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Soviet War Crimes

Investigating the Soviet brutality of World War 2

Bachelor's thesis in Historie - bachelorstudium

Supervisor: Jonas Scherner

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1.0 Introduction

My Research Question is the following:

What was the scope and reasoning behind Soviet war crimes and the rules regarding these crimes?

In this paper I will discuss the historical context of the conflict on the Eastern Front that emerged to be one of the largest and most significant arenas of engagement. During this period the clashes between the German and Soviet armies led to much suffering. The radical ideologies of communism and fascism contributed to views that often created a feeling of hatred towards the other side. This conflict is therefore not only a war but also a conflict of total war, a war which saw to either exterminate or subjugate the enemy. To showcase this, I have included sources and statements referring to either the orders or opinions by the high command of the different states which were at war during this conflict. My reasoning for this is that a lot of the hatred and ideological drive which was found among the soldiers and people in this war was often exploited and used by higher ranking individuals that not only influenced the minds of the people but also gave orders that allowed for such crimes.

A theme that is often talked about regarding this period and the topic of war crimes is the war crimes committed by Nazi Germany. In my paper I will try to discover and shine a light into the Soviet war crimes which at times compared in scale to the German ones. This is something that is of the utmost importance as to forget or even just overlook major humanitarian crises perpetuated by humanity is problematic. In context to the sources and historians I have found writing about the Soviet war crimes, I have come across sources that focused specifically on a single region or country in where the war crimes were perpetuated and rarely giving us the readers a bigger picture. Therefore, my paper will not only mention several examples from different regions but will also try to connect the reasoning of these crimes. By looking into the historical context and the international law of that time, this study seeks to provide an understanding of the motivations driving the Soviet engagement in these crimes. This is done to create a unique topic that not only gives examples of said war crimes, but also bases it on the law at that time. By using international law as a basis and not bias or hand-picked sources, I can provide a more nuanced and interesting way to interpret the issue of war crimes.

The structure of my thesis will first examine international law up to the Second World War, and the respective importance of it for the international community. This is done to better understand the mood and feelings of statesmen and politicians of that period regarding the topic of war crimes. What will be shown is that a great deal was done to try to limit the suffering of combatants and civilians. During the second part of my thesis, I will give an introduction and short explanation to the war and the context it had for the war crimes committed. My research will, towards the end, unveil the Soviet view of this war and their way of understanding international law. In contrast the German side will be mentioned briefly to compare it to the Soviet side but also explain to the reader what the Soviet leadership was living through. In the main part of my paper where I will be explaining and providing sources on the several war crimes committed by the Soviet side, and I will use statements and perspectives given by different people with different backgrounds to show a wider perspective on the topic.

In this analysis I will involve an exploration of several sources on the Eastern Front, here Historian Norman Naimark known for his writing on the Soviet crimes was used to document the Soviet crimes in western Europe. Naimark's approach is to explain and showcase the extent of crimes done by the Soviet military in east Germany. Eastern European authors writing on their respective countries and crimes committed in those regions was picked, examples include Kalbarczyk for Poland, Majstorović for Yugoslavia. Kalbarczyk and Naimark try to show us mostly the brutality done in detail meanwhile authors like Majstorovic include a more explanative version to the events showcasing the feelings and reasoning of the Red Army. My knowledge of Slavic languages helped me in finding and understanding these sources. Regarding law, I used the international red cross official documents which the Russian state either under Soviet Union or the tsarist government was signatory of. This is done to give my thesis a clear understanding of what a war crime is and to limit possible biases. I kept it as varied as possible to include both Western and Eastern views in my thesis. Unfortunately, there were not many sources from the point of view of Russian historians as it is still a heavily politicized part of Russian history. I have found a historian by the name of Nikolay Bugay who is known to defend Soviet war crimes by putting forward proof of justifications for deportations. Unfortunately, his works are not known in the west and are hard to come by, as well as his statements are described as "manipulated." In the end I decided that his work would not match my needs for this bachelor due to their contrarian motives which would

require me to create a long chapter dedicated to comparing his statements against the sources I have used in my Bachelor in regard to Soviet crimes. My sources were drawn upon to give us both the view and reasoning of the perpetrators but also to show us the extent of the crimes committed by the Soviet Union and not necessary challenge first and second-hand sources about these crimes.

2.0 The Rules of War – Geneva Convention 1864



Henry Dunant the humanitarian activist.

