930s. Likewise, the war aggravated this very complex situation. A part of the Chechen population was openly hostile towards Soviet rule. Some tried to make contact with the Germans, as Ukrainians or Russians had done. A few of the insurgent groups' leaders viewed Germany's advance as an opportunity to gain autonomy or even independence. However, the Germans refused to accede to their demands, and Chechens consequently cut off all discussions.

However, this does not mean that the Chechens massively collaborated with the Germans. The 1943-1944 official documents disclose quite the contrary. These documents assess the local population's role in stopping the German advance and resistance to the invaders, who occupied during approximately twelve weeks the North-West of the Republic (Nekrich, 1978: 58). In fact, many Chechen men served in the Red Army or took an active part in partisan movements.

Notwithstanding the evidence of contribution to the war effort, the Soviets accused the Chechens of cooperating with the enemy and subsequently condemned them to deportation. The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD), predecessor to the Committee for State Security (KGB), was in charge of the operation. In eight days, the NKVD forcefully deported 350,000 to 400,000 Chechens and 91,250 Ingush. Official documents vary on the precise figure deported and the exact Chechen population figure. Therefore, some doubt remains regarding the exact number of the Chechen deportees. More importantly, the Chechen deportation was longer and more difficult than the earlier deportations in the Northern Caucasus. Both, the uneven nature of the terrain and the Chechens who hid in the mountains to resist the NKVD soldiers slowed down this operation.

To thwart all oppositional impulses, the NKVD officers imagined a stratagem. On February 23, 1944, Chechen and Ingush men from each village were invited to take part in the Red Army Day celebrations. However, there were no festivities. Instead, they found soldiers holding automatic machine guns. The

soldiers surrounded and disarmed the men and then read to the dumbfounded captives a decree ordering their forced expulsion. In the meantime, soldiers herded up the remaining women, children and elderly. Deportees were given half an hour sometimes more, sometimes less to gather a few basic belongings. Next, they were loaded into trucks and shipped to railway stations from which they were sent off into exile.

On February 29, 1944, 159 convoys were already under way, and 21 more were ready to leave (Bugai, 1992:105). Most of the deportees traveled in cattle trucks or freight cars. Only a few political and religious representatives, traveled in normal carriages because they played an active part, under NKVD pressure, in the deportation. These representatives pleaded that the population obey the NKVD. After twenty or thirty days, locked in the overcrowded cars, the deportees finally arrived at an unknown destination. Some convoys stopped at the Central Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic (RSFSR). Others continued to the Central Asian Republics, mainly to Kazakhstan and others to Far Eastern Siberia. In autumn, all the men who were fighting on the German front were demobilized and sent off to labor camps before finally joining their fellow deportees in exile. Those who resisted deportation and hid in the Northern Caucasus Mountains were either killed or arrested, and then expelled to Central Asia. Chechens living in other regions were also required to relocate. In the aftermaths of the compulsory resettlement, the Chechen-Ingush ASSR had been dismantled, history rewritten. Almost all the symbolic, historical and material signs of Chechen life were destroyed. Russians, Ukrainians and North Caucasians settled in the deportees' houses.

Under the NKVD strict rules, the Chechens endured very hard conditions during their thirteen years of a forced exile. They were widely dispersed, and placed in special settlements. Although the camps were not surrounded by barbed wire, deportees were nonetheless subjected to special regulations. For instance, Chechens were not allowed to leave their villages beyond a three or five kilometer perimeter, and each month or even every fifteen days, they had to register with the local NKVD office (*spetskomandatur*). Moreover, the NKVD obliged them to work in *sovkhoze*, *kolkhoze* or a factory where they received poor salaries for hard physical labor. Chechens were also forbidden to use their own language, and the children who went to school attended Russian primary school. After three very difficult years, the survivors settled eventually into their new environment, while still keeping in the back of their mind a future return (M. Pohl, 2002). The exile lasted a total of thirteen years. In 1957, under Nikita Khrushchev rule, the government finally rehabilitated Chechens and authorized their return to Chechnya.

