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## The Deportation of the Poles to Kazakhstan: Ethnic Cleansing, Collective Suffering, and Cultural Assimilation

<https://doi.org/10.34739/his.2024.13.25>

**Abstract:** *The paper explores and analyzes one of the darkest pages of the history of the Polish people linked to the deportation of the Poles from Ukraine in 1936 and from Ukraine and Belarus in 1940-1941 to Kazakhstan. The central argument of the study is that the deportation of Poles from their historical homeland was carried out based exclusively on their ethnicity. We argue that the real intention of the Soviet regime's genocidal policy was not confined only to the collective punishment and extermination of Poles as a distinct ethnic group, but the regime also sought to subject the deported Poles to slave labor exploitation for profit and to forced Russification. The assumption here is that Poles were uprooted from their homeland not only for extermination, but also the Soviet regime considered Poles to be an important component of its nation building project and their assimilation into Russian-dominated society was on the totalitarian regime's agenda. The theoretical basis of this study constitutes the concept of ethnification of Stalinism, yet we add another dimension to our research, namely we employ the concept of racialization as a theoretical underpinning of the study to further deepen our analysis and indicate how ethnic identity of Poles was racialized. The study draws upon archival sources and the extant literature on the history of deportation in the Soviet Union, specifically we increasingly focus on Polish deportees' collective and individual experiences who went through horrendous dehumanization and brutalization in exile in various parts of Kazakhstan between 1936 and 1956.*

**Key words:** Deportations, Poles, Kazakhstan, Ethnic Cleansing, Persecution, Soviet Regime

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## Introduction

The importance of the topic under the current study lies in the preponderance and pervasiveness of the ethnic criterion of mass repressions and collective punishment directed against targeted ethnic groups in the Soviet Union in the 1930s-1940s.<sup>1</sup> Although at the core of the Soviet ideology and policy lied the concepts of class conflict, class struggle and elimination of class division, in practice the Soviet regime shifted towards mostly ethnic and nationalistic goals and methods.<sup>2</sup> Declared nationwide and even global principles of Marxist internationalism and the class approach were quickly faded into the background giving the way to parochial ultranationalism and ethnocentrism that reflected in the regime's repressive and genocidal policies towards certain ethnic groups. From this standpoint, along with ethnic Koreans in the Far East and Finns in Leningrad and its adjacent areas, ethnic Poles living in Ukraine and Belarus were systematically targeted by the Soviet authorities as a fifth column within the Soviet Union. On the one hand, the Soviet regime increasingly perceived ethnic Poles as hostile and disloyal to the Soviet state, and on the other, as loyal, and sympathetic towards foreign countries, specifically towards Poland, which was in a constant state of confrontation with the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup>

Through identifying and analyzing major trends in the extant literature on the deportation of Poles we touch upon only part of extensive scholarship regarding the history of Soviet deportations. Within the framework of this study our research is guided by several key questions. First question is why did the Soviet regime target the Poles and why was Kazakhstan chosen as one of the main destinations for Polish deportees? Second, why and how were Polish deportees subjected to dehumanization, marginalization, stigmatization, and cultural assimilation in exile? In our research we strive to find comprehensive answers to these questions by drawing upon the literature and archival documents.

In the context of the history of the deportation in the Soviet Union the removal and mistreatment of Poles represents an interesting case in terms of how the Soviet regime systematically targeted all ethnic Poles, both those who were Soviet and Polish citizens. We argue that Poles were violently removed and transferred to Kazakhstan and subjected to dehumanization because of their ethnicity and ethnic origin, specifically Poles were punished because they were Poles.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Stalinskie deportatsii, 1928-1953 gg*, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> *Stalinskie deportatsii, 1928-1953 gg*, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Werth, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Martin, 2001; Musial, 2012.

## The background

Due to historical animosity towards Poland as well as its domination over the Polish lands established in 1772 after the partition of Poland, Russia systematically applied terror and intimidation, including forced deportation to break the spirit of the Polish people. The first group of Poles were exiled to Kazakhstan in the aftermaths of the 1830-1831 Rebellion and the Polish Uprising of 1863-1864 against Russian rule in Poland.<sup>5</sup> Gentes stresses that the mass deportation of Polish insurrectionists by tsarist Russia was the reflection of a long-established and prevailing penal tradition in Russia whose authorities skillfully leveraged punitive measures like deportation, exile, or removal to punish offenders and accelerate imperial expansion. It is essential to note that did the Bolsheviks not only renounce the previous tsarist regime's policies and practices of punishment, but also, they built upon and considerably expanded them.<sup>6</sup> Mass deportation, slave labor camps or death camps had already been in place in Russia before the 1917 Bolshevik takeover.

The Bolsheviks inherited from the previous tsarist regime one of the largest empires with huge multiethnic and multicultural populations. At the beginning the Bolsheviks subscribed to the ideology of proletarian internationalism, friendships of peoples and equality of nationalities, which enshrined in their statements and written documents that emphasized "any action, any decision that violates the equality of nations or the rights of national minorities is illegal".<sup>7</sup> For instance, the 1936 Soviet constitution stipulated that all nationalities, and races were equal in all areas of state and public life. Nonetheless, the reality on the ground was not consistent with such declarations as they had only a declarative character and were not observed in practice. All these declarations and legal state documents were soon set aside or forgotten. The Bolshevik leadership harbored malicious intentions to harm the whole ethnic groups and started to express openly their genocidal plans, specifically in 1923 Stalin stated that if any ethnic group did not have its own historical territory, then it was right to relocate or remove such a group from its area of residence to somewhere.<sup>8</sup>

The Soviet regime engaged in war against both real and perceived enemies. Initially, the Soviet regime was at war with social classes such bourgeoisie, peasants dubbed kulaks, but soon the regime unleashed violence on various ethnic groups across the country. Although in literature it is indicated that repressions of ethnic minorities followed the mass exile and massacre of social classes such as kulaks, ethnic-based persecutions in fact emerged much earlier. Although Poles alongside Germans were first deported to Kazakhstan in 1936, anti-Polish paranoia and efforts directed at

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<sup>5</sup> Kabalduinov, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Gentes, 2017: 13.

<sup>7</sup> Bugay, 1995: 4.

<sup>8</sup> Bugay, 1995: 5-8.

suppressing Poles had long been underway. Oppression of Poles emanated not only from anti-Polish hatred and fear among Russians, but also from ethnic and national obsessions of the Bolshevik elites, especially Stalin, Beria, Kaganovich, Yezhov and many others who detested and were apprehensive towards Poles.<sup>9</sup>

In fact, before the Polish deportation to Kazakhstan in 1936 most Poles had lived for centuries in western frontiers referred to as Soviet Belarus and Soviet Ukraine, to which Poles were not alien rather they were indigenous to these regions. Referred to as a “western national minority” Poles along with Germans, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Finns, and other ethnicities were increasingly distrusted and demonized by the Bolsheviks.<sup>10</sup> In 1927, the Soviet leaders such as Kaganovich suggested that western regions ought to be cleansed from hostile elements, especially from the Polish communities living in Belarus and Ukraine who fiercely resisted the collectivization drive and ostensibly favored foreign nations.<sup>11</sup> The genocidal campaign of ethnic cleansing aimed at the depolonization of western frontiers and removal of the Polish population with the intent to massacre Poles in part and the remaining to forcibly relocate to Kazakhstan and elsewhere.