Picture taken from the international committee of the red cross
<https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/misc/57jnvq.htm>

In international diplomacy, the year 1864 stands out as a moment when representatives from European powers converged to address a pressing humanitarian concern: the treatment of wounded soldiers during wartime. All of this was first called for by a Swiss relief Activist by the name of Henry Dunant who having witnessed the battle of Solferino between Franco-Italian forces against Austria in 1859, and the many thousands of wounded soldiers left without any aid or help urged to create an international committee of the Red Cross. Jean Henry Dunant is today remembered as the father of the red cross and his contributions to international law, and humanist activism has impacted how we view wartime rules of conduct. The gathering set forth by the Red Cross and Mr. Dunant convened due to the escalating conflicts and mounting casualties, this marked efforts to establish a common legal framework governing the care and protection of those wounded in battle. The significance of this convention, resonating deeply within the international law and humanitarian discourse. At its core, the gathering helped build a collective acknowledgment of the moral need to

lessen human suffering in armed conflict based on a mutually agreed upon conduct during conflict. ¹

It is important to note that already the 1864 convention mandated with article 12 that wounded and sick soldiers are to be treated humanely and should not be put up to physical torment. Beyond its implications, the 1864 convention served as a start for broader diplomatic points aimed at a consensus on fundamentals of humanitarian conduct during times of war. As the first of its kind, this historic gathering laid the foundational groundwork for subsequent conventions and treaties, each building upon the principles espoused therein to further refine and expand the scope of protections afforded to vulnerable populations in times of strife. This convention is therefore important because it served as the cornerstone of the future conventions. Another important factor to consider is that already in this convention many of the articles were not upheld during the Second World War, which I will expand on later. ²

2.1 Hague Conventions

The Hague Convention of 1899 and its revised version in 1907 were pivotal international treaties that established rules and protocols for warfare. It continued the groundwork based on the 1864 Geneva convention and expanded it to limit the increasing brutality of war. The Hague convention was proposed by the Russian state itself and specifically Tsar Nicholas II in 1898. The years surrounding the Hague conventions were years of mass industrialization of the military industry and expansion of militarism on the European Continent. Imperialism and new deadly inventions created an atmosphere in Europe that called for certain restraint. Although human rights were not yet widely understood concepts, the ideas surrounding it were. The Russian statemen had a planned desire to bring peace for all people and limit the growing arms rate, partly due to the Russian state experiencing turmoil and growing costs of its army. ³

¹ Heudtlass, Willy, 283–296; Dunant 7, 13-16, 32.

² International Committee of the Red Cross, Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded in Armies in the Field. Geneva, 22 August 1864. Historical treaty.

³ Geoffrey Best, 619-621

By the end of the meetings peace and disarmament were mostly forgotten and what was convened was a more broad and updated set of laws regarding times of conflict and rules surrounding wartime actions. Part of the convention pertained to the ban weapons such as the “asphyxiating” and “deleterious” gases, that were still quite limited compared to what would eventually be developed. When the second meeting transcribed in 1907 more efforts were put on shelling and the new technology of aircraft bombing. Most importantly was the limit of shelling and bombardment of innocent civilian populations. These established principles were to protect non-combatants, including civilians, medical personnel, and wounded soldiers. This included rules for the humane treatment of prisoners of war and civilians in occupied territories and in essence added to the 1864 convention.⁴ A noteworthy part for this thesis from the convention was the introduction of international tribunals to adjudicate disputes between the signatory nations and enforce the provisions of the convention. Furthermore, new rules regarding the protection of civilian populations from heavy armaments, limitation on destruction of cultural and religious property and ban of perfidy pertaining to use of “treacherous conduct of war hiding one’s uniform or the improper use of the flag of truce”. These rules were often overlooked and outright ignored by Soviet Russia during the Second world war.⁵

2.2 The Geneva Convention of 1929

The Geneva Conventions concentrated primarily on safeguarding and updating the earlier 1864 convention, especially regarding individuals who are either not participating or have ceased to participate in hostilities during armed conflicts, such as wounded soldiers, prisoners of war, and civilians. These conventions delineate rules for the humane treatment of such individuals and strive to alleviate suffering during times of war. The Geneva Conventions expanded on their previous conventions and tried to create a more understandable and proper agreement. Specifically, the Geneva Convention of 1929 extensively addresses the treatment of prisoners of war, outlining their rights, protections, and conditions of internment. Originating in the aftermath of World War I, the Geneva Conventions underscore the imperative to protect vulnerable individuals affected by armed conflicts, regardless of their combatant status.⁶

⁴ Geoffrey Best, 626-627

⁵ International Committee of the Red Cross, Convention (IV) respecting the Laws and Customs of War on Land and its annex: Regulations concerning the Laws and Customs of War on Land

⁶ International Committee of the Red Cross, Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War. Geneva, 27 July 1929.

