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Negotiating Freedom of Movement through Ethnic Recategorization: Strategies of ›German‹ Special Settlers from Riga, 1945–1972

Abstract

On February 5–6, 1945, within the so-called German operation, Soviet authorities deported 675 people from Riga in the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic to the region of Syktyvkar in the Komi Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. Most of them were categorized as ›German‹ by the Soviet Latvian People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs responsible for the deportation. This article qualitatively analyzes the deportation files of those supposedly German ›special settlers‹ and focuses on how they and Soviet institutions used the national category of ›German‹ in the wake of the deportation. At issue is the discrepancy between the ascription of Germanness by authorities and the self-identification as ›non-Germans‹ put forward by the deportees in the vast majority of the files examined. For these Soviet citizens deprived of their rights and assigned to special settlements, recognition as being ›non-German‹ had significant positive consequences for the recovery of their freedom of movement. By focusing on the initiatives undertaken by the ›special settlers‹ and how repressive authorities reacted, the article addresses Soviet ›nationality‹ from the perspective of its production, implementation, and consequences for (im)mobilities. In doing so, the article highlights such ›nationality‹'s reversibility, relational nature and that it was not only ascribed but also negotiated.

Keywords

Soviet Germans, special settlers, mobilities, ethnic categorization, ethnic cleansing, nationality

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Freizügigkeit durch ethnische Re-Kategorisierung verhandeln. Strategien von ›deutschen‹ Sondersiedler*innen aus Riga (1945–1972)

Zusammenfassung

Im Zuge der sogenannten Deutschen Operation am 5. und 6. Februar 1945 deportierten die Sowjetbehörden 675 Menschen von Riga (Lettische Sozialistische Sowjetrepublik) aus in die Umgebung von Syktywkar (Autonome Sozialistische Sowjetrepublik der Komi). Die Mehrheit der Deportierten wurde vom zuständigen sowjetlettischen Volkskommissariat für innere Angelegenheiten als ›Deutsche‹ eingeordnet. Auf der Basis einer qualitativen Analyse der Deportationsakten dieser vermeintlich deutschen ›Sondersiedler*innen‹ wird in dem Artikel die Art und Weise untersucht, mit der individuelle Akteure und Sowjetbehörden die nationale Kategorie ›deutsch‹ nach der Deportation verwendeten. Es geht um die Diskrepanz zwischen dem durch die repressiven Institutionen zugeschriebenen Deutsch-Sein und der Selbstidentifikation als Nicht-Deutsche, die die Deportierten den meisten Akten zufolge vorbrachten. Die Anerkennung des Nicht-Deutsch-Seins wirkte sich für die Sowjetbürger*innen, denen die Rechte entzogen und Sondersiedlungen als Wohngebiet zugewiesen worden waren, bemerkenswert positiv auf die Wiedererlangung der Freizügigkeit aus. Der Aufsatz untersucht die Strategien der ›Sondersiedler*innen‹ sowie die Reaktionen der Repressionsorgane. Im Zentrum stehen also die Produktion und die Verwendung der sowjetischen Kategorie der ›Nationalität‹ sowie ihre Auswirkungen auf (Im)mobilitäten. Deutlich wird der umkehrbare und relationale Charakter der Nationalität, die nicht nur zugeschrieben, sondern auch verhandelt wurde.

Schlagwörter

Sondersiedler*innen, Sowjetdeutsche, Mobilitäten, ethnische Kategorisierung, ethnische Säuberung, Nationalität

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1 Introduction

On February 5–6, 1945, as part of the ›German operation‹¹ – in Russian, *ne-metskaia operatsiia* –, the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) of the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) deported 675 people to Syktyvkar, the capital city of the Komi Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR), and the surrounding Syktyvdinsky District (*raion*) (Riekstiņš 2003; 2007; Saleniece 2015, p. 205). More than 500 of them were Soviet citizens considered to be ethnic ›Germans‹ by Soviet authorities, whereas the 150 or so others were labeled ›stateless‹² – that is, lacking Soviet citizenship (Ginsburgs 1966). Above and beyond those designations, from the moment of their deportation they all became ›special settlers‹,³ a hybrid population that was ›neither fully free, nor fully imprisoned« (Werth 1997, p. 34). They arrived under extremely harsh circumstances to a special settlement area that they were not authorized to leave and to the economic development of which they were intended to contribute. Special settlers were assigned to ›contingents‹ (e.g., ›German‹ or ›stateless‹), assignments that determined the length of their forced stay on the special settlement. After Stalin’s death, the population of special settlers was progressively dismantled by way of collective and individual release. However, ›release‹ amounted to nothing more than the administrative act of removing their names from the lists of special settlers. Because it did not automatically confer the right to return home or to receive compensation, the recovery of the former special settlers’ rights as citizen occurred step by step, mostly as a result of their own initiative to send complaint letters to the Soviet administration (Koustova 2015; Blum and Koustova 2018b). Until 1988, only a small minority of former special settlers had been rehabilitated and their deportation recognized as illegitimate.

The deportation files of the German operation are housed at the *Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs* (Latvian State Archive, LVA). Each file, one per family, contains the deportation documents issued upon their arrest by the Latvian NKVD, subsequently fleshed out with various emerging materials until their rehabilitation in the late 1980s or 1990s. This article, based on a qualitative analysis of 29 files (i.e., 80 individuals) of the 286 ›German‹ files on the list created by

1 For readability’s sake, the terms used by the Soviet administration appear in quotation marks in this article only when first mentioned, except for the national categories.

2 Each so-called national operation conducted by the Soviet authorities beginning in the 1930s was usually named after the primary ethnic group targeted but did not exclusively impact people assigned to that particular group (Martin 1998, p. 856).

3 The deportees’ legal status as special settlers was established on January 8, 1945, by a decree of the NKVD (Werth 1997).

the LVA,⁴ examines the ways in which the deportees and Soviet institutions used the national category of ›German‹ in the wake of the deportation. At issue is the discrepancy between the ascription of Germanness by authorities and the self-identification as ›non-Germans‹ put forward by the deportees in the vast majority of the files examined.