Snyder highlights that in the 1930s more than half a million of Poles in western areas of the Soviet Union became the most persecuted ethnic minority as the Soviet authorities tirelessly constructed lies that the failures of collectivization and subsequent famine in Ukraine were a provocation engineered by a network of Polish spies dubbed the “Polish Military Organization”, to whom Polish residents were purportedly lending their support.<sup>12</sup> Thus, in the early 1930s the Soviet authorities embarked upon the policy of ethnic cleansing of Poles and depolonization of western border areas.<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting that alongside the kulaks, Koreans, Germans, and Iranians, ethnic Poles were the preeminent victims of the Soviet regime’s genocidal ethnic cleansing campaign.<sup>14</sup> At the beginning under the supervision of the Soviet secret police OGPU and the Soviet interior ministry NKVD thousands of Poles and Germans had been transferred from western Ukraine to the eastern part of the country.<sup>15</sup> Before Poles were deported to Kazakhstan in 1936 there had been several waves of the deportation of Poles,<sup>16</sup> and on April 28, 1936, the Soviet government adopted a resolution on

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<sup>9</sup> Baberowski, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Martin, 2001: 328.

<sup>11</sup> Musial, 2012.

<sup>12</sup> Snyder, 2010: 322.

<sup>13</sup> Musial, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Bugay, 1995; Snyder, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Martin, 2001: 330.

<sup>16</sup> Martin, 2001: 332.

the deportation of 15 thousands of Polish and German households from the Ukrainian SSR to the Karaganda region of the Kazakh ASSR as politically unreliable elements.<sup>17</sup>

According to the archival data, a total of 45 thousand Poles and Germans were forcibly relocated to Kazakhstan, and they were made to settle in labor settlements of the NKVD.<sup>18</sup> At first, the Soviet authorities considered dispersing 15 thousand households from Ukraine across Kazakhstan by distributing them to different areas of the Kazakh ASSR. Of 15 thousand households 5.500 were to be settled in Southern Kazakhstan oblast, 3 thousand in Almaty oblast, 2.500 in Eastern Kazakhstan oblast, 3 thousand in Karaganda oblast, one thousand in Aktobe oblast.<sup>19</sup>

### Theoretical framework

Theoretical underpinnings of the study are the concepts of ethnification and racialization of the Soviet regime's policy towards various ethnicities in the 1930s-1940s. Baberowski, Martin, Naimark, Pohl, Savin, Snyder, and Weitz observe that at the beginning of the 1930s there was a deep paradigm shift from class struggle to ethnicization of the Soviet regime's policy.<sup>20</sup> Ethnicization and racialization of the Soviet policy reflected in the emergence of the category of enemy nation and the practice of ethnic cleansing.<sup>21</sup> The shift from proletarian internationalism to Russian ultranationalism and policy of Russification is in fact congruent with the concept of ethnification and racialization of Stalinism.<sup>22</sup> Having abandoned the policy of "korenizatsiia" or "indigenization" that sought to accommodate non-Russian ethnicities, the Bolshevik elite embraced and prioritized Russian ultranationalism, embarking on the path of nation building. In fact, the persecution and victimization of Poles were preceded by their othering, essentializing, racialization, stereotyping, stigmatizing, objectification, and vilification by the Soviet regime.

Pohl argues that the Soviet regime punished and deported ethnic groups based on their ethnic origin. Germans and Poles were targeted because of their ethnicity.<sup>23</sup> Baberowski maintains that the concept of nation was always relevant to Stalin and other Bolshevik leaders who were prisoners of their own essentialist beliefs and hostilities towards real and imagined enemies.<sup>24</sup> In addition to reusing old stereotypes about Poles, they constructed new stereotypes that soon served as the rationale for

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<sup>17</sup> *Iz istorii polyakov v Kazakhstane (1936-1956 gg.)*, 18-21; *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan. 1935-1939 gg.*, 59-62; Bugay, 1995: 9.

<sup>18</sup> *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan. 1935-1939 gg.*, 59.

<sup>19</sup> *Iz istorii polyakov v Kazakhstane (1936-1956 gg.)*, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Pohl, 1999; Baberowski, 2016; Martin, 1998; 2001; Naimark, 2002; 2010; Weitz, 2002; 2003; Snyder, 2007; 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Martin, 2001: 311.

<sup>22</sup> Savin, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Pohl, 1999: 2.

<sup>24</sup> Baberowski, 2016: 290.

persecution and ethnic cleansing of the Polish population. Ethnicization and racialization of Poles also reflected in the construction of Poles as an external other and as an enemy.<sup>25</sup> Stigmatization, objectification, and vilification of Poles were reinforced and perpetuated by assigning them essential attributes such as disloyalty, hostility to the Soviet state, anti-Sovietism, defeatism, betrayal, which were difficult to cure or change.<sup>26</sup>

Although scientific and biological racism are conventionally ascribed to Nazi Germany or other Western powers as well as the Soviet regime under Stalin outrightly repudiated the ideology of race, scholars argue that race greatly affected the Soviet political establishment and society, with cultural and other forms of racism being prevalent among the Bolshevik leaders.<sup>27</sup> The Bolsheviks defined and conceptualized ethnicities from the racial perspectives. Racialization and essentialization of various ethnic groups reflected in the belief that ethnic groups were bearers of inheritable, fixed, immutable, and primordial essences. From this standpoint, the Soviet regime did not harbor the intention of the total extermination of any ethnic and racial groups, yet the primary goal was the physical elimination of those who could transmit primordial and immutable essences of the national and biological character to the next generation that the Bolsheviks considered incurable, thereby such racial traits could be extinguished by state-instigated violence and terror, specifically through executions, deportations and constant intimidations.<sup>28</sup>

### **Archival data**

In investigating the research topic and in answering research questions we have employed archival research methods and a critical review of the literature. Archival methods entail the engagement in the in-depth study of historical documents and textual materials stored in archives or produced by organization.<sup>29</sup> Up until recently archive as an institution was defined as a set of documents related to closed institutions, yet now archives are perceived as academic institutes.<sup>30</sup> The main layer of documents that allows investigating the issue is deposited in archival institutions of Kazakhstan and in other countries of the former USSR. The modern archival system in Kazakhstan was established during the Soviet period,<sup>31</sup> and the data pertaining to the deportation of Poles to Kazakhstan are stored in the Archive of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan,

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<sup>25</sup> Baberowski, 2016: 293.

<sup>26</sup> Martin, 2001; Snyder, 2010; Baberowski, 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Weitz, 2003: 68; Baberowski, 2016: 293;

<sup>28</sup> Weitz, 2003: 97.

<sup>29</sup> Ventresca & Mohr, 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Magier & Posokhov, 2022.

<sup>31</sup> Yskak & Zhumatay, 2022.

the State archives of Almaty, Akmola, Aktobe, East Kazakhstan, Zhambyl, Karaganda, Kostanay, North Kazakhstan, Kokshetau, Turkestan and other regions of Kazakhstan.

In this study we draw upon archival data regarding the deportations of Poles from Soviet Ukraine and Belarus in 1936 and from eastern Poland occupied by the Soviet Union in the aftermaths of September 1939, to various regions of Kazakhstan. Since the Soviet authorities had Poles deportees to settle different areas of Kazakhstan, archival documents pertaining to Polish experiences can be found in state archives of Kazakhstan. For the first time, Kazakh historians and archivists compiled archival documents related to the deportations of Poles to Kazakhstan and published them in 2000. Collection of archival documents titled *Из истории поляков в Казахстане in 1936-1956 гг.* was published in 2000.<sup>32</sup> This collection of archival documents contains orders, resolutions memos, reports, and other forms of documents produced and issued by different party and Soviet bodies such as the communist party of the Soviet Union, the communist party of the Soviet Kazakhstan, the OGPU, the NKVD, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, unionwide, republican, regional, district and local branches of these bodies, etc.