This emphasis on safeguarding the welfare of individuals differentiates the Geneva Conventions from the Hague Conventions. In contrast, the Hague Conventions primarily focus on regulating the conduct of warfare, encompassing rules governing combatants, the treatment of civilians, and the protection of cultural property during armed conflicts. Their aim is to create customary laws and establish regulations to minimize unnecessary suffering and destruction during armed conflicts, particularly by prescribing guidelines for the means and methods of warfare. Unlike the Geneva Conventions, which prioritize the protection of individuals, the Hague Conventions center on the treatment of combatants and the regulation of warfare between warring states. Regarding the signature of the 1929 convention it is worth noting that the following Great and Major Powers signed the Geneva convention of 1929: Germany, on 27.07.1929, France, on 27.07.1929, United Kingdom on 27.07.1929, and United States on 27.07.1929. An important Great Power that did not sign the convention was the Soviet Union.⁷

2.3 The View of International Law in the Soviet Union

Although the Soviet government did not sign the Geneva convention, they did sign the 1907 Hague Convention as the Russian Empire. The Soviet government would continue to follow this convention. In 1918, upon seizing power during the Soviet civil war the Bolshevik government would make a statement that they acknowledged all the international conventions, and that the Soviet government would comply with them.⁸ There is however a common problem found in Soviet sources that seem to point towards the fact that Soviet administration and law makers saw their laws and their country above what would be regarded as “bourgeoisie” law, referring to law created by western capitalist countries. The Soviet law makers seemed to have an “aversion” to laws signed in Tsarist times and laws signed by non-socialist countries. There are often little to no relations or statements by the Soviet Union that would state that they would continue a direct Tsarist precedent. This is due to the fact that the Soviet leadership often claimed to be the leader of humanitarianism and a paragon protector of workers and common people.⁹

⁷ International Committee of the Red Cross, Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War. Geneva, 27 July 1929.

⁸ Bernard A. Ramundo, 76-77

⁹ Bernard A. Ramundo, 80-84

This can further be seen with the Introduction of the Resolution of the Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR No. 46 on the approval of the draft resolution of the Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR "Regulations on prisoners of war." On March 19, 1931, introduced a regulation by the Soviet Government on treatment of prisoners of war. This was done three years after the 1929 Geneva convention which the Soviet Union did not sign. In this Soviet regulation a lot of what was agreed upon in the Geneva convention found place. The Soviet regulation mandated that the Soviet government would maintain a humane treatment of prisoners that would include ban on torture and mistreatment when in soviet captivity. The Soviet war could be argued to be much more liberal and humane compared to the Geneva convention of 1929 and often included socialist aspects such as the "No distinction are to be made based on ranks or religious beliefs...". There was even a clause stating that "Prisoners had the right, through free elections to form their own bodies to represent interests of prisoners of war." This can be understood as a soviet attempt to ideologically undermine what it perceived as "bourgeoisie law".¹⁰

3.0 The European Conflict

The Soviet Union emerged as a new vast geopolitical entity following the aftermath of the First World War. At the heart of its political ideology lay the principles of socialism and communism, which diametrically opposed the capitalist systems prevalent among many of its neighboring states in the West. The ideological difference between the Soviet Union and its capitalist neighbors started geopolitical tensions and conflicts during the interwar era. The socialist and communist doctrine championed by the Soviet Union represented a fundamental challenge to the capitalist and eventually fascist West.¹¹ The Soviet Union's often aggressive diplomacy heightened geopolitical tensions and engendered geopolitical rivalries, exacerbating existing ideological divisions between the socialist East and many of its neighbors in Europe. Consequently, the interwar period witnessed a complex interplay of ideological conflict, geopolitical competition, and territorial expansion, as the Soviet Union

¹⁰ Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR No. 46 regulations on prisoners of war. March 19, 1931

¹¹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Soviet Union and the Eastern Front

sought to assert its ideological hegemony and expand its sphere of influence in the face of opposition from capitalist states.¹²



Map of Europe by 1940

Picture taken from the Holocaust encyclopedia <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/map/europe-1940>

By 1940, the territorial expansion of the German Reich had extended its dominion over a major portion of Central Europe. Under the leadership of Adolf Hitler, the Nazi regime and demands for territorial annexation were driven by the concept of lebensraum, or "living space," coupled with the fervent ideology of self-determination propagated by the Nazi regime. This radical doctrine advocated the expansion and safeguarding of the German populace, often at the cost of neighboring nations. In pursuit of this expansionist agenda, Hitler's Germany laid claim to Sudetenland, territories which then were part of Czechoslovakia. Motivated by the will to secure lebensraum for the German people, the political control of Bohemia and Moravia in March 1939 served as a pivotal step in the Reich's expansion.¹³