In the struggle against the restrictions on mobility that were imposed upon all special settlers, the so-called Germans deported from Riga rejected their ascribed ›nationality‹.⁵ It was the main argument they brought up, both in their complaint letters sent to various administrations, and during the interrogations to which they were subjected when they were arrested for escaping the special settlement. For the authorities, assessing the ethnicity of special settlers also proved to be a core element of the investigations. It was central in the inquiries conducted by the Soviet Latvian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) for the Soviet Latvian Council of Ministers,⁶ the body that issued final decisions on their cases.⁷ In the decision-making process subsequent to complaint or arrest, recognition as being ›non-German‹ had significant positive consequences for the recovery of freedom of movement. Until now, scholars have mainly investigated how, starting in 1964, former ›German‹ special settlers in the Soviet Union began invoking their ›Germanness‹ and fighting for their political rights as ›German‹, in the hope that the former Volga German ASSR would be restored or that they would be allowed to

4 »No 1945. līdz 1953. gadam izsūtīto iedzīvotāju saraksti pa grupām: Vācieši«, http://www.archiv.org.lv/dep1941/saraksti/04_Vasiesi.pdf, accessed 1.3.2022. Considering the information mentioned on the list (i.e., date of birth, date of arrest, date of release, address in Riga before deportation, place of deportation, and number of family members deported together), the choice of the files was aimed at illustrating the variety of fates.

5 That is, the Soviet administrative category for ethnic belonging. In this article, »national« and »nationality« refer to Soviet administrative categorizations, whereas »ethnic«, »ethnicity«, and »ethnic belonging« refer to self-identifications, practices, and representations that exceed the strictly administrative framework.

6 Beginning in 1946, the NKVD of the Latvian SSR ceased to exist, and, in its stead, two ministries were created: the MVD and the Ministry of State Security (MGB). After being briefly merged with the MVD, in 1954 the MGB was replaced by the Committee of State Security (KGB), which was brought under the Council of Ministers of the Latvian SSR (Jansons 2004).

7 From 1946 onward, the Soviet Latvian Council of Ministers was tasked with examining complaints sent by special settlers and with deciding, on the basis of inquiries conducted by the MVD, whether the deportees should be released, rehabilitated, authorized to return home, and/or receive compensation for lost property (Jansons 2004, p. 476). In 1955, a commission of the Soviet Latvian Council of Ministers was created to handle those specific tasks (Saleniece 2015, p. 210). As for the Soviet Lithuanian case, Blum and Koustova have identified other decision-making bodies depending on the source of the decree or decision underlying the deportation (2018b, p. 543). I could not find such a distinction in the scientific literature dealing with the Latvian SSR, however.

emigrate to Germany (Polian 2004, pp. 201–210; Pohl 2012). However, the files examined in this article give an insight into the converse attitude, which is much more likely to remain invisible in the sources, unless it is a way to improve one's situation – namely the cases of those who rejected such categorization.

Paying attention to the ways in which nationality is defined and revised by the Soviet administration, as well as interpreted and performed by the deportees themselves, allows investigating the empirical production of ethnic categories at the most fundamental level. It also offers insight into complex forms of ethnic belonging that challenge the simplistic Soviet categorization of the deportees into contingents in the special settlement area. Indeed, the cases studied defy the principle in force since 1938, according to which an individual's nationality was to be ascribed by the Soviet administration depending on their parents' nationality (Blum and Mespoulet 2003, p. 285). The files reveal that such complexity originates less from problematic ›interethnic marriages‹⁸ (Hirsch 2002, p. 39) than from a range of other phenomena: the unstable character of ethnic belonging over time, the fuzzy distinction between nationality and citizenship in the eyes of the deportees as well as the administrative agents, the even fuzzier boundary between self-declaration and ascription, and the non-standardization or mere absence of civil documents issued by administrations past scattered across different localities observing different rules.

Considering that deportees assigned to the ›German‹ contingent might not have identified as ›German‹, this article addresses ethnic categories from the perspective of their (co-)production and sketches the evolution of their uses and impacts from 1945 to the early 1970s. The confrontation of the deportees' and the authorities' perspectives reveals that nationality was not only ascribed but also negotiated. Focusing on the issue at stake in such negotiations – freedom of movement – the article examines the interrelationship between ethnicization and (im)mobilities⁹ in the Soviet Union. Its first aim is to contribute to the historiography of the Soviet nationalities policy, which has chiefly investigated the production, operationalization and uses of national categories by Soviet authorities until World War II while paying little attention to its implementation at the individual level and to how it shaped the lives of Soviet citizens after Stalin's death.¹⁰ The article's second aim is to

⁸ For a critical assessment of the term, see Gorenburg (2006).

⁹ In line with the ›mobilities turn‹, this article examines not only movement but also blocked movement, potential movement, and non-movement (Büscher and Urry 2009, p. 99; Düvell 2021, p. 228).

¹⁰ Except for a large scientific literature to the discrimination of ›Jews‹ in the Soviet Union, see for instance Fainberg (2014).

de-essentialize the ›ethnic‹ part of the study of ethnic deportation. Thus, unlike other existing research works (Eisfeld 2012; Neutatz 2012), the article does not tackle ethnic Germans as such but people who were deported *as* ethnic Germans.

2 The Production of Ethnic Categories in the Soviet Union and Latvia

2.1 Defining and Operationalizing Nationality in the Soviet Union, 1920s–1930s

Although the Soviet Union was not a nation-state, it paid significant attention to ›nations‹, or groups understood to be ethnic units linked to territories (Hirsch 1997; Martin 1998; Holquist 2001; Blum and Filippova 2006). By recognizing and, to some extent, fostering national distinctiveness (Slezkine 1994; Martin 2000; 2001; Suny and Martin 2001; Hirsch 2005; Blitstein 2006), Soviet authorities acknowledged that citizenship and nationality (*natsional'nost'*) might be decoupled from one another. From 1932 onward, nationality materialized on the fifth line of passports introduced for the inhabitants of urban areas. However, the production of its precise meaning and its introduction into all official documents were the result of a process spanning nearly two decades (Hirsch 1997; Holquist 2001; Blum and Mespoulet 2003, pp. 260–298; Hirsch 2005).

The category of nationality was initially shaped by statisticians and ethnographers as a descriptive tool for use in census-taking. However, the NKVD soon recognized it as being a powerful way of identifying and ›extract[ing] elements‹ considered to be ›harmful‹ or ›unreliable‹ (Holquist 2001, pp. 111–112). It thus seized hold of the category in order to repress so-called diaspora nationalities, including for example ›Polish‹, ›German‹, or ›Latvian‹, which were perceived as being primarily loyal to a foreign nation-state and thus a threat to the Soviet state's integrity (Martin 1998, p. 847; Hirsch 2002, p. 39). As a result, in 1938, the descriptive category once based on self-declaration was converted into an administrative, juridical, and ascriptive ›operative category‹ that required a process of unique, irreversible assignation and a stable definition.¹¹ To that purpose, the administrative agents were tasked with ascribing nationality to citizens based on the nationality of their parents (Blum and Mespoulet 2003). Thus, while nationality

¹¹ The category operated similarly to the category of class (Fitzpatrick 2000; Martin 2000; Slezkine 2000, pp. 325, 333; Blum and Mespoulet 2003, p. 287; Blum and Filippova 2006, p. 319).

remained a »predictor of an individual's loyalty to the regime« (Hirsch 2002, p. 39), the criterion of its ascription seemingly reduced it to a simple biological fact. In becoming part of routine administrative work, national categorization created the social fact »that national identity was primordial and inherited« (Martin 2000, p. 355). From there, local police in charge of issuing passports and registering inhabitants played a decisive role in the repression of inhabitants of the Soviet Union (Shearer 2001; Weiner and Rahi-Tamm 2012, pp. 15–16).