In 2012, 2014, and 2019 archivists of the Archive of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan compiled and published three volumes of archival documents titled *Из истории депортации. Казахстан* on the forced deportations of Poles and other ethnic groups to Kazakhstan.<sup>33</sup> These volumes contain rich data regarding the management of special settlers, their resettlement, and involvement in the economy, as well as the working and living conditions of special settlers, their treatment by the Soviet authorities and the hardships and deprivation of Polish deportees, lived experiences of the Polish communities in various regions of Kazakhstan who differed in culture, customs, traditions, religious affiliation, language, and way of life. Furthermore, these volumes contain a wealth of data with respect to changes in the national policy of the Soviet regime aimed at cultural assimilation and Russification of deported ethnicities, including Poles.

The two main Polish editions of Kazakh sources regarding the expulsion of Poles are: *Z dziejów Polaków w Kazachstanie 1936-1956. Zbiór dokumentów z Archiwum Prezydenta Republiki Kazachstanu*<sup>34</sup> and *Deportacje Polaków i obywateli polskich do Kazachstanu w latach 1936-1941. Dokumenty ze zbiorów Archiwum Prezydenta Republiki Kazachstanu* edited by Bogusław Żyłko and Dmitriy Panto.<sup>35</sup> However, the vast majority of documents stored in Poland concern deportations carried out after September 17, 1939. These are mainly reporting and aid files of the Union of Polish

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<sup>32</sup> *Из истории поляков в Казахстане (1936-1956 гг.)*.

<sup>33</sup> *Из истории депортации. Казахстан 1930-1935 гг ; Из истории депортации. Казахстан. 1935-1939 гг ; Из истории депортации. Казахстан. 1939-1945 гг.*

<sup>34</sup> *Z dziejów Polaków w Kazachstanie 1936-1956.*

<sup>35</sup> *Deportacje Polaków i obywateli polskich do Kazachstanu w latach 1936-1941.*

Patriots in the USSR, kept in the Archive of New Records in Warsaw, and ego-documents kept in the De-partment of the History of the People's Movement at the Supreme Executive Committee of the Polish People's Party and in the Eastern Archives of the Karta Center, files of soldiers recruited from among displaced persons kept with the Central Military Archives, and files of prose-cutor's proceedings of the Institute of National Remembrance regarding displacements.

## Discussion

### *Why did the Soviet regime target ethnic Poles?*

Perhaps there is not an exhaustive and comprehensive answer to this question that the literature can offer. Martin argues that the inception of the campaign of ethnic cleansing in the Soviet Union was caused by collectivization, dekulakization, the Polish emigration movement, and growing concern over the security of western frontiers in the Kremlin.<sup>36</sup> Here we suggest that there were several reasons that induced full-scale persecutions of ethnicities and ethnic cleansing. First, the deep-rooted historical hostility between Poland and Russia that was revived by the Bolsheviks. Second, the Soviet elites' prejudices and hostile attitudes towards Poles as a traitorous and unreliable category, being hostile to the Soviet state and favoring foreign nations, specifically Poland. Third, the Soviet regime's retreat from the policy of "korenizatsiia" or "indigenization" that bestowed upon ethnic minorities greater cultural autonomy and the rise of National Bolshevism in the form of ultra-Russian nationalism. Fourth, the Soviet regime's policy of securing western borders through removing Poles from western regions. Fifth, the regime's intention of decimating the strong national and religious identity of Poles and forced incorporation of Poles into Russian dominated society.

In relation to the first rationale for ethnic cleansing of Poles, Musial suggests that deeply entrenched historical Russian fear and hatred towards Poland and Poles, referred to as the "Bolsheviks' Poland-complex" or "trauma", induced the Bolshevik to carry out violent expulsion of the Polish population from western regions.<sup>37</sup> Although it was defined as the "Bolsheviks' Poland-complex", Levintova maintains that the Bolshevik hostility to Poles deeply rooted in history, which means that the Soviet regime's mistreatment of Poles was not a phenomenon occurred at that time, rather it was the continuation of the long-established and deep-seated historical confrontation

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<sup>36</sup> Martin, 2001: 323.

<sup>37</sup> Musial, 2012.



between Poles and Russians.<sup>38</sup> Andrzej Nowak devoted a lot of attention to the issue of Polish-Russian neighborhood, most recently in his cross-sectional work from 2022.<sup>39</sup>

Stalin and his henchmen not only resurrected and rehabilitated Russian ultranationalism and imperialism,<sup>40</sup> also they resuscitated old historical animosity and hatred towards the Poles that had deeply been rooted in Russian psyche and mentality.<sup>41</sup> The removal of Poles from Ukraine and Belarus was the reflection and manifestation of historical Russian enmity and antagonism towards Poles. The confrontation and hostility between Russia and Poland go back to history and this trend has become a recurrent phenomenon. Yet the agonizing and painful aspect of the animosity between these two nations became the total mistreatment and victimization of ethnic Poles by Russians. When relationships between Poland and Russia became tense and hostile the latter intentionally targeted ethnic Poles even if they were citizens of Russia or the Soviet state.<sup>42</sup>

Pohl highlights that the Soviet Union under Stalin's leadership viewed ethnic minorities with ties beyond the Soviet borders with growing suspicion.<sup>43</sup> From this perspective, the deportation of ethnic groups in the Soviet Union coincided with and resulted from the ethnicization and racialization of the Soviet political establishment and society at large. At the beginning of the 1930s the dominant discourses of class struggle paled into insignificance and overly ethnicized worldviews gained ground that increasingly shaped, directed and guided the Soviet regime's domestic and international policy.

Stalin had deep suspicion of Poland and Poles,<sup>44</sup> putting the blame on Poles for all his failures in collectivization, for fierce resistance of Ukrainian peasants to collectivization, even for the mass starvation in Ukraine and the deterioration of the Soviet Union's position in the international arena.<sup>45</sup> Such cruel and deeply biased narratives and worldviews about Poles should not be solely ascribed to Stalin as anti-Polish paranoia was prevalent among the Soviet political leadership. Kaganovich, Yezhov, Beria and many others harbored anti-Polish sentiment, implicitly and explicitly favoring the murder and displacement of Poles from western frontiers.<sup>46</sup>

Thus, Poles were made a scapegoat for the failures and debacles in the Soviet regime's policy. The very presence of Poles near the border was seen as a grave threat to the Soviet regime, and hence the Soviets feared that in the event of Poland's

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<sup>38</sup> Levintova, 2010.

<sup>39</sup> Nowak, 2022.

<sup>40</sup> Carrère d'Encausse, 2007.

<sup>41</sup> Levintova, 2010.

<sup>42</sup> Berdinskyh, 2005.

<sup>43</sup> Pohl, 1999: 22.

<sup>44</sup> Paczkowski, 1999.

<sup>45</sup> Snyder, 2010: 91.