The Molotov-Ribbentrop pact between Germany and Soviet Union was a pact based on pragmatism. Both Nazi Germany and Soviet Union viewed Poland as an obstacle and neither of the two countries was interested in fighting each other for the time being. This treaty allowed both states to pursue their own interests in the region, creating a sphere of influence between the two.¹⁴ The German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 broke the pact and represented an ideological reasoning and a strategic calculation by the Nazi regime. Adolf

¹² United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Soviet Union and the Eastern Front

¹³ Rich, N, 110-113

¹⁴ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Soviet Union and the Eastern Front

Hitler had a mistrust towards the Soviet Union as being reliable, viewing its communist ideology as inherently incompatible with Nazi Germany's expansionist aims and racial thought. The fertile lands of the Soviet Union held appeal to Hitler's expansionist ambitions, offering vast agricultural resources and strategic territorial regions that could secure the economic and agricultural economy of the Nazi regime. Moreover, the successful pacification of France in 1940 provided Germany with a strategic advantage, allowing the German military to redirect its focus towards the East. With the Western Front stabilized, Hitler could now go towards his ideological thought of confronting Bolshevism and securing Lebensraum in the Soviet Union. ¹⁵

3.1 The Eastern Front

By March 1941 Hitler ordered the German Generals to implement drastic measures to combat “judeo-bolshevik leadership”. The Nazi leadership would also enforce SS and Police units to accompany the German military named the Wehrmacht in these measures. The armed forces of Germany would annex new territories and put forward a martial law allowing the SS and military police to seize people they saw fit. Communist politicians, ideologues, soviet military police and all other intelligentsia was either shot or deported to camps. Hitler concluded with the assumptions that the Bolshevik-jewish intelligentsia was to be wiped out with all its Soviet leadership because this was to be a total war where the enemy would exterminate. ¹⁶

The German offensive launched on June 22, 1941, on the Eastern Front during World War II marked a significant point in the conflict. Operating under the same leadership as in the previous invasion of France in 1940, the German forces initiated a multi-pronged attack, targeting key strategic locations such as Leningrad, Kyiv, and ultimately Moscow. This offensive caught the Soviet leadership off guard, leading to a hasty and unprepared response from the Red Army, which was partially demobilized at the time. The German strategy was to destroy the Soviet Military and render it inoperational. The initial German advance was swift and decisive, with tanks making significant territorial gains, including the capture of Minsk. However, despite the progress, logistical problems and determined Soviet defense prevented the complete destruction of Soviet forces, allowing a substantial portion of them to retreat eastward. As the German forces continued their advance, they faced

¹⁵ Rich, N, 205-113

¹⁶ Rich, N, 216-219

increasingly adverse weather conditions and encountered fierce Soviet resistance.¹⁷ The onset of the harsh Russian winter, coupled with logistical difficulties and the tenacity of Soviet defenders, posed significant challenges to the German offensive, and would prolong the conflict. This along with the increasing influence of the US through lend lease and active participation in operations in the west started to put the German army in an increasingly worse position. Despite reaching the outskirts of Moscow and making some initial gains, the German advance stalled and stopped in the face of a determined Soviet opposition. Ultimately, the German offensive on the Eastern Front during 1941 proved to be a costly campaign, resulting in significant casualties and logistical setbacks for the German forces. The entirety of the German and Soviet society was mobilized in a grand total war which involved many lives and organized brutality that caused mass suffering. Nationalism and ideology were used as a mobilizing force to give everything one had to the mother and fatherland.¹⁸

The campaign highlighted the challenges of waging war in the vast and inhospitable terrain of the Eastern Front, as well as the resilience of the Soviet Union in the face of overwhelming odds. A major difference in the eastern front compared to previous wars and even the western front, was the horror that both sides of soldiers faced in captivity of the other. This aggressive and repressive treatment of captured soldiers led both sides to fight fanatically to not be captured, this introduced both the German and Soviet armies to a relentless long-lasting slaughter. Soldiers from both sides feared the revenge they would have to endure in the captivity of the other. This resulted in a fanatical drive to fight against what was perceived as the embodiment of evil. The war resulted in the dehumanization of the soldier and civilian which allowed both sides psychologically to engage in war crimes.¹⁹

¹⁷ Encyclopedia Britannica, Invasion of the Soviet Union 1941

¹⁸ Henriksen Waage, H., 28-34; Barber, J, Harrison, M, 4-7

¹⁹ Barber, J, Harrison, M, 11-13



Soviet female soldiers captured by the German army ca 1941. Taken from https://www.worldwarphotos.info/gallery/ussr/rkka/red_army/russia-pow/