2.2 Ethnic Cleansing under Stalin

In time, nationality became a strong tool for repression in the Soviet Union and led to waves of arrests and deportations. To highlight the logic of the perpetrators, Terry Martin has characterized such arrests and deportations as acts of »ethnic cleansing«: »It is the perpetrator who provides the ethnic definition of the targeted group, which may or may not coincide with the population's self-definition. And it is the perpetrator who views the removal of this population as ›cleansing‹« (Martin 1998, p. 824). On the long list of nationalities targeted (Pohl 1999; Polian 2004), ›German‹ was the most populous group. Their deportation increased dramatically with the German attack on the Soviet Union in 1941, and on August 28, 1941, the ›Germans‹ from the Volga ASSR were deported as the first of the »punished peoples« (Nekrich 1976). By the time of Stalin's death, they comprised 40% of all special settlers (Blum and Koustova 2018a, p. 32).

Fostered by debates on totalitarianism and based on the fact that, from the mid-1930s onward, most of Stalin's victims were ethnically defined groups, the ethnic nature of Stalinist repression has been disputed by historians since the early 2000s. Whereas Eric D. Weitz (2002) has underscored Hitler's and Stalin's similar ways of »biologically« defining populations and has interpreted the Stalinist repression of ethnically defined groups as a form of intermittent »racialization« of the regime, Francine Hirsch and Amir Weiner have highlighted the rejection of the concept of race by Stalinist ideology (Hirsch 2002) as well as the unsystematic, contingent use of the national category in repressive actions (Weiner 2002). The two latter authors have also emphasized that the deported national groups were perceived to be a threat to the regime given their supposed ties to foreign states, not due to their ethnicity as such.¹² A range of other studies have shed light on the sorts of misinterpretations that support a strictly ethnicized analysis of Stalinism – namely, failing to recognize the specificity of Hitler's and Stalin's regimes (Zarusky 2012), over-interpreting ethnicity within a wide range of the different forms

12 See also Martin (1998) and Neutatz (2012).

of ›cleansing‹ (Mertelsmann and Rahi-Tamm 2009), and overlooking other explanatory factors and the ›eclecticism‹ of Stalin's political line (Döninghaus 2012, p. 62).

This article extends that debate by shifting the level at which ethnicity is understood. By investigating how ethnic categorization and its negotiation took place at the individual level, it illuminates the comprehension of ethnic categorization in relation to the criteria of its mobilization and to other potential claimed or former ethnic belongings and citizenships. In support, it focuses on the practical uses and consequences of the Soviet Union's systematic ethnic categorization during and after Stalin's rule and highlights the persistence of assumed nationality as a charge against ›Germans‹ after his death.

2.3 ›Germans‹ in Latvia

When the Soviet army took power over the Baltic republics in 1940 and again in 1944, the history of the German-speaking population on the territories of present-day Estonia and Latvia had already dated back to the 12th century. Since then, and until the creation of the Latvian and Estonian states in 1918, the upper class in the region, known as ›Baltic Germans‹, had been German-speaking. For several centuries, being a ›Baltic German‹ was a matter of social upward mobility, not ethnicity, whereas ›little Germans‹ – that is, German-speakers belonging to the lower economic strata – were considered more likely to assimilate in the Latvian- or Estonian-speaking environment (Angermann 2012). Even though sharper boundaries between ethnically defined groups arose in the 19th and 20th centuries (Hirschhausen 2006), each group was heterogeneous and did not automatically identify with the political representatives that claimed to defend the national groups' interests (Brüggeman and Wezel 2019). Between the two world wars, each recognized ethnic minority had its own school system and its own churches. However, the choice between attending a Latvian- or a German-language parish or school was liable to be influenced by numerous pragmatic factors. In an increasingly ethnicized political context, self-positioning was already at the intersection of self-identification and negotiation. For so-called Baltic Germans, the sharpening of ethnic boundaries culminated in their ›repatriation‹ (*Umsiedlung*) organized by the Nazi government between 1939 and 1941.¹³ Based on the assumption that ›Baltic Germans‹ were part of the ›German people‹ (*Volksdeutsche*), the operation also afforded the opportunity to escape Soviet rule for a range of Estonian or Latvian citizens who had ›multidimensional‹ ethnic and linguistic backgrounds and managed to be categorized as

¹³ In all, approximately 82,000 ›Germans‹ left Estonia and Latvia between 1939 and 1941 (Schlau 2001, p. 33).

›Germans‹ without necessarily identifying as such (Liivik and Tark 2016, pp. 414–415). Conversely, it is likely that a few citizens who met the requirements for participating in the *Umsiedlung* did not make use of it and stayed in Estonia or Latvia.

Thus, as the national category was being standardized and operationalized in the Soviet Union, in Latvia ethnic belonging remained subjective and subject to change over time. As a result, Soviet agents conducting inquiries into the nationality of ›German‹ deportees had to grapple with sources that deviated from the Soviet logic of categorization.

3 The German Operation of February 5–6, 1945

3.1 The Operation

The German operation took place during World War II in the context of Latvia's ›re-Sovietization‹ (Denis 2008). As other western territories annexed by the Soviet Union in 1939–1940, later occupied by Nazi Germany, and ultimately reannexed in 1944, Latvia was viewed as suspicious in the eyes of Soviet authorities, and its ›enemy elements‹ (Denis 2008) and ›non-Sovietized populations‹ were to be subdued through all kinds of repression, including deportation (Blum and Koustova 2018a, p. 22).

However, unlike other Stalinist deportation actions,¹⁴ the ›German operation‹ was not based on an official decree or decision. Instructions regarding its implementation cannot be found in the archives either. It seems to have been planned and executed in a hurry, shortly after the NKVD of the Latvian SSR had established a list of people approved for deportation by the vice prosecutor of the Latvian SSR (Riekstiņš 2007, p. 741). The lack of clarity surrounding the action directly impacted the way in which it was implemented. The agents who conducted it were unsure whether whole families or only individuals had to be deported, they did not know precisely what to do with the remaining property, and it was unclear what kind of documents had to be issued for the transport of the deportees (Riekstiņš 2003).