<sup>46</sup> Baberowski, 2016: 298.

invasion of Russia, the Soviet Poles in Ukraine and Belarus would take Poland's side.<sup>47</sup> Stalin and his cronies believed that Poland's invasion would lead to the defeat of the Soviet Union and thereby the Soviets ought to take preventive measures by removing Poles from Soviet Ukraine and Belarus.<sup>48</sup> Stalin regularly ordered the Soviet security and secret police agencies to get rid of Poles and their spy filth for the sake of the USSR. The head of the NKVD Yezhov genuinely shared his superior's views about Poles, announcing that "The Poles must be completely destroyed".<sup>49</sup> The Bolshe-vik genuinely believed that without full-fledged state orchestrated mass violence and terror they could not achieve their objectives.<sup>50</sup> All these stated reasons served as the rationale for unleashing large-scale state-sponsored violence and terror against Soviet Poles, setting in motion mass murder and removal of the Polish population from Ukraine and Belarus.<sup>51</sup>

### ***Why was Kazakhstan chosen as one of the top destinations for Polish deportees?***

Referring to the 1940-1941 deportation of Poles to Kazakhstan Snyder stresses that "Poles could not have known that a third of the population of Kazakhstan had starved to death only a decade before".<sup>52</sup> To be precise, seven years ago almost a half of the Kazakh population perished due to the man-made famine engineered by the Bolsheviks. It is important to note that by orchestrating the famine in Soviet Kazakhstan in 1929-1933 the Soviet regime successfully dekazakhized of Kazakhstan as the indigenous inhabitants of the Kazakh steppes Kazakhs were reduced to a minority in their ancestral land. Thus, the forced deportations of ethnic groups to Kazakhstan were preceded by the total war against the nomadic Kazakh population. In addition, over three hundred thousand of dekulakized peasants were exiled to Kazakhstan in 1930-1933.<sup>53</sup> The Soviet regime waged war against indigenous Kazakhs through collectivization forcing nomads into collective farms with the intent to make them sedentary. Elimination of nomadism was an increasingly violent endeavor, which resulted in mass famine and death of millions of Kazakhs. Scholars have not come yet to a common conclusion regarding the exact number of Kazakhs perished in man-made famine, yet some estimate that at least 1,5 million Kazakhs were wiped out by famine and large-scale violence orchestrated by the Soviet regime.<sup>54</sup> As over half of the indigenous population perished and over millions were forced to flee to neighboring

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<sup>47</sup> Martin, 2001.

<sup>48</sup> Snyder, 2007.

<sup>49</sup> Baberowski, 2016: 298.

<sup>50</sup> Weitz, 2003: 62.

<sup>51</sup> "Operacja polska" NKWD 1937-1938, 2023.

<sup>52</sup> Snyder, 2010: 129-130.

<sup>53</sup> *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan 1930-1935 gg.*, 32.

<sup>54</sup> Cameron, 2018.

countries, the Kazakh steppe became virtually an empty space, which was soon to be filled by various persecuted social strata and ethnic groups brought to Kazakhstan against their will.

Imperial Russia leveraged its demographic resources as a tool to colonize and subjugate Kazakhstan and other areas, encouraging Russian and other Slavic settlers to migrate to Kazakhstan. State-sponsored Russian settler colonialism started well before the 1917 Bolshevik revolution and the Soviet regime not only inherited colonial policy of the previous regime, it also further expanded and perfected the methods of settler colonial policy, making it more pervasive and ubiquitous. The general pattern of communist behavior towards Kazakhstan (including the organization of their party) was applicable in other countries that were not only incorporated into the USSR, but also found themselves within its orbit of influence, including Poland after 1944.<sup>55</sup> Specifically, the Soviet regime designated Kazakhstan as one of the top destinations for repressed social and ethnic groups. Dekazakhized Kazakhstan was turned into a Russian-dominated settler society and the Soviet regime aimed to exploit repressed and deported ethnicities for its nation building project as punished people were expected to integrate themselves into Russian culture and become integral part of this settler society.

Moreover, the Kazakh steppe was indeed an inhospitable and harsh environment and Kazakhstan hosted a network of labor concentration camps. Thus, not only was the regime cruel to Poles, but the Kazakh steppe was ruthless and merciless to the deported Poles. Besides Kazakhstan, Poles were deported to Siberia and the Far East. The Kazakh steppe had before hosted Polish deportees in the second half of the 19th century, but the deported were individuals rather than the whole communities and families. Tsarist Russia deported to Kazakhstan prominent Polish political and public figures such as Adolf Januszkiewicz, Gustaw Zieliński, Bronisław Zaleski, Severin Gross, and others.<sup>56</sup> However, with the Bolshevik's takeover not only individuals, but the whole nation was punished by the regime.

***Why and how were Polish deportees subjected to dehumanization, marginalization, stigmatization, and cultural assimilation in exile?***

Scholars often refer to several underlying rationales for government-instigated mass expulsions of populations, among which intentional removal, extermination, and cultural elimination are emphasized.<sup>57</sup> Pohl argues that although the Soviet government strove to punish ethnic groups through forced removal, exposing them to hunger, disease, and mass suffering, the total annihilation of these nations was not in the inte-

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<sup>55</sup> Magier, Shotayev & Makhanbayev, 2023.

<sup>56</sup> Kabalduinov, 2008.

<sup>57</sup> Semelin, 2007; Garrity, 2022.

rest of the regime.<sup>58</sup> Mass expulsion and punishment are intended to subjugate and marginalize targeted ethnic groups.<sup>59</sup> Cultural elimination or coercive assimilation of the deported Poles through barbaric and brutal methods. The persecution and mistreatment of Poles in Kazakhstan and in other parts of the Soviet Union became an unceasing process over many years and even after 1956 when the shameful mark of “special settlers” was removed, overt and covert oppression of Poles remained in effect.

In Zhanguttin’s view, Poles constituted a considerable segment of the mass political repressions at that time, yet the literature on the Soviet deportations provides various statistical data on the numbers of the deported Poles to Kazakhstan in 1936, in 1940-1941 and in the subsequent years. He states that according to the archival data from the NKVD and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the USSR the number of deported Poles constituted 151.034 people, of which 60.283 were deported to Kazakhstan in 1936, 66.072 in 1940, and 15.679 in 1941 respectively.<sup>60</sup>

If in 1936, the Soviet regime deported Poles from Ukraine who were Soviet citizens, after the annexation of the eastern part of Poland in September of 1939 by the USSR, Stalin and his cronies extended and applied the regime of state-sponsored terror and extermination to the territories that had been previously under Poland’s jurisdiction. With the establishment of the totalitarian Soviet system over Poland’s eastern lands, Poland’s Poles were systematically subjected to the same inhuman oppressive policies that had been experienced by their ethnic brethren in the Soviet Union for many years.

With the invasion and annexation of Poland in September of 1939 by Germany and the Soviet Union “the double occupation of Poland brought two laboratories of totalitarianism into being side by side. For two years the Nazi and Soviet vultures feasted on Poland’s fallen body undisturbed”.<sup>61</sup> Davies emphasizes that both totalitarian monsters were determined to erase the Polish statehood and subject the fallen Poland’s population to savage and vicious annihilation, dehumanization, and cultural assimilation. Both regimes increasingly ethnicized and racialized Poles, viewing them as subhumans. In cooperation with the Third Reich, the Soviet regime violated sovereignty and territorial integrity of Poland, invading, and occupying the part of the country, which “was scourged by the full force of the Stalinist terror”.<sup>62</sup> The Soviet regime used ethnic propaganda as the rationale for annexation of eastern part of Poland, specifically the regime justified its aggressive behavior towards Poland by referring to how Ukrainians and Belarusians had been languishing and suffering

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<sup>58</sup> Pohl, 1999: 3.

<sup>59</sup> Semelin, 2007: 114.

<sup>60</sup> Zhanguttin, 2006: 90; see also Boćkowski, 1999, 15-103.

