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Operation Lentil: Soviet Ethnic Cleansing of the Chechens

By Tom Shattuck '13



On February 23, 1944, Lavrentii Beria ordered for the NKVD to systemically remove all of the Chechen people from their homes in the Caucasus to Kazakhstan and Kirghizia in Central Asia. Before this cleansing, the Chechens had a history of tension with the Russians. This age-old conflict culminated after the Germans retreated when the Soviet Union charged the entire Chechen population with treason for aiding the Germans. Despite the fact that several thousand Chechen men had volunteered in the Red Army to help fight the Germans, Stalin still used the pretext of a German retreat through an area of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Republic to condemn them all. In reality, Stalin just wanted to finally end the Chechen problem. Because the cleansing removed every Chechen from their home, the process proved to be brutal and deadly for the Chechens. The NKVD loaded the Chechens on to train cars in a similar way that the Nazis loaded the Jews on to trains on their way to concentration camps. After the NKVD removed all of the Chechens in the Autonomous Republic, Stalin erased all references and memory of these oppressed people. No matter the reason given for the ethnic cleansing of the Chechen people, Operation Lentil proved only to be an excuse for Joseph Stalin to remove one of the many problems involving the Soviet Union's minority nationalities.

In order to make the removal of the Chechen people from their homes appear legitimate, the Soviet government needed an official reason to give to the public. The official reason given for their removal, treason for collaborating with the Germans, made it extremely easy for the Soviets to cover up the true reason. The official report said that "many Chechens and Ingush were traitors to the homeland, changing over to the side of the fascist occupiers, joining the ranks of diversionaries and spies left behind the lines of the Red Army by the Germans. They formed armed bands at the behest of the Germans fighting against Soviet Power."¹ This language plays to the people's emotions by claiming that the Chechens worked with the Germans. After the brutal battles against the Germans, charging the Chechens with treason was not difficult for the people to accept. They charged *every* Chechen with high treason, and the punishment would be forced removal from their homes into Central Asia. However, the Soviets had little, if any, evidence to prove Chechen collaboration with the Nazis. In reality, many Chechens fought on behalf of the Red Army against the Nazis. "Thousands of Chechens loyally fought for the Soviet

¹ Norman M. Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 94.

homeland in the Red Army during the German invasion. Between 18,000 and 40,000 Chechens were mobilized to fight in the Soviet ranks and many Chechens received medals and promotions for their heroism during the war.”² During World War II, the Chechens fought against the Nazis, but would later be charged with collaboration and treason. The only charge that would have had any justification involved Chechens who deserted. Lavrentii Beria, the Minister of Internal Affairs, claimed that between 1941 and 1942, 1,500 Chechens deserted.³ However, this small number of deserters cannot justify the removal of *every* Chechen to Central Asia. What the Chechens actually did during the war and what the Soviets charged the Chechens with does not add up.

While the Soviet government claimed the Chechens committed treason, they really had other motives for their removal. Two areas stand out that explain why the Soviet government wanted to remove the Chechens from the Northern Caucasus: politics and past issues. The Chechens successfully resisted almost all Soviet attempts to propagandize and to install Socialism. Despite collectivization, the Chechens consistently resisted socialism by having private plots of land.⁴ The Soviets had a difficult time indoctrinating the Chechen people with their propaganda, which caused much discontent. The other area of interest, past issues between the Chechens and Soviets, helps to explain Stalin’s motivation to remove the Chechens. Since the Bolsheviks took power, the Chechens continuously resisted Soviet interference. Because the Chechens resisted successfully, the Soviet government wanted to find a way to get rid of this problem. “The attachment of the Chechen and Ingush to their homelands, the difficulty of imposing modern state forms on a resilient traditional society, and the ability of the Chechens and Ingush to resist both direct pressures from Moscow and the modernization expected from the granting of national institutional forms made the Soviet leadership determined to deal with them once and for all.”⁵ These reasons explain why the Soviets falsified charges of treason against the Chechen people during World War II. The Soviets used the false pretext of the war to get rid of an ongoing problem.