An initial look into the deportation files clearly shows that the ›German‹ and the ›stateless‹ cases were handled differently. A range of empirical discrepancies justify the choice of focusing only on ›German‹ files in this article.

¹⁴ Deportations could be based on a decree issued by the Council of People's Commissars, the Council of Ministers, or the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet or else on a mere decision by the Ministry of the Interior, at the level of either the Soviet Union or the republic (Blum and Koustova 2018a, pp. 25–26). Even actions targeting a small number of individuals were usually the result of a decision-making process involving several authorities (Rahi-Tamm 2005; 2009).

First, they followed a collective logic based on the family unit, with one deportation order for the entire family. In each file, the corresponding deportation form contains two sections; the first includes information on the person mentioned in the deportation order (i.e., name, surname, father's name, year of birth, nationality [»German«], citizenship [»USSR«], and address), whereas the second is dedicated to the »composition of the family«, with a list of the other family members, whose ethnicity does not appear. Conversely, the »stateless« files contain as many deportation orders and forms as deportees, which suggests that the individuals were to be deported independently. Second, the deportation forms of the »Germans« issued by the NKVD were created for the purpose of the operation and completed by the agents upon the individuals' arrest, whereas those of the »stateless« were recycled¹⁵ application forms (*zaiavlinie*) issued by the visa and registration department and completed five or four days before the deportation. That discrepancy suggests that the list of »stateless« people to be deported was based on the applications for residence permits made in the final days before the action. By contrast, the reason why individuals were put on the »German« list cannot be deduced from the documents contained in the files. Third, the property of »Germans« was entrusted to neighbors and that of the »stateless« people to the NKVD. Fourth and finally, most of the »stateless« files include a »search report« (*protokol obiska*) that mentions »compromising material« found or not found in the deportee's apartment, whereas there is no evidence in the »German« files that their houses were searched.

3.2 The »German« Deportees: Shared Characteristics

Other documents provide a wide range of diversified information. Interrogations and complaint letters in which the deportees wrote their autobiographies show how they presented themselves to the authorities. In addition, the documents gathered by the MVD over the course of the inquiries – birth certificates, death certificates, marriage certificates, passports, extracts from house registers, certificates issued by former employers, and interrogations of »witnesses« – supply information from different external perspectives at different times. Finally, the official decisions and reports afford insight into the ways in which Soviet authorities interpreted all of those documents.

However, apart from the initial pages of the files (i.e., deportation order and deportation form), the type and amount of documents vary greatly depending on the preservation of the file and the way in which the deportees behaved. When the deportees or their families sent complaint letters, escaped from the special settlement, returned, sought rehabilitation and compensa-

¹⁵ They were retitled »information forms« (*spravka*) by hand.

tion, or had any other kind of requests, the actions produced new materials. Otherwise, the files remained thin. As a result, the information about deportees who disputed their categorization as ›German‹ is far more detailed than the information about all others. Despite the unequal amount of information available about each family, it remains possible to roughly describe the characteristics that most of the deportees shared, with particular focus on three aspects: past (im)mobility, markers of family ethnicity, and profession.

The first characteristic shared by those ›German‹ individuals was that they did not migrate to Germany when it would have been possible for them to do so. They did not participate in the *Umsiedlung* in 1939–1941, nor did they flee in 1944 when the German army retreated from Latvia and Estonia. That circumstance suggests that they might have not personally identified with Germany as a territorial or political unit whatsoever.¹⁶ Furthermore, when information about birthplace and/or other past places of residence could be collected, it is striking that no deportee came from or had lived in Germany before and that the vast majority were born in Latvia. In all, it seems that in the first half of the 20th century, the population in question was geographically anchored in the region and relatively immobile.

However, the geographic origins of their ancestors, the languages spoken in the family, and the several types of self-declared and assigned ethnic belonging paint a more complex picture. First, several deportees mention that their parents or grandparents had migrated to Latvia from other countries (e.g., Estonia, Germany, or Lithuania). Second, most of them reported speaking at least two languages from among Latvian, Russian and German. Third, they described their grandparents or parents as belonging to different »nationalities«. Yet, when they use this term, it is hard to determine whether they are referring to citizenship or to a perceived belonging in a particular ethnic group. Fourth and finally, single individuals were often categorized differently depending on the document. All of those characteristics are typical of interwar Latvian society and are not ›ethnic‹ *per se* but were nevertheless interpreted as ethnicity markers by authorities who (re)categorized the deportees and, as such, constituted a core element of the inquiries.

¹⁶ A deportation of similar size targeting ethnic Germans took place on August 15, 1945, across the entire territory of Estonia. Aigi Rahi-Tamm (2005; 2009) has interpreted that event as the deportation of the »last Baltic Germans« from Estonia, thereby assuming their self-identification as Baltic Germans. She has also suggested that lists issued by the occupation's German authorities provided a basis for the creation of the deportation list and that it first targeted individuals who had participated in repatriation in 1939–1941 but later returned to Estonia. There is no trace of similar migratory behavior in the deportation files analyzed for this article, even though cases of return existed in Latvia as well (Kangeris 2008).

The final shared characteristic is the socioeconomic profile of the deportees. The information available about their or their parents' profession(s) shows that the targeted population belonged to the lower strata of society from a socioeconomic perspective, despite the diversity of their occupations (e.g., workers, artisans, and employees). Thus, they did not belong to the prewar Baltic German upper class and were not deported as a result of their socioeconomic status.

4 Performing ›Non-Germanness‹: Ethnic Recategorization and the Right to Return

4.1 The Deportees' Status: A Double Administrative Uncertainty

The administrative agents obviously lacked instructions on how to deal with the complaints of special settlers and the arrests of fugitives deported as part of the German operation. One of the most recurring topics in the internal correspondence of ›Special Department 1‹, which was in charge of special settlers at the Latvian MVD, is the search for the decree or official decision responsible for the deportation. The equivalent department at the MGB or KGB (›Department A‹) could not locate such a decree or decision either. In rare cases, the absence of any legal basis led to the recognition of the deportation as being illegal. Such recognition amounted to rehabilitation,¹⁷ and even entitled the family to recover their confiscated property,¹⁸ which in principle was denied to all ›German‹ deportees, including those of Riga's German operation (Riekstiņš 2004, p. 532). In most cases, however, the agents focused on the fact that the person was deported »as an individual of German nationality« (*kak lits nemetskoj natsional'nosti*) and applied corresponding rules. On November 26, 1948, following a decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union, the deportation of the ›German‹ and other national contingents was made permanent. Attempts to flee were punished with up to 20 years in prison. In December 1955, the ›German‹ special settlers were collectively released but were denied the right to return to their previous residence and barred from receiving any compensation for confiscated property (Pohl 2012). Those restrictions explain why the deportees of the German operation sought recognition as ›non-Germans‹ even after 1955.