3.2 Soviet War Goals

Stalin's objectives during early stages of World War II were initially focused on seeking security through alignment with Nazi Germany, motivated by suspicions of British and French motives and a will to prevent a potential German attack. This choice culminated in the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, which provided Stalin with a buffer zone in Eastern Europe and allowed Stalin to pursue annexation of eastern European territories. However, following the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, Stalin's priorities shifted towards the destruction of Germany while still desiring a Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe during the aftermath of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, which split Europe between Soviet and German Spheres. Despite the eventual advancing German forces, Stalin remained steadfast in his demands for the pre-war borders and a sphere of influence which Stalin viewed as vital for the regime to survive. As the war progressed, Stalin's objectives evolved in response to changing circumstances. In 1942, Molotov dropped demands for post-war border agreements that the Soviets previously had with the Germans through the Molotov-Ribbentrop agreement, instead prioritizing the establishment of a second front to relieve pressure on the Soviet Union. This shift in priorities underscored the pragmatic considerations guiding Stalin's foreign policy and evolved towards a more aggressive and destructive foreign policy towards the German Reich.²⁰

²⁰ Strachan, F. 1-2

Stalin's foreign policy during World War Two has been characterized as opportunistic. New documents from the Russian Institute of General History indicate a clear strategy for Eastern Europe, evident in the activities of the Comintern and its successor, the *otdel mezhdunarodnoy svyazi*, until May 1943. Nevertheless, Stalin's actions often contradicted his strategic objectives. For instance, while instructing Communists to avoid antagonism, he himself engaged in actions that strained relations with the Allies, such as cutting ties with the Polish Government in Exile. His refusal to aid the Polish Home Army during the Warsaw Uprising further eroded Allied trust in the Soviet Union and deepened the view that Soviet Union was an aggressor state willing to invade its neighbors. Despite attempts to influence Eastern Europe, Stalin ultimately prioritized Sovietization over maintaining an alliance with the West. He believed that establishing a sphere of influence was crucial for Soviet security. This stance led to tensions with Western allies, particularly regarding Poland and future satellite states in Eastern Europe, where Stalin insisted on creating a buffer zone aligned with Soviet interests. This meant that Soviet Union saw the eastern and central European territories now under their control as conquered territories, treating the civilians and soldiers as subjects.²¹

By the later years of the war between 1942-1943 the Soviet government would concentrate their goals on cooperating with the western allies to hamper the German onslaught in the east. A major goal for Moscow was to create a second front in the west and this was given a priority above any major land gains. At this point of the war Germany was still a major threat to Soviet Union and no clear post war borders were being planned beyond simple ideas. As the war moved towards the last years and victory began to be certain, the Soviet government pursued a policy of spheres of influence. This created an aim for the Soviet army and government to secure eastern Europe as a Soviet sphere separate from the western sphere.²²

4.0 Definition of a War Crime

It's noteworthy to state that the Hague Convention, to which the Soviet Union was a signatory, contained Article 46, emphasizing the need to respect and protect the lives of individuals. This is important as much of what would be done by the countries during Second

²¹ Strachan, F. 3-5, Tucker, The Emergence of Stalin's Foreign Policy

²² Roberts, G. 664-670

World war including Soviet Union would pay little attention to this article.²³ A War is the failure to follow the international law as understood in the Hague convention of 1907 and the Geneva Convention, at that time.²⁴ Furthermore the Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR No. 46 draft resolution of the Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR "Regulations on prisoners of war" would also require similar breaches as stated in the Geneva convention to be considered a crime.²⁵

One of the primary reasons why the established laws of warfare were disregarded on the Eastern Front during World War II was due to Hitler's deliberate decision to wage a "total" war of annihilation and extermination based on ideological and sometimes even esoteric views. This approach, driven by Hitler's racial ideology, allowed for the complete abandonment of basic principles of international law and morality which alone led to a far bloodier conflict on the civilian populations than the first world war. Factors such as the commissar order issued by the German command and the general view of Slavs as subhuman by the German government created a vicious will to genocide a whole population. Even plans before Operation Barbarossa wanted to starve the entirety of soviet population as means of genocide and population control. The way of response by German army to any kind of resistance was to shoot and exterminate. This led to harsh punishments against partisan units and villages that engaged in these activities.²⁶

The Nazi regime attempted to justify this by arguing that the Soviet Union had not formally adhered to the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 as well as the Geneva convention of 1929, this assertion must be examined critically. It is true that, at the time of the German invasion of the USSR, the Soviet government had not officially ratified the Convention of 1929. However, as mentioned previously the Soviet Union not only acceded to the Hague Convention of 1907 but also had their own laws of conduct similar to that of the Geneva Convention of 1929, which protected war prisoners in a similar manner. Furthermore, the