<sup>61</sup> Davies, 1998: 1002.

<sup>62</sup> Davies, 1998: 1002.

under the Polish rule for many years and indicated that the Soviets were forced to resort to military invasion with the intent to save their Ukrainian and Belarusian brethren. Yet it was a bogus justification, as the state-sponsored mass terror was not only directed against ethnic Poles, but soon Ukrainians, Belarusians, Jews, and other nationalities started to be persecuted in full force, who should have ostensibly been liberated and protected by the Soviet regime. In 1940-1941, between 1.5 and 2 million people were deported to death camps across the Soviet Union, including Kazakhstan and other countries of Central Asia.<sup>63</sup>

German-Russian invasion and annexation of Poland in 1939 was not an accidental event, but rather it was the continuation and manifestation of the old anti-Polish prejudices and hatred prevalent among Russians and Russian political establishment. The Bolsheviks neither forgot nor forgave Poland and Poles for their triumph over Russians in the Russo-Polish war of 1919-1921. The Bolshevik defeat in this war left a deep scar on the national collective memory of Russians who could not overcome their anti-Polish attitudes due to the prevailing desire for revenge as well as experiencing collective trauma. The bitter and painful memory drove the Bolsheviks to hate and distrust Poles inhabiting Ukraine and Belarus who quickly became a hostage of the regime's policy toward Poland.<sup>64</sup> Driven by the deep anger and hatred the Bolsheviks sought vengeance. As the Bolsheviks' quest for Sovietization, in other words an attempt to restore Russian domination in Poland ended in failure, Stalin and his henchmen did not intend to dispose of old anti-Polish hostility and prejudices. Quite the opposite anti-Polish propaganda, antagonism and revanchism were always on the agenda of the Bolsheviks. As another war against Poland was out of question and without Germany's acquiescence it was impossible, Stalin systematically repressed the Polish minority within the Soviet Union. The Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact of 1939 paved the way for the implementation of the Bolshevik agenda of vengeance and destruction of Poland and Poles. In this case, Stalin and his cronies were aware that the complete subjugation of Poland and establishment of Russian hegemony over Polish lands would be unfeasible unless the Bolsheviks break the neck of the Polish society and the spirit of the Polish people. Like in 1919-1920, in 1939 the Bolshevik invoked the national and ethnic propaganda, making reference to Ukrainian and Belarusian brethren who were allegedly suffering under Poland's rule.<sup>65</sup>

After the state-sponsored depolonization of western Ukraine and Belarus in 1936 through deliberate repressions and deportations, the Soviet regime started to get rid of Polish citizens in occupied territories in 1940-1941. Due to the planned ethnic cleansing carried out by the Soviet regime in 1939-1941 approximately ten percent of Poles were removed from eastern Poland to different spots of the Soviet Union. Yet

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<sup>63</sup> Nowak, 1997.

<sup>64</sup> Musial, 2012: 100.

<sup>65</sup> Nowak, 1997.

this was not an exact estimation of the deported Poles. Studies have shown that the forced removal of Poles regardless of their places of residence became a cyclical and recurrent pattern rooted in and emanating from the traditional Russian exile policies under the tsarist regime. Sword observes the continuity between the ethnic cleansing policies of Imperial Russia and Soviet Russia. Poles of previous generations were subjected to the same policy of forced uprooting, in which Siberia and Kazakhstan were selected as the dumping ground of the deported populations.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, persecutions and ethnic cleansing became an integral part of the history of Poles as many generations of Poles shared the same fate.

Jan Plater-Gajewski who was the spokesman for the Polish community in Kazakhstan stated that in the history of his family four generations had been deported by tsarist Russia and later by the Soviet regime. In 1831, Jan Plater-Gajewski's great-grandfather had been exiled by Russia to Siberia for his involvement in the Rebellion, and his grandfather was born in exile, who in turn was likewise deported to Siberia in 1863 for his engagement in the Uprising against Russian rule. His father was likewise persecuted and exiled to Siberia for his involvement in the Polish democratic movement. In turn, Jan Plater-Gajewski was made to share his great-grandfather's, grandfather's, and father's fate by being exiled by the Soviet regime.<sup>67</sup>

In relation to the experiences of Polish deportees in Siberia and Kazakhstan Snyder rightly points out that "even in the distant east the Soviet authorities reacted with great hostility to any sign of Polishness".<sup>68</sup> Cultural elimination and erasure of ethnic identity of Poles was in fact a bigger colonial and imperial imperative aimed at reducing Poles to a marginalized entity that was supposed to become part of dominant Russian culture through forced assimilation. The resurgent Russian ultranationalism and ethnocracy that informed and guided the Soviet regime's policies towards ethnic minorities. Subscribed to the idea of Russian ethnocracy, Stalin and other Bolshevik leaders considered ethnicity to be a pivotal factor in determining loyalty of people.<sup>69</sup> Stalin, Beria, and other Bolshevik leaders despite their different ethnic origin, acted and behaved like Great Russian chauvinist and nationalist.<sup>70</sup>

The Soviet ethnocracy under the guise of Marxist internationalism, skillfully concealed its character and nature based on Russian ultranationalism and imperialism. The bottom line of the nationality policy of the Soviet regime was that the country would be national in form, yet socialist in content, and it was believed that sooner or later national differences would disappear.<sup>71</sup> To be precise, all non-Russian ethnicities

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<sup>66</sup> Sword, 1994: 24.

<sup>67</sup> Sword, 1994: IX.

<sup>68</sup> Snyder, 2010: 130.

<sup>69</sup> Pohl, 1999: 22-23.

<sup>70</sup> Naimark, 2010.

<sup>71</sup> Naimark, 2002: 128.

would be expected to surrender their national identities and distinctiveness, integrating themselves into dominant Russian culture through voluntary and forced assimilation. It appears that the Soviet regime deliberately and systematically subjected Poles and other repressed ethnicities to dehumanization, discrimination, marginalization, stigmatization, making them suffer and languish. Individual and collective suffering, trauma, coupled with daily terror, intimidations, deprivation, and hardship far from their homeland in inhospitable and harsh milieus would lead to the disruption of their traditional way of life and dilution of their national identities, which would eventually force them to adapt to a new environment and embrace Russian culture and identity. On the one hand, the disguised and concealed Russian ethnocracy, supremacy, and chauvinistic ultranationalism in the form of sham communism would be imposed and inculcated in non-Russians, and on the other, the Soviet regime was determined to ruthlessly crush any sign of nationalism or national self-determination among non-Russians.<sup>72</sup>

Although not all scholars share the view that the Soviet regime pursued ethnocratic and assimilationist policies in regard to ethnic minorities, certain studies explicitly emphasize that through violent uprooting of ethnic groups from their homeland the regime sought to assimilate these peoples, which would be achieved faster and effectively if these minorities were away from their historic terrain.<sup>73</sup> In this regard, Zemskov writes that

By all indications, Stalin and his entourage were irritated by the national diversity of the state they ruled. The deportation of a number of small nations clearly served the purpose of accelerating the assimilation processes in Soviet society. This was a purposeful policy of eliminating small nations in the future through their assimilation into larger ethnic communities, and their exile from their historical homeland was supposed to speed up this process.<sup>74</sup>

Despite some scholars increasingly question such assumptions,<sup>75</sup> historical evidence suggests that assimilation of ethnic minorities into Russian-dominated Soviet society was the paramount goal of the Soviet regime. Yet the erasure of national identities and distinctiveness of ethnic minorities was carried out through inflicting severe inhuman physical and mental pain, suffering and trauma upon them. Deliberate marginalization, discrimination, intimidation, terror, and stigmatization would lead to dehumanization of repressed peoples, and they would regain their humanity only if they would abandon their ethnic identities, embrace Russianness, and internalize a socially constructed lie and myth of supremacy of Russian culture and way of life. In other words, the belief

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<sup>72</sup> Naimark, 2010: 80.