B. Perpetrators

The Chechen-Ingush massive deportation was well-prepared. It occurred during the Second World War, while the Red Army engaged in hard fighting against Germany, suffered heavy losses and material shortages. Yet, about 120,000 NKVD soldiers were in the Republic at the time and participated in the forced resettlement. The NKVD commandant, Lavrenti Beria, personally supervised the operation. On February 17, 1944, Beria arrived in the capital city of Grozny. He regularly reported to Stalin on the progress made by his armed forces. The correspondence, which records each step of the deportation in its preparation and realization, attests to the highest central authorities' involvement.

Central authorities, more particularly Stalin and his entourage, were indisputably responsible for the Chechen deportation. The poor conditions in their new settlements, the general indifference regarding living conditions, and the NKVD's harsh rule contributed to decimation of the deportees. Local authorities were notified at the last-minute, if they were informed at all, about the arrival of large groups of special settlers. Meaning that, local authorities had neither the time, nor the means, to prepare for such an influx of people arriving in exceedingly poor physical and moral condition due to the grueling journey. In most regions, nothing was prepared to accommodate the deportees. Thus, the local administration was unable to supply the newcomers with even the most basic necessities. The NKVD, accountable only to itself, was

undoubtedly responsible for the lack of organization, indifference and violence used during the expulsion itself and in the exile-destinations.

The Chechen-Ingush ASSR local authorities played an indirect role. As underlined by Aleksandr Nekrich, the Republic's leaders among whom no Chechens consciously exaggerated throughout the 1930s the nature of the Chechens' resistance to Sovietization and collectivization (Nekrich, 1978:43). Moreover, after stressing the positive role of the Chechens in fighting the Germans, local authorities completely changed the nature of their declaration. Through the fabrication of evidence accusing Chechens of cooperating with the invaders, local authorities actively supported the official thesis and official propaganda. Right after the deportation event, Chechens were depicted as traitors to the motherland. The official Soviet history was rewritten to perpetuate that the Chechens were bloodthirsty bandits and noteworthy insubordinates to Russian and then Soviet state power. Yet, the Russian collective imaginary already portrayed the Chechens as rebels and savages. Soviet propagandists, relying on this earlier representation, renewed old common fears and generated new antagonisms. At a time when the Soviet political leaders constantly emphasized togetherness (which would be created after the victory over the Nazi army), the accusations of betrayal further stigmatized the Chechens.

While the Chechen-Ingush local administration's hostile attitude towards Chechens was not decisive, it certainly played a role in the stigmatization of the Chechens, which in turn influenced the final decision to deport them. Nonetheless, the official propaganda campaign launched by the Stalinist government underscores the intentional nature of the deportation.

C. Victims

The Chechen death toll remains a controversial issue. Chechens lost all collective existence during their thirteen years of exile as special settlers. They were excluded from all population censuses. The NKVD, which administrated the special camps, regularly reported on the demographic situation. The official documents, partly accessible through the Soviet archives reproduced in Nikolaj F. Bugj's almost inexhaustible collection of works, show that Chechens' deportees suffered very high mortality rates in the special settlements. Soviet officials assessed that during 1944 to 1948, the three most terrible years, between 14.6% and 23.7% of the outcast population perished (Bugai, 1992:264-265). These rough figures, however, do not take into account those who died during the initial expulsion and journey.

The Chechen deportation gave way to violence and abuse. Unhealthy persons and those who opposed the expulsion were systematically shot on the spot. Testimonies also confirm the existence of mass killings in the mountains. To meet the objectives, soldiers were ordered to eliminate persons considered unfit to travel. About 700 persons originating from Khaibakh, a small mountain village and the surrounding farms, were killed. They were locked in a stable and burnt alive. It would have taken too much time to transport them to the valley on the snowy roads. The transport conditions were equally fatal to many Chechens: disease (like typhus), starvation and the cold took the most vulnerable persons. The non-respect of some traditions also caused the deaths of some Chechen women who refused to relieve themselves in front of men.