A range of misunderstandings between the special departments of the MVD in the Komi ASSR and in the Latvian SSR show that the authorities of the former struggled to categorize the deportees of the German operation. In

¹⁷ LVA f. 1994, apr. 1, l. 633R.

¹⁸ LVA f. 1994, apr. 1, l. 489R.

1946–1947, they issued passports that entailed no movement restriction to a range of those deportees,¹⁹ who were thus *de facto* freed and returned to Riga. When they attempted to register in Riga, however, the local police arrested them, and their cases were subsequently managed by the MVD of the Latvian SSR, which did not recognize those releases as being legitimate and either sent the individuals back to special settlement or condemned them to prison. It remains unclear why the passports were issued in the first place, for, depending on the file, the authorities of the Komi ASSR claimed either that it was an error or that the passports issued did not entitle the deportees to leave the special settlement. Local Komi authorities had probably considered that those deportees were either ›non-Germans‹ or too old and/or sick to work. They thus issued passports to them before any responsible authority ruled on their cases.

In the years that followed, the authorities of the Komi ASSR became warier. However, even in 1954, the boundaries between the responsibilities of the Komi ASSR and of the Latvian SSR remained unclear. By that time, special settlers suspected of having fled from their special settlements were no longer searched for or arrested (Blum and Koustova 2018a, p. 35) but still needed to be officially released in order to recover all of their rights as citizens. The consequences of that dynamic are illustrated well by the fate of a family deported as being ›of German nationality‹ from the center of Riga. The family comprised Roberts H., a tram driver born in 1896 who died in deportation in 1946; his wife, Zelma, an invalid born in 1896; and their three children, respectively born in 1924, 1926, and 1930. In March 1954, following a decision of the Komi MVD, the entire family, joined by four children born in deportation, was recategorized as being ›of Latvian nationality‹ and subsequently released.²⁰ Upon their arrival in Riga, Zelma requested authorization from the police in the district from which they were deported for the family to move back into their previous apartment. Because the family had not been issued an official release certificate by Komi authorities, however, the local police did not authorize her request. To obtain such a certificate, Zelma wrote to the Latvian MVD, which the Komi MVD had not informed about the decision. The Latvian authorities thus continued to regard the family as special settlers and denied them the right to send their request until April 1955, when the Komi MVD transmitted the decision. Following the transmission of

¹⁹ LVA f. 1994, apr. 1, l. 12513, lp. 23: letter addressed by the vice minister of State Security of the Latvian SSR to the vice minister of State Security of the Komi ASSR in Syktyvkar (25.1.1947).

²⁰ The incident proves that the authorities upheld the contingents to which the deportees were assigned, for the contingent ›from the Baltics‹ was not to be released at that time (Blum and Koustova 2018a, p. 32).

the decision to the Latvian MVD, Zelma was authorized to address the request to the Latvian Supreme Court, which she did but to no success. It is striking that the decision issued by Komi authorities specified only that the H. family had been deported as »individuals of German nationality« and »released as individuals of Latvian nationality«,²¹ without mentioning either of the usual categories of release: »on exceptional grounds« for a simple release without rights to compensation and »recognition of the deportation as groundless« for rehabilitation (Blum and Koustova 2018b, p. 552). Nevertheless, the Latvian MVD treated the H. family as being rehabilitated, for it authorized them to address a restitution request to the Supreme Court, which in principle was limited to former rehabilitated special settlers only. The case illustrates not only the lack of clarity surrounding the release and rehabilitation process but also the not-so-irreversible character of the ascription of nationality by the authorities. In this case – in which recategorization followed the death of the father, with whose name the deportation order had been labeled –, Soviet authorities seemed to consider that Roberts' wife and children recovered their ›Latvianness‹ when he died, which makes their ethnicity a context-dependent characteristic. The reason why Roberts was considered to be ›German‹ whereas his wife and children were considered to be ›Latvian‹ is not explicitly mentioned in the file.

The context-dependent character of national categorization unambiguously appears on the deportation forms issued by Komi authorities, which have been reintegrated with some of the files held in the Latvian archives. On those forms, the categories »contingent« and »nationality« are decoupled from each other. Between them, the box for »nationality« required information about native and other spoken languages. For example, a special settler of the ›German‹ contingent was registered as »Latvian, mother tongue Latvian, speaks freely German«. ²² The recognition by the repressive authorities that a ›German‹ deportee might be an ethnic ›Latvian‹, whether with German-language skills or not, makes it all the more paradoxical that to be recognized as a ›non-German‹ proved to be a reliable way to obtain release.

It thus appears that neither the Komi nor the Latvian administrations had clear information about the legal or administrative basis for the deportation or about why those deportees had been categorized as ›German‹ in the first place. Such an arbitrary framework left room for negotiation and had multiple consequences for (im)mobility.

21 LVA f. 1994, apr. 1, l. 12728.

22 LVA f. 1994, apr. 1, l. 12720, lp. 30–31: »form« (*anketa*), Special Commander's Office of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Syktyvkar in the Komi ASSR (26.2.1949 and 10.2.1949). For a similar case, see LVA 1994. f. 1.apr. 12494. l., lp. 30: »form«, Special Commander's Office of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Syktyvkar in the Komi ASSR (26.2.1949).

4.2 The Deportees' Mobility and Argumentation Strategies

4.2.1 *Escaping the Geography of ›Germanness‹*

The deportees frequently challenged the restrictions on mobility to which they were subjected. In several files, one or more members of the listed family left the special settlement without authorization, returned to Latvia, and resorted to different methods in order to escape the control of the authorities. As special settlers, they neither possessed a passport nor had the right to register in Riga, which was mandatory in Soviet cities, especially for getting legally employed. Thus, they were illegal and in a very vulnerable situation (Moine 2003; Rahmonova-Schwarz 2010).