Because the Soviet government wanted to end this problem once and for all, they conducted the removal of the entire Chechen population in an efficient and quick manner. February 23, 1944 started off with celebrations because it was Red Army Day, but the Soviets used this holiday as an excuse to bring in soldiers not for celebration but to remove the Chechens: “No one suspected that disaster was at hand. Studebaker trucks rolled up . . . Soldiers holding automatics appeared. The Chechens were held at gun point. In every village the decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet was read, announcing the total deportation of the Chechens and Ingush for treason and for collaboration with the enemy.”⁶ The Soviets tricked the Chechens into thinking that the soldiers wanted to partake in the celebrations on this special day. However, they would later find out that the Red Army came to take them away to Central Asia. The Studebakers came from the United States to help with the war effort against Germany, but the Soviets used them round up its own people. In total, they moved 603,193 people in

² Brian Glyn Williams, “Commemorating “The Deportation” in Post-Soviet Chechnya: The Role of Memorialization and Collective Memory in the 1994-1996 and 1999-2000 Russo-Chechen Wars,” *History and Memory* 12, no. 1 (2000): 6.

³ Lavrentii Beria, “From the Report of the NKVD Department of Special Settlements. September 5, 1944,” from www.soviethistory.org

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Naimark, *Fires of Hatred*, 95.

⁶ Aleksandr M. Nekrich, “The Punished Peoples,” from <http://vip.latnet.lv/LPRA/Punished.htm>.

Operation Lentil, and 496,460 of those were of Chechens and Ingush descent.⁷ These statistics came from the official Soviet report by Beria, but the numbers differ greatly between sources. Due to the number of deaths in the process, it is impossible to know the exact number of people transported. The Soviets removed every Chechen from the Autonomous Republic and began to remove Chechens living in other areas in the Soviet Union. The Red Army loaded up the Chechens on to trains and sent them to Kazakhstan and Kirghizia in Central Asia.

In the process of moving over half a million people, the NKVD demonstrated brutal tactics to make the people obey their orders. The Soviet forces claimed the removal occurred smoothly and only 50 Chechens died in the process,⁸ but in reality, thousands of Chechens died during Operation Lentil. In one instance, the NKVD killed an entire village of Chechens: "The most glaring example of numerous reports of Soviet excesses was the Soviet annihilation of the Chechen mountain village Khaibakh, in Shatoi raion, where more than 700 Chechens were locked in a [barn] and burned alive."⁹ This one massacre alone exceeds the original Soviet number of 50 deaths. The troops made sure that anyone who attempted to escape was shot, so no one could get away. Similar experiences occurred in other villages: they gunned down people in their homes and in the streets and killed the young and the old alike with grenades.¹⁰ In addition to these brutal methods, Lavrentii Beria gave orders to eliminate any person that a soldier considered "untransportable." This category included the young, old, and diseased. They killed these people on the spot and did not even take them to the trains for transportation.¹¹ The mass killings of people considered "untransportable" demonstrates the brutal nature of Operation Lentil.

The Chechens and other minority nationalities that the Soviets transported into Central Asia faced terrible conditions during Operation Lentil, and many died as a result. The number of deaths in the process will never be known because so many people died at different stages in the Operation. Many died from attacks in the villages, but many more died during the journey to Central Asia. "Some 3,000 perished even before being deported . . . One can extrapolate from these separate figures that roughly 10,000 died from disease, hunger, and cold."¹² Those numbers are only estimates because the Soviets attempted to cover up Operation Lentil and to erase the Chechen people from memory. Nevertheless, these numbers provide the best estimate because it takes into account the horrid conditions on the railcars: "The Chechens were sealed in the guarded carts for two to three weeks as the trains made their way across the Soviet Union . . . The people were mowed down by typhus, they were not able to bury those who died. On the rare stops on the empty steppes, soldiers walked through the wagon taking off bodies."¹³ These conditions are very similar to those that the Jews faced during their transportation to concentration camps during the same time period. The Nazis rounded up the Jews and put them on railcars just like the Soviets did to the Chechens. Even more Chechens died during re-settlement, but it is impossible to know exactly how many died during their time in Central Asia. One estimate claims around 25% of all minority nationalities in Operation Lentil died from 1944

⁷ Lavrentii Beria, "From the Report of L. B. Beria to I. V. Stalin, V. M. Molotov and A. I. Maienkov. July 1944," From www.soviethistory.org. (1992)

⁸ Jeffrey Burds, "The Soviet Wars against 'Fifth Columnists.' The Case of Chechnya, 1942-4," *Journal of Contemporary History* 42, no. 2 (2007): 304.

⁹ *Ibid*, 305.