Testimonies state that women, children, and elders were severely affected. Men, whether expelled with their families or sent into exile after demobilization, also suffered from the very austere living conditions. From 1944 to 1948, the leading causes of death in exile were: disease, malnutrition (and even famine), lack of elementary supplies (like clothing or shoes) and absence of medical care. Hard winters carried off the most weakened special settlers. Many had to spend the freezing months in small makeshift shelters that they themselves had built. (Dzhurgaev, 1989).

Finally, despite incomplete and imprecise figures, the death toll among Chechens is one of the higher ever reached. A study based on the NKVD documents and demographic projections estimates that about 30% of the Chechens died between 1944 and 1952 (Ediev, 2003). In the same period, it shows that the demographic loss (deaths plus birth deficit) represents 54.3 %. According to Chechen historians, the death rate rose up to 50% during the journey and the first years of exile. This estimate does not rely on any scientific study, nor on any census, but on an approximation based on impressions and testimonies. It pertains to a larger strategy of victimization, and has a strong social resonance since the victims testimonies were basically the only ones that recount the deportation and exile during the late Soviet period.

D. Witness

About 120,000 NKVD soldiers and officers participated in the deportation. Individuals of other nationalities who also inhabited the Chechen-Ingush ASSR witnessed the Chechen forced resettlement. Moreover, Chechen settlers in their exile were not isolated from local populations who lived nearby. External witness testimonies are nevertheless scarce and are sometimes reported by a third person, which give them little credit.

These testimonies usually give factual and practical details dealing with a given event. Written predominantly by soldiers and members of the local administration, testimonies reflect the indignation felt by their authors. S. Bitsoev, a member of the local Chechen-Ingush administration, reported one of the most striking events. He describes the Khaibakh mass killing and the steps that a direct witness, Dzziadin Malsagob, took to denounce the Khaibakh event to Nikita Khrushchev (S. Bitsoev, 1990: 180-184.)

Soviet regime's control of the diffusion of information explains most of the silence surrounding massive deportations. The official propaganda that depicted the deportees as both traitors and dangerous bandits played the greatest role. Many victims' testimonies recall the local populations' reaction to the deportees' arrival in their places of exile. These reactions are mixed with curiosity, fears and aggression. Special settlers were typically regarded with suspicion and were largely unwelcome, at least in regions with a Slavic majority. After some time, relationships generally smoothed out and a certain *modus vivendi* was established.

The political censorship during the entire Soviet period accounts for the absence of testimonies by witness who were directly involved, or not in the deportation. It was strictly forbidden to discuss the massive deportations. In the official Soviet history, the forced expulsions appear scarcely and in a very laconic prose, except when justifications are being given. Massive deportations have become history's non-events. Moreover, even after the deportees were rehabilitated in 1957, suspicion and distrust continued. Chechens, like many other deported peoples, were still viewed as traitors and non-trustworthy beings.

This silence directly affected the deportees. Chechens, like the other punished peoples, had neither the right to speak overtly about their forced resettlement, nor even write testimonies concerning their traumatic experience. Commemoration of the deportation was also completely proscribed until the end of the 1980s.

E. Memories of deportation

The ban on discussing the deportation greatly influenced the Chechen memory of the event. Tragic recollections connected with individual and collective grievances were passed on through the family structures. The destruction of the main social frameworks of memory after the deportation and the loss of spatial and temporal markers during the forced exile transform intergenerational memories into one of the

principal sources of the Chechen memory.

Individual memories linger on the physical, moral, and symbolic violence endured during the entire deportation. Beyond recalling starvation, cold, fear, death and sufferings, they are embedded in incomprehension. An incomprehension felt by the deportees when they learn about the decision to deport the entire Chechen population. A decision based on the pretense of a massive collaboration with a German army that most Chechen never saw. Testimonies present the deportation as treason, a betrayal taking physical form in the brutality used by the NKVD soldiers. Testimonies recall the warm welcome that soldiers were given while taking a rest before returning to the front; soldiers were lodged in the local population's homes. Many victims' statements express their incredulity when they saw the very soldiers they housed previously enter by force to deport them.