The responses to that situation varied. Some deportees hid and did not officially work, while others tried to bypass the interdiction to register. Ludmila G., born in 1907 and lacking education, and her son, Benno, born in 1931, both fled Syktyvkar in 1948 and lived in Riga under different circumstances. Ludmila did not work or register and was considered to be deprived of a steady home upon her arrest in 1949, while Benno lived at his grandmother's residence and managed to obtain a passport issued by the local police because both his birth certificate listed the same address and he had just turned 16 years old and thus was not expected to have a passport already. The registration enabled him to obtain a job as a turner in a factory but did not prevent him from being finally arrested in 1949, together with his mother. Both of them were sent back to Syktyvkar and authorized to return to Riga only in 1959.²³ Other fugitives circumvented the obligation to be registered by living outside Riga while working there or by hiding completely in the countryside. Such strategies did not always prevent them from being arrested but did decrease the likelihood of arrest. A case in which that strategy succeeded is that of Aleksandrs V., born in 1883, who was among the previously mentioned individuals to whom a passport was issued by Komi authorities in 1946. In his case, it is likely that his status of invalid was the main basis in favor of the delivery of such a passport. Upon his arrival, Aleksandrs understood that his release was not recognized by the Latvian SSR and left Riga, and the authorities could not find him until 1949. When they finally did, he was not sent back to the special settlement because the inquiry determined that he was not ›German‹ but ›Latvian‹. Considering that recategorization, the Latvian MGB abandoned the proceedings against him in 1951 and authorized him to settle in Riga.²⁴ Such examples show how restrictions on the mobility of ›Germans‹ were not implemented only by the institutions

²³ LVA f. 1994, apr. 1, l. 12519.

²⁴ LVA f. 1994, apr. 1, l. 12513.

in charge of special settlers at the MVD or within the Council of Ministers. The dual system of passport issuance and registration enabled local police to play a significant role in controlling the special settlers' (im)mobility, and, in turn, the deportees adapted their behavior accordingly.

Another consequence of the role played by local authorities was the persistence of restrictions on mobility beyond the deportees' release and their theoretical right to return. The police were able to deny registration to former deportees, which amounted to a denial of social rights, including access to school, health care, or even jobs. Herta H., born in 1930 as the daughter of Roberts and Zelma H., whose family was authorized to settle in Riga by the Latvian MVD in 1955, was the only one in her family who could not register in Riga. She finally built a house in the countryside on her own, where she raised her daughter and lived the rest of her life.²⁵ Her case clearly shows that the deportation's impact on the deportees' (im)mobility ended neither with their release nor with the authorization to return to Latvia; families could arbitrarily be separated, and the places of residence were not freely chosen. The letters sent by former special settlers or their children during the rehabilitation process in 1988–1989 also suggest that registering in Riga was more a question of having acquaintances who knew of an unoccupied flat than a matter of having the right to register there. In response, strategies for ensuring freely chosen mobility were a core element of the lives of former special settlers.

4.2.2 *Performing ›Non-Germanness‹*

Be it during the interrogations following their arrest or in complaints sent by them or their relatives,²⁶ the deportees' aim was to prove their ›non-Germanness‹ or to downplay the impact of their German descent by resorting to different types of arguments.

The first kind of argument was biological in nature. In the files, the deportees refer to their parents or grandparents as being ›non-Germans‹. Some of them, including Aleksandrs V., completely deny having ›German‹ ancestors.²⁷ However, the majority refer to a ›German‹ grandparent usually labeled as a ›Baltic German‹ (*pribaltiiskii nemets*) while highlighting the ›non-Germanness‹ of the rest of the family, sometimes detailing their entire family tree. The second type of argument reflects a cultural-anthropological understanding of ethnicity: the deportees either intend to prove their ›non-

²⁵ LVA f. 1994, apr. 1, l. 12728.

²⁶ The special settlers and their relatives sent their complaints to different Soviet Latvian institutions: the NKVD, the President of the Council of Ministers, the MVD, or the President of the Supreme Soviet. The complaints were then forwarded to the Latvian MVD.

²⁷ LVA f. 1994, apr. 1, l. 12513.

Germanness: by stressing that they speak Latvian or Russian at home or insist that, despite having German roots, they or their relatives do not behave the way (they assume) ›Germans‹ would do. In a representative case, Aleksandrs K., whose wife, Ella, an artisan born in 1900, was deported during his absence, addresses a complaint to the Latvian MVD in which he insists that ›Although she may come from a German background, she has felt and worked like a true Latvian.« He adds that the family never had contact with Germany and that their daughter used to attend the ›Latvian‹ school.²⁸ Such argumentation amounts to performing one's ›non-Germanness‹ and consists not only in stressing some ›non-German‹ characteristics but also avoiding mentioning other characteristics – for instance, German-language skills.²⁹ A third argumentative pattern mirrored the contagious conception of ethnicity on the authorities' side: because whole families were deported on the basis of one person's ethnicity, numerous complaints followed the same logic in hoping to be released when that family member died.

By comparison, the role played by nonethnic arguments is minor. While the claim of having always been a good worker and citizen seems to belong to routine complaint-writing, it is striking that the rejection of Nazi Germany is almost completely absent from the deportees' argumentation. A final kind of argumentation called on sickness or age, when deportees needed their family's support.

Altogether, the initiatives undertaken by the deportees had a varying impact on their fate. Mostly, sending a complaint letter or escaping (and being arrested) was decisive because it initiated inquiries and created the opportunity for the case to be reassessed. However, though the inquiries were sparked by the deportees' initiative, the institutions were not permeable to the complainers' arguments but instead followed their own logics, as sketched in the following section.

4.3 The Inquiries and Decisions of the Institutions in Charge of Special Settlers

4.3.1 *Determining the Deportees' Nationality: Blurred Boundaries Between Competing Conceptions*

In their analysis of the files of Lithuanian individuals deported during the Priboi operation in March 1949, Blum and Koustova have concluded that ›whatever the substance of the complaint, the investigations sought to verify only a limited number of points, which were all connected to the Stalinist

²⁸ LVA f. 1994, apr. 1, l. 12594, lp. 20: ›request‹ (16.1.1946).

²⁹ LVA f. 1994, apr. 1, l. 627R, lp. 23: ›witness interrogation report‹ (9.12.1968).

mentality that had underpinned the deportation« and were determined by the deportee's contingent – that is, the »initial accusation that had justified the deportation« (Blum and Koustova 2018b, pp. 557–558). Inquiries assessed, for example, whether someone was a ›kulak‹ but did not question the fact that ›kulaks‹ should be deported. The same pattern applies to cases analyzed for this article: because they had been deported as ›Germans‹, the question of their ethnic belonging remained the most relevant to the authorities in charge of examining their complaints throughout the 1950s, even though ›Germans‹ were no longer a concern for state security. Looking at the way in which the inquiries were conducted and at the decisions subsequently taken allows reconstructing how the agents understood ›nationality‹ and which methods they used to determine national belonging.