¹⁰ Williams, "Commemorating "The Deportation" in Post-Soviet Chechnya," 8-9.

¹¹ Burds, "The Soviet Wars against 'Fifth Columnists,'" 305.

¹² Naimark, *Fires of Hatred*, 97.

¹³ Williams, "Commemorating "The Deportation" in Post-Soviet Chechnya," 10.

to 1948.¹⁴ No one exact number will ever be produced due to the secret nature of Operation Lentil, but a large number of Chechens died during the forced removal due to the poor treatment by the NKVD and horrid conditions during travel.

In addition to removing the Chechens from the Northern Caucasus, the Soviets unsuccessfully attempted to remove any memory or knowledge of the Chechens from the records. Stalin used two methods to try to remove the Chechens from memory: dissolving the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Republic and trying to remove Chechen culture. Once the NKVD completed Operation Lentil, Stalin allowed for Georgia, northern Ossetia, Daghestan, and Stavropol to absorb the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Republic.¹⁵ Georgia received most of the land, but the people of all of the regions moved into the abandoned Chechen villages. After moving into the areas, Stalin wanted to remove all traces of the Chechens from the villages. He removed anything that could go back to a Chechen origin: "Mosques were demolished, literature in the Chechen language burned, signs in Chechen destroyed and, most importantly, the revered graveyards of the Chechens were plowed over. The expunging of the memory of the Chechens extended to town and topographical names"¹⁶ By removing anything Chechen, it seemed like they never even existed, let alone lived in the area. No one in the Soviet Union dared to mention them or what happened to them. In Kazakhstan and Kirghizia, the Soviets refused to allow the Chechens to speak their native tongue and did not allow public displays of their culture. Everything Chechen became either forgotten or outlawed.¹⁷ In order to ensure the lasting success of Operation Lentil, Stalin attempted to remove all aspects of Chechen culture from memory.

Despite Stalin's efforts to eliminate any memory of the Chechen people, they continued to endure in Kazakhstan and Kirghizia until 1957 when they returned to their native home. They initially returned home slowly, but by "the end of 1957, the Chechen and Ingush Autonomous Republic was reestablished, and all the Chechens and Ingush were allowed to return to their homes."¹⁸ Some violence did occur when the Chechens tried to regain their former territory and homes. Despite Stalin's best efforts, the Chechen people carried on in Kazakhstan and Kirghizia. Their resilience allowed for them to survive: "Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn wrote of the Chechens: 'Only one nation refused to accept the psychology of submission.' And this applied 'not to individuals, nor to insurgents, but to the nation as a whole...no Chechen ever tried to be of service or to please the authorities. Their attitude towards them was proud and even hostile.'"¹⁹ They realized what Stalin wanted to happen, but they refused to allow him that convenience by living on. The Chechens not only survived in Central Asia, but they also thrived in a sense. During their exile, they had the highest birthrate in all of the Soviet Union in an attempt to keep their people alive. "The number of Chechens who returned to their homeland after their release from exile in 1956- 1957 was almost as high as that deported [in 1944]."²⁰ Despite their major losses in Operation Lentil, the Chechen people lived on.

In Operation Lentil, Stalin ordered the systemic removal of the Chechen people from the Northern Caucasus to rid the Soviet Union of the historic Chechen problem. Under the guise of the high treason by collaborating with the Nazis, the Soviets removed the Chechens to Central

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Naimark, *Fires of Hatred*, 98.

¹⁶ Williams, "Commemorating "The Deportation" in Post-Soviet Chechnya," 11.

¹⁷ Naimark, *Fires of Hatred*, 98.

¹⁸ Ibid, 99.

¹⁹ Williams, "Commemorating "The Deportation" in Post-Soviet Chechnya," 11.

²⁰ Ibid, 10.

Asia. However, in reality, the true motivations behind their removal go back before World War II. The Chechens resisted Soviet Socialist practices and culture/propaganda. Therefore, the Soviet government forcibly removed the entire Chechen population in late February 1944. This removal led to the death of thousands and thousands of Chechens by Soviet hands in the streets of their villages. Even more died en route to Central Asia on packed railcars. Their situation and Operation Lentil have many similarities to the German treatment of the Jews in the same time period. Both populations were murdered in their homes, brutally assaulted, packed in railcars, and transported to a foreign land not meant to survive. In the end, the Chechen people survived and returned home from exile in 1957.

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