²³ Margaret M. de Guzman, 1-5 Crimes against humanity, International Committee of the Red Cross, Hague Convention

²⁴ International Committee of the Red Cross, Hague Convention 1907, Geneva Convention 1929

²⁵ Central Executive Committee and the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR No. 46 regulations on prisoners of war. March 19, 1931

²⁶ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, THE GERMAN ARMY AND THE RACIAL NATURE OF THE WAR AGAINST THE SOVIET UNION

Soviet Union's failure to formally sign and ratify the Hague Conventions does not remove Germany of its obligations under these regulations that the German state signed. The deliberate disregard for these principles by the Nazi regime was a calculated decision more accurately based on ideological view of soviet citizens, and not justified by legal technicalities. Therefore, mere absence of Soviet ratification should not have provided Germany with radical exemption from adhering to internationally recognized norms of warfare.²⁷

4.1 Soviet deportations

Following the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact on August 23rd, 1939, which contained secret protocols dividing Eastern Europe into spheres of influence between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, coordinated deportations escalated with the joint German - Soviet invasion of Poland. Both sides pillaged Poland and abused the local populations for various reasons. This invasion led to the annexation of new territories by both aggressors and millions of poles would now be at the mercy of the soviet government. This annexation paved the way for the forced deportation of approximately 250,000 Poles, along with thousands of Ukrainians and Belarusians. these populations were sent to Siberian camps and “settlements”. These deportations were widely condemned as a violation of international law, particularly considering that Poland was not only an war occupied territory but also a signatory to various international conventions and laws aimed at protecting civilians during times of conflict. Despite claims of targeting individuals based on ethnic criteria, the reality was that the forced expulsions predominantly affected families of military colonists, prisoners-of-war, and forest workers, many of whom were subjected to labor camps or executed. The living conditions in these places of exile were notoriously harsh, with deportees enduring extreme deprivation and suffering.²⁸

Following the annexation of the Baltic states, from June 13th to 14th, approximately 39,395 people of various ethnic backgrounds were sent to the far east Siberian camps. Ivan Serov oversaw the operation under the direction of Lavrenti Beria, once again targeting ethnic and civilian population. Between June 12th and 13th, 1941, approximately 29,800 family

²⁷ Ginsburgs, G, 254

²⁸ Lebedeva, 28-46.

members of individuals categorized as "counterrevolutionaries and nationalists" and perceived as threats to the Soviet government were forcibly expelled from the Moldavian SSR. The Soviet Regime tried to purge national dissidence that would threaten it. Nationalism and any disagreement with the Government was cracked down. People were deported to various regions in Siberia and central Asia, where there was a lot of empty land used for work camps and forced settlements. The deportation from Bessarabia was overseen by Sergo Goglidze, a trusted associate of Lavrenty Beria within the Georgian NKVD. Often called voluntary work by the Soviet government, the work camps had poor conditions and if somebody refused it, they could often be accused of being a rebel and counter revolutionary. Forced work camps were often the punishment given to most Soviet subjects that the government was hostile to. During 1940 and 1941, a total of 53,356 people from newly annexed Bessarabia were mobilized for forced slave labor across the Soviet Union. This population was just a year ago under the government of Romania. Now its populations were being exploited and used by the Soviets as forced labor.²⁹



Polish civilians being boarded on a train to be deported
taken from <https://swoopingeagle.com/home/repression/deportations/>

It is estimated that between 1940 and 1941, 200,000 to 300,000 Romanian Bessarabians were subjected to persecution, forced labor camps, or deportation with their entire families, resulting in the loss of 18,000 to 57,000 lives. These actions were meant to pacify the region

²⁹ Polian, 35-75

and incorporate it into the Soviet Union. Some scholars estimate that 12% of the population of these provinces suffered either death or deportation. From late August 1941 to June 1942, approximately 1,200,000 Russo-Germans were forcibly removed from their homes and forced to Siberia. On August 28th, 1941, a decree issued by the Soviet government held Russian-Germans collectively accountable for collaboration with German invaders and demanded their largescale deportation. This operation used military forces and local political commissars to carry out the deportations. The death toll is unknown but Germanic culture virtually ceased to exist in the Volga.³⁰

4.2 Soviet views on War Crimes

The Marxist view, which was the leading ideology in Soviet Union sees laws as a necessity to bring an essential and stable truth discovered by laws of nature. Ideology of Marxism-Leninism was the moral parameter in Soviet Union. This ideological perception meant that any action could be seen by political reasoning. A law in Marxist ideology is to be drawn from the evidence and political philosophical reasoning made by the people. ³¹