Confronted with individuals whose ethnic belonging had no clear administrative expression until the deportation, the agents could not merely deduce an individual's nationality based on that of their parents. They thus collected a range of data: any kind of administrative document mentioning the individual's nationality or citizenship or that of their family (e.g., birth certificates, death certificates, marriage certificates, house registers, passports, and notarial or judicial deeds), documents mentioning their places of birth and residence, and testimonies on language practices, the social environment of the deportees, and how they were perceived by neighbors, colleagues, and relatives. Most inquiries, in combining several types of information, blurred the boundaries between different ways of conceiving nationality – that is, on a linguistic, cultural, biological, judicial, or geographical basis.

The search for information about relatives' nationality was usually the first step in the inquiry, one that followed a descent-based logic. However, the difficulty of finding unequivocal documents led to the paradox that the ascription process was mostly based on previous self-declaration. For example, when birth certificates were unavailable or did not mention nationality, the administration deduced nationality from marriage certificates or other sources in which the deportees declared their nationality as adults. As a case in point, the ethnicity of Jēkabs and Natālija H., both born in 1896 and employed as salespeople before the deportation, was reassessed according to the ethnicity of their non-deported adult offspring – that is, according to how the latter had declared their ethnicity upon applying for Soviet passports as adults. Because their three sons were categorized as ›Latvians‹ on their Soviet passports, Komi institutions deduced that their parents were ›Latvian‹ as well and allowed them to return in 1954. On the Latvian authorities' side, only the mother was considered to be ›Latvian‹, but the release of both spouses was allowed because no compromising material was found regard-

ing Jēkabs.³⁰ However, the house register of their son's apartment where they lived upon returning mentions that they were both issued Soviet passports stating Latvian nationality by the Komi ASSR.³¹ As a result, they both were categorized as ›Latvians‹ from then on, regardless of Latvian authorities' appreciation of the situation. That example puts into perspective the very notion of ascription: that it is not only intertwined with self-declaration but also highly dependent on single administrations and does not follow rigid rules.

The family-based ascription of nationality proved to be even more complex in cases of so-called interethnic marriages. Indeed, ethnicity was conceived by the Soviet authorities as being ›contagious‹ in an asymmetric manner; ›German‹ women married to ›non-German‹ men were not supposed to be deported, whereas ›non-German‹ women married to ›German‹ men were. That conception turned the biological concern into a judicial one. For instance, Valija A., who was born in 1910 and categorized as ›German‹ and who had worked as a salesperson before the deportation and as a cleaner afterward, was rehabilitated in 1950 because her inquiry proved that she was officially married to a ›Polish‹ individual at the time of her deportation.³² Similarly, Ļubova K., who, born in 1907 and working as a cleaner, was categorized as ›Russian‹, and her daughter, Irēna, who, born in 1942, was categorized as ›Latvian‹, were released in 1954 because the inquiry established that Ļubova was not officially married to the ›German‹ man whom she was living with at the time of the deportation.³³ By contrast, Frīda N., who, born in 1894 and working as a cleaner, was categorized as ›German‹, was barred from returning in 1954 despite her official marriage to a ›Latvian‹ man, for she had divorced him by the time of the deportation.³⁴

In many cases, the inquiries combined diverse criteria: former citizenship, place of birth, place of residence, language(s) spoken, and school(s) attended. For example, in 1949, Benno G. was considered to be ›Latvian‹ by the authorities even though his parents were respectively considered to be ›German‹ and ›Russian‹. Surprisingly, the reason mentioned in the decision is that he was a Latvian citizen before the war and lived in Latvia until deportation.³⁵ This outcome is surprising because such was true of nearly all deportees, but usually these facts were not considered to be good reasons to categorize someone as a ›Latvian‹. In the case of Ivans/Jānis/Johann G., a

30 LVA f. 1994, apr. 1, l. 12720.

31 Personāla dokumentu valsts arhīvs (PDVA) f. 3254, apr. 3, l. 515.

32 LVA f. 1994, apr. 1, l. 442R.

33 LVA f. 1994, apr. 1, l. 12494.

34 LVA f. 1994, apr. 1, l. 12577.

35 LVA f. 1994, apr. 1, l. 12519.

worker born in 1908, the inquiry primarily consisted in determining which name his family and acquaintances called him by before the war, for the various official documents that he owned mentioned different first names, which the authorities perceived as being markers of different ethnic belonging.³⁶

In most cases, the agents followed a logic that was both descriptive and ascriptive. Although they sought to gather evidence about how the deportees were perceived by others and themselves before the deportation, the lack of material, the subjective dimension of belonging, and the process's lack of standardization increased the arbitrariness of the final decisions.

4.3.2 ›Non-Germanness‹ and ›Statelessness‹

While some complaints were not followed by any inquiry but were directly rejected,³⁷ some very similar cases received opposite responses. The most common unequal treatment concerned families seeking ethnic recategorization after the death of the man, usually the father, grandfather, brother, or husband, whose assumed ethnicity had caused the family to be deported in the first place. Generally, before Stalin's death, the deportation of family members recognized as ›non-Germans‹ continued to be regarded as valid despite the death of the ›German‹ member. After Stalin's death, by some contrast, Latvian authorities released the living ›non-German‹ family members but did not automatically authorize them to return.

However, even under Stalin, it was not a rule that ›non-German‹ members of a family should be kept in deportation after the death of their ›German‹ relative. Indeed, in 1947, several complaint letters were sent by women recognized as being ›non-German‹ by the Latvian authorities and whose ›German‹ husbands had died. Following the logic sketched above, the authorities could have denied them release based on the fact that, as ›members of a German family‹, the women should have remained in deportation even after their husband's death. Even so, their requests were rejected for another reason: without any further inquiry or evidence, they were recategorized as ›stateless‹ and, as such, denied release.³⁸ Conversely, in 1950, Valija A. was released because of her proven marriage to a ›Polish‹ man, despite her being deprived of Soviet citizenship.³⁹ In other words, the authorities in charge of special settlers did not re-assign her to the ›stateless‹ contingent despite her being deprived of Soviet citizenship, but they did so with women who pos-

36 LVA f. 1994, apr. 1, l. 627R.

37 LVA f. 1994, apr. 1, l. 12498.

38 LVA f. 1994, apr. 1, l. 12500, 12514, 12555, 12634 and 12876.

39 PDVA f. 3556, apr. 3, l. 3978.

essed Soviet citizenship. The general reluctance to release special settlers until Stalin's death thus led to an arbitrary use of national categorization and supposed statelessness that blurred the boundary between nationality and citizenship as a charge against special settlers.