<sup>73</sup> Pohl, 1999; Snyder, 2010; Zemskov, 2003.

<sup>74</sup> Zemskov, 2003: 106.

<sup>75</sup> Furr, 2017; Pykhalov, 2008; 2013.

was that only embracing Russian language and culture would save those punished from constant anguish, deprivation, misery, suffering, and terror. It was a deeply entrenched belief among Russian communist functionaries that the Soviet ‘civilizing mission’ in the form of collectivization and sedentarization would eventually turn Kazakhs into Russians.<sup>76</sup>

The rationale for removal of Poles and other ethnicities from western border areas to Siberia and Kazakhstan was based

on the assumption that those deported could be better assimilated into Soviet society when they were separated from their homes and homelands... Men of elite families were killed at Katyn and other sites, and their wives, children, and parents left to the mercy of the Kazakh steppe. There they would integrate with Soviet society, or they would die.<sup>77</sup>

The mass punishment and destruction of Poles and other persecuted ethnicities was the goal of the Soviet regime as they were growingly perceived as enemy nations, and hence Stalin and his henchmen believed that these ethnic groups deserved to die. Yet at the same time, Stalin sought to transform these ethnicities into the Soviet nation, deprived of their ethnic identities and characteristics, more loyal, reliable, and trustworthy.<sup>78</sup>

From this perspective, not only were western border areas cleansed of their Polish populations, but ethnic Poles were increasingly subjected to depolonization, being deprived of their ethnic identity. The ruthless and systematic assaults on Polish cultural and educational institutions in Ukraine and Belarus were underway, and hundreds of Polish schools were shut down.<sup>79</sup> Polish suffering and privation seemed to become unceasingly reinforced and perpetuated as Poles were subjected to the greatest degree of ethnic hostility at all levels. After being forcibly removed to Kazakhstan, Poles were right away reduced to the status of “special settlers” that had been previously assigned to deported kulaks and other social outcasts, being put under the NKVD supervision.<sup>80</sup> The Soviet regime initially designated exiled kulaks as ‘exiles’ (ssyl’nye) and ‘exiled settlers’ (ssyl’noposelentsy), which were inherited from the previous tsarist regime. Yet the legal status of forced social and ethnic groups changed over time. The authorities initially referred to exiled individuals and groups as ‘special settlers’ (spets-pere-selentsy), but in 1933 a new term started to be applied to them such as ‘labor settlers’ (trudposelentsy) and the places of their settlement were referred to as ‘special

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<sup>76</sup> Thomas, 2018: 27.

<sup>77</sup> Snyder, 2010: 330.

<sup>78</sup> Naimark, 2010: 81-82.

<sup>79</sup> Martin, 2001: 332.

<sup>80</sup> Martin, 2001: 330.



settlements' (spetsposelki), then 'labor settlements' (trudposelki).<sup>81</sup> However, in 1940 the authorities returned to the terms 'special settlers' and 'special settlements'.<sup>82</sup>

Polonophobia and anti-Polish sentiments were deeply embedded in the Russian psyche, which were manifested in the behavior of party and state functionaries at all levels. Indeed, as Snyder notes the deported Poles were left to the mercy of the Kazakh steppe.<sup>83</sup> As the Soviet regime treated all Poles as enemies and dangerous unreliable elements, all categories of Poles and all family members were persecuted and removed to Kazakhstan. To say nothing of adults, Polish children, aged parents, and disabled individuals were perceived as disloyal, dangerous and anti-Soviet, carriers of ethnic Polish identity. From Ukraine, Belarus and later from occupied part of Poland Poles and other ethnicities were forcibly removed and transferred to Kazakhstan and other destinations by trains that were not equipped with necessities, as they were designed to transport commodities and animals. Train cars were overcrowded and guarded by the NKVD guards, who exhibited overt hostility towards the deported. As little and negligible attention was given to well-being of the deported, their forced journey to unknown areas was unbearable and fatal that had a deep dehumanizing effect on them. Due to the lack of lavatories, the deported people had to relieve themselves right in cars, the absence of sanitary conditions and facilities led to the spread of diseases. Bitter cold, inclement weather conditions and the absence of heat in cars caused high rates of casualties among the deported as many people succumbed to illnesses and the cold, and "as time passed, the children learned to lick the frost from metal nails, and watched as the elderly began to freeze to death. Now the adult dead would be taken out and thrown into a hastily dug mass grave".<sup>84</sup> Due to the lack of food and malnutrition people starved, swelled up, became sick and eventually perished en mass. Such barbaric and inhuman treatment caused massive emotional and psycho-logical trauma among Poles and even children were aware that their torturers were taking them to hell.<sup>85</sup>

In the distant areas of Kazakhstan hatred and hostility towards Poles endemic and prevalent within the Soviet authorities, did not subside, rather mistreatment of Poles sustained and reinforced. Upon arrival to Kazakhstan, deported Poles were scattered across the country, and were settled in Karaganda, Aktobe, Kustanai, North Kazakhstan, Pavlodar, Semipalatinsk, Akmola, South Kazakhstan, and other regions.<sup>86</sup> Although the Soviet authorities stated that the deported Poles' civil rights and the right of movement within the administrative area of settlement under the NKVD supervision

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<sup>81</sup> *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan 1930-1935 gg*, 20.

<sup>82</sup> *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan 1930-1935 gg*, 20.

<sup>83</sup> Snyder, 2010.

<sup>84</sup> Snyder, 2010: 129.

<sup>85</sup> Snyder, 2010: 130.

<sup>86</sup> *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan. 1939-1945 gg*, 138.

would not be limited, they were prohibited from leaving the settlements.<sup>87</sup> Yet such decrees and resolutions were just hollow words and pure hypocrisy, in fact utter lawlessness and arbitrariness reigned on the ground and at all levels.

Considering special settlers as a contingent of the NKVD, district and regional party and Soviet organizations in Kazakhstan neglected and shunned addressing issues pertaining to accommodation of deported Poles, their well-being, employment, and education.<sup>88</sup> Instead, district and regional party and Soviet authorities appealed to the branches of the NKVD, complaining that they were overburdened with the influx of special settlers from western Ukraine and Belarus, and they were unable to address issues regarding deported Poles.<sup>89</sup> The Soviet government and communist party charged the republican communist party and government of Kazakhstan with the task of not only monitoring, but also, assisting deported Poles to settle in their respective designated areas. On the one hand, district and regional authorities in Kazakhstan lacked capacity to address these issues, and on the other, they were rather unwilling to deal with deported Poles. Moreover, to say nothing of district and regional authorities, local populations harbored prejudices and exhibited hostility towards deported Poles on the ground, which were well documented by the Soviet Kazakh republican authorities who reported directly to the Soviet party and government organizations.<sup>90</sup>

In the Resolution of the Bureau of the Kustanai Regional Committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan of October 21, 1940, it was stated that

the Regional Committee establishes that many secretaries of the district committees of the Communist Party and the chairmen of the district executive committees have withdrawn themselves from managing the matter of labor placement and creating the necessary living conditions for the administrative exiles expelled from the western regions of the Ukrainian SSR and the BSSR.<sup>91</sup>

In addition, the Kustanai Regional Committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan established that because of an utter negligence and disregard for the fate of the deported many of them were not employed, living conditions for those deported did not meet normal requirements.<sup>92</sup> It was also indicated that at the central estate of the Kustanai grain state farm, 120 people were housed in a former bathhouse, which was not heated, and in the village of Novo-Troitsky, Karabalyk district, 68 people lived

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<sup>87</sup> *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan. 1935-1939 gg*, 59; *Iz istorii polyakov v Kazakhstane (1936-1956 gg.)*, 18.