Moscow took an unconventional approach by emphasizing the systematic nature of German atrocities during World War II. According to the Soviets, both individual members of the Hitlerite Government and the German High Command, were equally, if not more, responsible for these crimes than the rank-and-file soldiers in the field. The Kremlin insisted that Berlin should be held criminally responsible for the actions of authorities in the field and in occupied areas. They argued that these individuals were simply executing official, planned, and premeditated policies outlined in specific and detailed orders given by the government. Consequently, Moscow advocated for the punishment of all involved, regardless of rank or position. This encompassed not only "organizers and executors" such as Hitler, his ministers, and military leaders, but also individual perpetrators of these crimes, regardless of their status. This created a situation where the Soviet government worked towards treating what it saw as "criminals" with punishments enforced by their own military. Molotov's initial denunciation of German atrocities was followed by others, including in a note dated January 6, 1943. This note extensively quoted captured German documents and orders, accusing German authorities of mass looting, destruction, and executions. The soviet belief would be

³⁰ Pohl, 21-61

³¹ Baxter, W. 17-19

that there are facts that prove that the Nazi regime of plunder and bloody terror of non-combatant population of soviet occupied towns and villages created by the individual German officers and soldiers, was previously planned and encouraged by the Nazi Government's high command, which permits and actively encourages brutality towards the Soviet Union. ³²

On 19 April 1943, a Decree of the Supreme Soviet, Article 29 of the Geneva Convention of 1929, prescribed that "German-Fascist criminals guilty of grave crimes against Soviet citizens, were to be punished with death by hanging, and their accomplices, with hard labor" The first use of this decree was done shortly after between July 14 and July 16 where eleven individuals accused to be collaborating with German forces. Eight of them were hanged and three were deported to hard labor. This was often used as a justification in the mass deportations of populations deemed to be "anti-Soviet". According to Soviet authorities, any German found guilty of perpetrating atrocities was no longer considered a soldier or a prisoner of war that could be treated in accordance with the Hague and Geneva agreements. They would upon performing the crime become wanted criminals in soviet territory. Soldiers and officers of the German and Axis armies who were guilty of atrocities against peaceful citizens were not regarded as legitimate soldiers but as bandits and executioners. Which often led to the Soviet government permitting and even encouraging executions without trial by partisans and soviet civilians. ³³

This unique view of partisan and guerilla formations, which would be deemed a war crime and a breach of articles referring to noncombatant by international law, would on the other hand be defended by the Soviets. The Soviet government saw guerilla and civilian combatants as mass popular will and occupied a privileged position as vigilantes and enforcers of law against bandits and criminals. The Soviet military tribunals operated under the same regulations in theory in foreign and own lands. This meant that if a Soviet soldier looted in Poland, he would under military law be punished the same as if he looted in Romania or Germany.

³² Ginsburgs, G. 259-262

³³ Ginsburgs, G. 259-279

This in theory meant that there would be no changes in attitudes based on ethnicity, however in reality this would be proven to not be the case. Citizens from Germany and other axis members were specifically treated poorly compared to other ethnicities. ³⁴

4.3 Soviet War Crimes

"They took rubber truncheons wrapped in barbed wire, they beat until midnight, took a break, during which they violently drove matches under the nails, after which the 'strelki' [i.e., NKVD rank-and-file soldiers] carried me to the cell on a chair. They knocked out teeth and crushed genitals of others." – Polish Railway Worker imprisoned in Lviv³⁵

Already during the early stages of the war in occupied Poland the soviet forces were found to indiscriminately pillage, murder, and rape Polish citizens. Many of the Polish soldiers who fought against the Soviets would be subjected to torture and even executions, a blatant breach of the Geneva convention and Soviet "Regulations on prisoners of war". Soldiers which surrendered and gave up would in breach of international law face torture, executions and beatings. On September 22, 1939, in the Polish city of Grodno where heavy resistance by polish soldiers was found faced heavy punishment. Once Grodno was captured all the remaining 300 defenders that were captured would be executed. With the outbreak of the war between Germany and Soviet Union Many of the deported Poles would be hastily executed in the chaos that ensued in the German invasion of 1941. The reasoning was that the NKVD was fearful of the possible freedom which would await the imprisoned Polish men and women. Prisons in occupied Poland and Soviet border regions housed many forced laborers, one of these prisons in Lviv would see massive executions right after the German Invasion. As many as 10 000 Poles were killed in the first weeks of the German invasion at the hands of the Soviet NKVD. Many were tortured and women were sexually assaulted before being executed. ³⁶

When the Soviet military entered axis-controlled lands, the populations often faced humiliation, widespread looting and rape. This breach of international law such as the mentioned article 46 in regard to protection of citizens in occupied territories would continue

³⁴ Majstorovic, V. 404;

³⁵ Kalbarczyk, S, Spisane czyny. Pamięć o sowieckich zbrodniach.