4.3.3 ›Germanness‹ as a Threat to the Regime: The Role Played in the Inquiries by Nonethnic Criteria

Although most of the inquiries stuck to the question of ethnic categorization, other aspects were sometimes investigated that played a more or less central role in the final decision. Analyzing their evolution over the years allows a better understanding of how the perception of ›German‹ deportees by the administration evolved from 1945 into the 1960s.

Until the end of the 1950s, the authorities continued applying the ›contingent‹ logic such that being of German ethnicity was a sufficient charge against special settlers. The fact that ›Germans‹ had been deported as being potentially disloyal in the context of the war did not play any role in the inquiries. Instead, they aimed at establishing one's nationality and did not investigate, for instance, the deportee's attitude under the German occupation in Latvia. Some external elements could nevertheless be taken into account. Until 1953, invalid people or isolated children whose relatives in Riga could care for them, as was in the interest of the Komi ASSR, had some chance to be released. After Stalin's death, the social origin and political reliability of the deportees began to play a role in some of the cases. For example, in 1955, the Latvian authorities released Elizabete L., born in 1884, along with her son Fridrihs L., born in 1916, and her daughter-in-law, Margarita L., born in 1904, from the special settlement in the Komi ASSR because the inquiry by the Latvian MVD established that Elizabete and Margarita were respectively ›Russian‹ and ›Latvian‹. Although Fridrihs was still categorized as a ›German‹, he was also released because of his proletarian background and the absence of any compromising material. However, the family was prohibited from returning to Latvia until 1960,⁴⁰ and such investigations on social and political background remained marginal in the 1950s.

The limited number of files still active in the 1960s show that, in the second half of the decade, under Brezhnev, the decisions were no longer the result of the mere assessment of one's ethnic belonging. For example, when Fanija B., a worker born in 1912, and her whole family were rehabilitated in 1968, the decision mentioned a range of converging reasons: the lack of legal basis for their deportation, the fact that the family was neither rich before the war nor politically compromised during the German occupation, the possi-

40 LVA f. 1994, apr. 1, l. 12876.

bility that the father, who died in deportation in 1946, may not have been of German ethnicity, the absence of police records concerning the father, and the good behavior of Fanija and her daughter since their return. The enumeration mirrors how the inquiry was conducted and investigated all of those issues. However, the rehabilitation did not entitle the family to compensation.⁴¹ This case shows that, after two decades during which ›Germanness‹ as such was problematic regardless of individual behavior, it again became associated with potential disloyalty, which was prioritized in the inquiry.

Thus, ›Germanness‹ continued to be perceived as a threat. Beyond the persistence of the interdiction for former ›German‹ special settlers to return to their homeland until 1972, several archival sources concur that ›Germans‹ in general were considered to be undesirable by Soviet Latvian authorities. In 1968, a report by the President of the Latvian Council of Ministers expressed concerns regarding the unplanned arrival of ›Germans‹ from Siberia, Central Asia, Kazakhstan, and the Ural region. He concluded that their immigration into Soviet Latvia should be hindered via restrictions on housing and jobs.⁴² In the late 1970s, ›German‹ migrants arriving in Germany from Latvia testified that Soviet ›Germans‹ who wanted to settle in Latvia were still being denied registration.⁴³ Thus, even after returning to Latvia, being recognized as a ›non-German‹ likely had a positive impact on the lives of former special settlers beyond the mere judiciary concern of obtaining financial compensation for lost property.

5 Conclusion

The analysis conducted allows drawing conclusions about the role played by ethnic belonging for both the authorities and the deportees. To be sure, after the deportation, nationality became an autonomous criterion on the authorities' side, independent from the suspicions charged against ›Germans‹ during the war. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the ›Germanness‹ of complainants or fugitives was sufficient cause to deny them release or return. Being able to prove one's proletarian origin or ideological reliability did not help. Despite that striking continuity in approaching nationality until the late 1950s, the number of former special settlers authorized to return significantly

⁴¹ LVA f. 1994, apr. 1, l. 633R, lp. 20-21: »decision« issued by the prosecutor of the Latvian SSR (30.9.1968); and lp. 44: letter addressed to Fanija B. by V. Laivin, 2nd-class state counsel of Justice (25.11.1968).

⁴² LVA f. 270, apr. 1s, l. 1892, lp. 62-68: reports by V. Ruben, chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Latvian SSR to (20.8.1968) and Avdiukevich, chairman of the KGB of the Latvian SSR (5.8.1968).

⁴³ Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amts, B 85-REF. 513/1530, 513/1336, 505/V6/935.

increased after Stalin's death, primarily because the requests of ›non-German‹ members of ›German‹ families were accepted and sometimes, along with them, those of younger ›German‹ family members. In the second half of the 1960s, the administration's perception came back to a more politicized view on Germanness, such that being ›German‹ was a basis for suspecting disloyalty, though such suspicions could be challenged via inquiries.

Paradoxically, the analysis also shows that even during the 1940s and 1950s, the very notion of German nationality was not quite clear to the administration and far from being an immutable category. Nationality could be re-ascribed, and there was room for negotiation. For that reasons, researchers should be wary when using the ethnic categories applied to deportees. Just as the categories of ›kulak‹ or ›bandits' accomplice‹, ›German‹ is a repressive category applied not only to individuals who identified as Germans. Beyond the case of deportation, the sources examined here suggest that the practical modalities of the ethnic categorization process in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union require further research.

For the special settlers, the deportation resulted in the ethnicization of their lives, insofar as ethnicity literally shaped their life paths from deportation on, regardless of the role that ethnic belonging had previously played in their lives. Unlike in the cases studied by Otto Pohl (2012), that traumatic experience did not strengthen their sentiment of being ›German‹. Seeking recategorization as ›non-Germans‹, mostly as ›Latvians‹ or ›Russians‹, was a way of de-ethnicizing their lives; it not only enabled them to return from deportation but also meant joining a group of citizens whose ethnicity (e.g., Russian or Latvian) mattered less because it was less stigmatized. For that reason, the deportees' ethnic belonging should not be understood as monolithic or decisively ›non-German‹ from the outset. It is probable that, given the deportees' multicultural and multilingual backgrounds, the Soviet context shaped the ways in which they related to their potential ethnic belongings and adapted to given circumstances. The long struggle for the recognition of their ›non-Germanness‹ by the deportation authorities may have decisively shaped how former deportees perceived themselves and wished to be perceived by others in a context that remained hostile to ›Germans‹.

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