The violence towards women and elders, the non-respect of beliefs, traditions and customs are strongly committed to memory. Survivors systematically point to the fact that men and women were put together in the same cars without any division. They also commonly evoke that they were not allowed to bury, as required by the Muslim tradition, persons who died in the convoys. When visiting the cars during the rare stops, the NKVD guards threw out the dead bodies.

While expressing uniqueness and telling about a particular experience, each testimony, whether oral or written, continually reinforces the Chechen community of destiny. Testimonies relate in similar terms the violence endured during the deportation and the forced exile, and speak uniformly about shared grievances and traumas. These testimonies describe the scattering of the national group (and sometimes a family throughout the whole Soviet territory), the very harsh living conditions, the ban on the Chechen culture and the widespread feeling of abandonment on all sides. They also integrate events that occurred either during the gathering (like the Khaibakh mass killings) or after the forced removal and the massive Russification of the dissolved Chechen-Ingush ASSR (such as the destruction of religious and historical monuments). All these events emerge from witness memories. They are part of a collective memory, which describes the deportation as a tragedy and as a breach in a group's life. It recalls all outstanding facts and episodes that illustrate the violence and rough treatment that the deportees experienced during thirteen years.

The Chechen collective memory structures individual memories. The historical account also supplies a scheme of mediation that also conditions the act of individual recollections. Testimonies not only provide a simple description of individual experiences, but also inscribe them within a formalized framework. With the recurrent use of the term of genocide, narratives mix the individual survivor's life with an attempt to contextualize the Stalinist regime's genocidal policy.

The genocide has changed the Chechen and Ingush peoples – instead of the big mountain dwellers, of the elegant mountain dwellers, of the holy mountain dwellers, living in mountains for centuries, were born puny and sick children, among which a big number died. The guardians of the national wisdom, of ten centuries of accumulated experience died, the experts of the Chechen-Ingush history, habits, traditions, the experts of the secrets of the former Masters of the work of metal, and others, died, as did the *achug* [Caucasian singers] and the expert of the folklore. (Khozhiev, 1991:171.)

Further, individual memories are in the same way, very selective. They commonly pass over in silence the collaboration of a number of Chechens with the German army. Not that the entire war participation is glossed over as an event; on the contrary, most testimonies show that Chechens participated in the fight against Nazi Germany, and that they often distinguished themselves on the front by acts of courage. In fact, it is well-known that the thesis of massive collaboration, as it was formulated by the Soviet regime to justify the Chechen resettlement, was merely a ploy. A myth invented to facilitate the Stalinist national policy. But this period remains an unspoken one. Individual and collective memories have infiltrated the historical version, until conscious forgetting turns into an involuntary omission.

Some individual narratives even incorporate the deportation with their own experience into a much larger historical framework. They refer to a notion of planned genocide that the Chechen historical narrative has developed. Accordingly, the deportation is viewed as the final attempt to wipe out the Chechens from the face of the earth; the bloody conquest of the North Caucasus during the nineteenth century. The repression against the revolts occurring in the 1920s and 1930s represent the first steps of what is presented as a deliberate Russian genocidal policy, whose final aim is to seize the Chechen territory along with its resources. This historical fiction has been included in a long-term memory of oppression, which gives it a very strong social bond.

The two Russo-Chechen wars strongly influenced the act of remembering and the interpretation of the past events. Developing during the late Soviet period, the impact of the historical narrative on deportation memories can be explained through the delayed act of recalling. It often occurs years or even decades after the initial incident. It is related to a situation that has been prevailing in Chechnya since the beginning of the 1990s, when claims for independence were first formulated. The rhetoric of never again used by the pro-separatist leaders mobilizes tragic recollections and produces homogenization based on memories of deportation. Since the first Russo-Chechen war was launched in 1994, the historical version has evolved. The deportation is no longer presented as the ultimate course action for destroying the Chechen people, but as a further step in this so-called objective. (Campana, 2003).