<sup>88</sup> *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan. 1939-1945 gg*, 139.

<sup>89</sup> *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan. 1939-1945 gg*, 139.

<sup>90</sup> *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan. 1939-1945 gg*.

<sup>91</sup> *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan. 1939-1945 gg*, 122.

<sup>92</sup> *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan. 1939-1945 gg*, 122.

in a former stable and other unsuitable premises for habitation as well as in a number of collective farms, deportees were not supplied with food, bread, or goods.<sup>93</sup>

In the memo from the leadership of the NKVD of the Kazakh SSR to the People's Commissar of the NKVD of the USSR L. Beria on the placement, employment and state of intelligence and operational work among special settlers expelled from the western regions of Ukraine and Belarus, as of October 15, 1940, it was indicated that in April-May 1940, from the western regions of the Ukrainian and Belarusian SSR, the NKVD authorities sent 61.092 special settlers to Kazakhstan, mainly families and relatives of individuals repressed by the NKVD authorities.<sup>94</sup> Table 1 illustrates data regarding the number of deportees brought to Kazakhstan in 1940 by the NKVD, which reflected the number of special settlers in these six regions and later more people were transferred to Kazakhstan.<sup>95</sup>

Tab. 1. Accommodation of deported Poles in Kazakhstan (After: *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan. 1939-1945 gg*, p. 124).

No	Region	Total in region	Numbers				
			Families	Adults	Old people from 60 years and over	Children under 16 years old	Other category of deportees
1	North Kazakhstan	20.064	N/A	8.820	N/A	N/A	342
2	Pavlodar	11.411	3.587	5.250	706	5.403	N/A
3	Kustanai	8.705	2.454	3.886	613	3.524	N/A
4	Aktobe	7.092	N/A	3.535	713	2.919	12
5	Semipalatinsk	7.644	N/A	5.553	819	1.988	N/A
6	Akmola	6.176	1.894	2.170	689	2.754	N/A
Total by regions		61.092	N/A	29.214	3.540	16.588	354

In the memo senior officials of the NKVD of the Kazakh SSR indicated that corresponding district authorities tended to disregard the fate of special settlers, rendering them without housing, jobs and depriving them of any source of livelihood.<sup>96</sup> It was revealed that even those few Poles who had been employed on state and collective farms were often fired by local party and Soviet functionaries. Even if there was a shortage of workforce, a number of regional and district authorities gave instructions that categorically prohibited hiring special settlers. Party and Soviet authorities appeared not to do any work in terms of settling and employing special settlers, believing that this was not their task, considering Poles to be enemies. The republican authorities in Kazakhstan were convinced that as these special settlers were brought and under the supervision of the NKVD, this was the task of the NKVD

<sup>93</sup> *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan. 1939-1945 gg*, 122.

<sup>94</sup> *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan. 1939-1945 gg*, 123-124.

<sup>95</sup> Zhanguttin, 2006: 90.

<sup>96</sup> *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan. 1939-1945 gg*, 125.

to provide them with food, shelter, and jobs.<sup>97</sup> Even those who had a job did not receive any payment for their work for several months. Consequently, deported Poles became increasingly susceptible to impoverishment, starvation, diseases, which led to shrinking their numbers. Being exposed to misery and hunger, deported Poles, especially women with their children were forced to leave their designated areas in search of food and job.<sup>98</sup> Many Polish families lost their breadwinners who were detained and executed by the NKVD. The brightest and educated Polish men were intentionally killed with the intent to deprive the Polish people of its leadership. As it was mentioned, even though there was a lack of labor force on state and collective farms and other places local authorities kept denying deported Poles the right to be employed.

In addition to being deprived of job opportunities, thousands of deported Poles and their families did not have a roof over their heads, being forced to live anywhere – in bathhouses, barns, stables, or in the steppe in haystacks, walking around without dress and barefoot, having no means of subsistence.<sup>99</sup> Regional and district party officials often instructed their subordinates that “Stop all sales and issuance of food products to Poles as wages for work, give the latter the most difficult work, demand fulfillment of its norms twice as much as from collective farmers, and the payment for work recorded in this way is half that of collective farmers”.<sup>100</sup> As a result of such anti-Polish prejudices among party and Soviet officials, collective farms almost completely stopped supplying any products to the special settlers, giving them the most difficult jobs, and no complaints from special settlers were considered or taken into account.

Even though regional, district and local party and Soviet officials were the culprits behind the misery, privation, and hopelessness of Polish deportees, they tended to place all blame upon the victims, accusing them of abandoning their workplace and engaging in anti-Soviet counterrevolutionary agitation and propaganda.<sup>101</sup> As no special premises had been built for the accommodation of deported Poles, regional and district organizations were assigned the task of placing them in the available premises of state farms and collective farms. Yet sadly, district officials and chairmen of collective farms shunned and disregarded accommodating deported Poles, stating that they did not want these people.<sup>102</sup> On May 23, 1940, at a meeting of the district council of workers, the secretary of the Ordzhonikidze district committee of the Communist Party of Kazakhstan Morozov gave instructions to the collective farm chairmen to kick Poles out of the collective farmers’ apartments and not provide them with any

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<sup>97</sup> *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan. 1939-1945 gg*, 125.

<sup>98</sup> *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan. 1939-1945 gg*, 126.

<sup>99</sup> *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan. 1939-1945 gg*, 126.

<sup>100</sup> *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan. 1939-1945 gg*, 127.

<sup>101</sup> *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan. 1939-1945 gg*, 127.

<sup>102</sup> *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan. 1939-1945 gg*, 128.

assistance.<sup>103</sup> These Soviet officials treated deported Poles as slaves, openly showing their savagery, forcing them to work without any payment, threatening, intimidating, severely beating, and maiming them.<sup>104</sup> A chairman of one of the collective farms, Larin explicitly stated that, “We give everything that is worse on the collective farm to the Poles, and everything to them last. They are enemies... My superiors give me such instructions”.<sup>105</sup>

As can be seen, Polonophobia and constructing Poles as the ‘Other’ were not exclusively peculiar to the upper Soviet political establishment. Anti-Polish sentiments were harbored and exhibited by party and Soviet officials at all levels and such bigotry and prejudices were manifested among ordinary people. The removal from their homeland and exile in Kazakhstan reduced Poles to destitute, helpless, and demoralized beggars. Having lost their men and mistreated by Soviet authorities, Polish women with their children and other vulnerable category of people among deported Poles such as aged and disabled persons were hit the hardest, living in utmost misery and despair. They were subjected to barbaric, inhuman treatment and abuse, being often treated worse than animals. Having no means of subsistence, many Polish women had to abandon their children and hence the number of Polish orphans grew significantly.<sup>106</sup> Polish children were denied educational opportunities, education was not provided in Polish, and their mothers did not wish their offspring to go Soviet schools on the ground that they would become an object of discrimination, mistreatment, ridicule, and mockery.<sup>107</sup> In this regard, deported Poles deeply understood that the Soviet Union was deliberately exterminating them, yet they never lost their hope that though Poland was defeated, it was still alive.<sup>108</sup>

In addition to physical genocide of Poles, the Soviet regime carried out cultural genocide. Not only Poles as a distinct ethnic group were under fierce government-orchestrated attack, but their culture, language, way of life, and ethnic identity were systematically assaulted. In alien, inhospitable, and hostile environments perhaps the most important task for deported Poles was to survive and stay alive somehow. Moreover, in Russian-dominated milieus Poles had very little likelihood to keep their language alive, their culture and ethnic identity intact. Cultural elimination and suppression of Polish identity were on the agenda of the Soviet regime. As one of the most repressed and stigmatized ethnicities, Poles developed various strategies to their prejudicial treatment from shifting to Russian culture and language while maintaining their Polishness to concealment of their ethnic identity and stopped

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<sup>103</sup> *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan. 1939-1945 gg.*, 130.