Despite the strong ideological divisions that have undermined the Chechen society since 1991, the deportation's interpretation generally raises little dispute among Chechens. Some, it is true, call for the decree of 1989, issued by the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, to be acknowledged as official recognition of the deportation. This decree rehabilitated all the deported peoples, even those excluded from the 1957 process and paved the way for eventual compensations to be paid to the survivors. Yet, first of all it was a very symbolic act which included almost no concrete measures. Moreover, it did not erase years of stigmatization or the collective traumas, which changed the perception Chechens had of themselves.

F. Interpretation and qualifications of facts

Scholars have scarcely addressed the Chechen deportation in itself; rather, they focus on massive deportations as a whole. However, due to the events in Chechnya since 1994, the categorizing of the deportation has become a much more sensitive issue.

There is no agreement within the scholarly community whether to consider the deportation ethnic cleansing or genocide, two concepts which are often very poorly defined and even mixed-up. The great majority of Chechen historians currently defend this second position. Some scholars also share this point of view. A study published in 1958 under the outstanding title of *Genocide in the USSR* considers and analyzes the Stalinist terror in general and the massive deportations as acts of genocide. Here, genocide is understood according to the 1948 United Nations Convention's definition. One of the co-authors, Ramazan Karcha, presents the wholesale deportation of the Chechens, Ingush, Balkars and Karachai as the final and culminating act of Soviet genocide against the North Caucasians (Karcha, 1958:43.)

The historian Otto J. Pohl advances his research on the subject, despite prejudicial confusion of terminologies. He demonstrates that massive deportations constituted acts of ethnically motivated murder. He brings to the fore the fact that the Stalinist regime deliberately and consciously sent the deported peoples to areas known to have deadly living conditions, which resulted not only in heavy death toll, but also in the fall of birth rates (O. Pohl, 2000:268-272). He thus considers that Stalin's deportation of national minorities only partially meets the strict definition of genocide, under which the crimes committed against the Armenians, the Jews and the Tutsi were internationally recognized as genocide. However, he agrees

with the aforementioned co-authors on the fact that the legal definition of genocide provided by the 1948 Convention is applicable to the Stalinist policy of forced resettlement (O. Pohl, 1999:2-3).

On the other hand, massive deportations cannot be categorized as acts of genocide, but are rather a matter of ethnic cleansing. Norman Nairmak bases his argument on the Chechen-Ingush and Crimean Tatar forced expulsions. The official documents certainly provide evidence of the intentional character of these massive deportations. Yet, according to Nairmak, they also prove that the Soviet leaders did not mean to exterminate the deported peoples. To sustain this thesis, the author makes three major points. First, he relies on the fact that in the territories from which the punished peoples were deported, no ethnically homogenous regions were created. Secondly, he emphasizes that the initial plan was to assimilate Chechens into their regions of exile, not exterminate them. Finally, he concludes by pointing out the main goals that Stalin and his lieutenants wanted to reach. These goals were, according to him, to establish a stronger control over the diverse peoples composing the Soviet Union and to punish those considered as nationalist or rebellious ethnicities (Nairmak, 2001:104-107). Terry Martin, who deals with all the pre-war deportations, underlines that ethnic cleansing has the advantage of accurately representing the perspective of the perpetrator (Terry, 1998:824). The concept of ethnic cleansing also refers to the Russian word used to describe deportations in official correspondences, *ochist* which means to cleanse .

In February 2004, the plenary assembly of the European Parliament approved one amendment. This amendment recognizes that on the basis of The Hague s 1907 fourth Convention and the United Nations General Assembly s Convention of 1948 concerning the prevention and repression of the crime of genocide, the deportation of the entire Chechen people ordered by Stalin on February 23, 1944 constitutes an act of genocide. Notwithstanding that this decision has had no political impact, it shows to an important symbolic significance and throws into new light the debates about the categorization of the massive deportations.

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