<sup>104</sup> *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan. 1939-1945 gg.*, 132.

<sup>105</sup> *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan. 1939-1945 gg.*, 133.

<sup>106</sup> *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan. 1939-1945 gg.*, 129.

<sup>107</sup> *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan. 1939-1945 gg.*, 131.

<sup>108</sup> *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan. 1939-1945 gg.*, 135.

speaking their mother tongue.<sup>109</sup> To escape constant persecution and stigmatization some Poles had to shift their identity from being Polish to Russian and conceal their true ethnic identity for a long time, disclosing their Polishness to their children much later after the disgraceful label of ‘special settlers’ was removed in 1956. When children of such Poles became aware that their mother or father was not in fact Russian, but rather Polish, they got deeply flabbergasted and shocked.<sup>110</sup> Those who maintained their Polish identity kept being discriminated against and persecuted, and even after 1956 Poles in the Soviet Union continued to be mistreated and singled out as an outcast. A Polish deportee who remained in Kazakhstan after 1956 reminisced later about how he was reminded more than once that he was a Pole and that he was not entitled to everything.<sup>111</sup>

Although Poles who were brought to Kazakhstan in 1940-1941 were given an opportunity to leave the Soviet Union in accordance with the Sikorski-Mayski agreement of July 30, 1941, such a right was not extended to those Poles who were deported from Ukraine and Belarus in 1936.<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, even though the Soviet Union removed the status of ‘special settlers’ in 1956, the regime provided neither assistance nor permission for Poles to return to their homeland, Ukraine and Belarus. As carriers of traditional Polish culture, the Poles deported from Ukraine and Belarus in 1936 constituted and continue to constitute the backbone of the current Polish diaspora of Kazakhstan.<sup>113</sup> Life under ethnic oppression and forced assimilation did lead to the erasure of ethnic identity and loss of certain ethnocultural characteristics, in particular language loss among Polish youths in Kazakhstan and across the Soviet Union.<sup>114</sup>

## Conclusions

In this study drawing on archival data and literature on Stalin’s deportation of ethnic minorities during the 1930s-1940s we have shed light on the ethnic cleansing, ethnicization, racialization, persecution, and victimization of Poles as a distinct ethnic group by the Soviet regime. This study has sought to answer two key questions that guided our research. We have striven to respond to the research questions of why the Soviet regime targeted the Poles and why Kazakhstan was chosen as one of the main destinations for Polish deportees, as well as why and how Polish deportees were subjected to dehumanization, marginalization, stigmatization, and cultural assimilation

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<sup>109</sup> *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan. 1939-1945 gg.*, 517.

<sup>110</sup> *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan. 1939-1945 gg.*, 517.

<sup>111</sup> *Iz istorii deportatsiy. Kazakhstan. 1939-1945 gg.*, 653.

<sup>112</sup> Sword, 1994: 115.

<sup>113</sup> *Iz istorii polyakov v Kazakhstane (1936-1956 gg.)*, 6.

<sup>114</sup> *Iz istorii polyakov v Kazakhstane (1936-1956 gg.)*, 6.

in exile. The central argument of our research is the removal and oppression of Poles were carried out because of their ethnicity. Furthermore, we have argued that even though the removal of Poles had genocidal implications and led to physical extermination of Poles, total annihilation of Poles was not on the agenda of the Soviet regime as Stalin and his henchmen sought to assimilate the remaining Poles in exile.

During the early 1930s the Soviet regime engaged itself in targeting and ethnic cleansing of certain ethnic minorities on account of groundless and fabricated allegations and accusations of untrustworthiness, unreliability, treason, disloyalty, and hostility to the Soviet Union. At the end of the 1920's there was a paradigm shift from class struggle and Marxist internationalism to a parochial ethnicized and racialized policy in the Soviet Union premised upon the primacy and preeminence of the Russian people in nation building process. This shift to Russian ultranationalism and imperial chauvinism prompted mass persecutions and ethnic cleansing of Poles and other targeted ethnicities. Based on the concepts of ethnification and racialization of the Soviet regime's policy towards various ethnicities in the 1930s-1940s conceptualized by Baberowski, Martin, Naimark, Pohl, Savin, Snyder, and Weitz, we have identified and analyzed how ethnicity and race informed, shaped, and guided the Soviet regime's policy towards ethnic minorities. In this regard, the Soviet regime under Stalin skillfully concealed its genocidal vicious ethnicized policy with the utopian communist ideology that had already lost its significance and faded into the background.

Ethnocracy and hegemony of Russians over other nationalities reflected in the policy undertaken by the Soviet regime to denationalize and forced assimilation of non-Russian nationalities. When the Soviet regime embarked upon targeting and ethnic cleansing of ethnic minorities, Poles inhabiting western Soviet Ukraine and Belarus were the first victims of the Soviet deportations and persecutions alongside Germans, Koreans, and other ethnicities. Persecution, ethnic cleansing and dehumanization of Poles emanated from Polonophobia and anti-Polish sentiments harbored by the Soviet leadership and society, yet hatred and prejudices towards Poles go back to history and the Soviet oppression and removal of Poles were the continuation of the crime punishment practices and traditional anti-Polish hostility rooted in Russian history.

In 1936, and in 1940-1941 Poles were deported to Kazakhstan due to the fact that the steppe had been a dumping ground of punished individuals and groups during the tsarist era and the Soviets inherited and perpetuated this practice from the previous regime. Besides, before Poles were brought to Kazakhstan, its indigenous population, Kazakhs, had been annihilated and ethnically cleansed by the Soviet regime. Our analyses on the basis of archival data and current literature have shown that persecution, discrimination, dehumanization, marginalization, and stigmatization of Poles were a systemic and sustained policy that persisted even after 1956 when the label 'special settlers', all restrictions and draconian laws were removed by the Soviet authorities. While far away from their homeland and subjected to brutal

inhuman treatment by the Soviet authorities, Poles developed various strategies to cope with the hardship, deprivation, and ethnic oppression. We call for further research into issues of ethnic cleansing, persecution, collective suffering, national trauma, identity crisis, identity loss, cultural assimilation and lived experiences of deported Poles to Kazakhstan drawing on archival data stored in various archives of Kazakhstan.

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**To cite this article:** Zhumatay, G., Yskak, A., Magier, D., Kruszynski, M. (2024). The Deportation of the Poles to Kazakhstan: Ethnic Cleansing, Collective Suffering, and Cultural Assimilation. *Historia i Świat*, 13, 413–438. <https://doi.org/10.34739/his.2024.13.25>



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