³⁶ Kalbarczyk, S, Spisane czyny. Pamięć o sowieckich zbrodniach.

throughout the war. They were treated as subjects and conquered spoils of war, many different populations of Hungarians, Poles, Germans, and others had to live through the Soviet brutality that engulfed much of central and eastern Europe.³⁷

Impersonal violence of war created total disregard for human life. Indeed, the soviet armies in 1944-1945 were filled with extreme blood lust and will to bring the war to an end once they reached the doors of Germany. As the war progressed and German intensity kept on dying, the Soviet Officers, soldiers, and sometimes even generals felt that the Nazis were just one grand offensive away from paying back for their crimes and massacres in their homeland. As the Eastern front often was characterized by the idea of a Total war of extermination the soviet soldiers accustomed to this brutality were not planning to stop. The campaigns in Hungary for the Soviets were often infuriating as the alien culture and higher standard of living as well as stubborn defense of major cities in Hungary led the Soviet army into resentment and berserk that created mass looting and rape. It was stated by local correspondents that “it was impossible to go a day without witnessing soviet brutalities”. Hungarian girls were reported to be seized and put into quarters where they were raped repeatedly and often murdered.³⁸

The Yugoslav crimes were so widespread in the start that Yugoslav communist leader Josip Tito organized a meeting with Soviet representative Konev demanding the Soviet army to restrain its plunder. Tito would write to Stalin and complain that the Red Army did not respect Yugoslav authorities and often assaulted Yugoslav women. Yugoslav authorities would find that there were 121 cases of rape where only 10 did not end in murder of the victims. Armed looting was reported to have up to 1204 cases. This came as a shock to the Yugoslavs who barely welcomed the Soviets, as the Soviet armies only entered the northeastern part of the country. Yugoslav protests to Stalin did not result in any serious response in the start, as one account states that Stalin responded with anger “Can’t he understand that if a Soldier who has crossed thousands of kilometers through blood and fire and death has fun with a woman or takes some trifle?”. Stalin is by the same account recorded as to say, “We lecture our soldiers too much.”. Soviet Marshal Konev would also similarly respond by saying “The main culprits were gangs of soviets deserters.” when asked

³⁷ Naimark, M. 1-3; International Committee of the Red Cross, Hague Convention

³⁸ Majstorovic, V. 405-407; Naimark, M. 69-71

about the rapes in Slovakia. To The German communists Stalin was also reported to say, “In Every family there is a black sheep”, eventually becoming angry Stalin would continue by stating “I will not allow anyone to drag the reputation of the Red Army in the mud”. The indifference by the Soviet High Command on issues of crimes in the fronts had a negative impact resulting a much higher toll of brutality than should have been allowed.³⁹

Many of Yugoslav communists were disgusted by what their own allies did to their people in Belgrade, leading to a fear that the Serbian population of Yugoslavia would turn against communism due to the widespread rape and looting of the Soviet Soldiers. Yugoslav government efforts would eventually curtail and create a response from the Soviet high command. General Antonov, Stalin’s deputy would pass an order from Stalin demanding the Soviet forces to treat Yugoslavs well because “they viewed the Red Army as liberators”. Antonov also published a specific incident regarding Soviet Officer trying to rape a Yugoslav female partisan and demanded for the culprits to be found and punished. Yugoslav protests would also impact lower ranking commanders such as Colonel Sidorenko ordering all units under to stop drinking, plundering, and engaging in rape. Regimental commanders were told to use an iron fist when dealing with these offences and Sidorenko’s soldiers were to not leave their units. Still low-ranking soviet officers would sometimes engage in crimes in Yugoslav region, this was especially evident within new units coming from Romania, Hungary, and other fronts briefly into Yugoslavia. These new units would be surprisingly punished by Soviet command stationed in Yugoslavia, but often only in regard to their crimes against the Yugoslavs, as crimes against Hungarian and Romanian populations received rarer punishments. This showcased the possibility of the Soviet Army to at the very least consciously have a chance to limit war crimes if willing, within the army in different regions as well. ⁴⁰

Circumstantial factors made scale of the Soviet War crimes differ in different regions of eastern and central Europe. It seemed that what was regarded as human and enemy determined if the international law would be upheld. Where German, Austrian, and Hungarian women would often hide and change their appearance to escape the gaze of Soviet troops, records by Yugoslav public and female population feared the Soviet army to a much

³⁹ Majstorovic, V. 405-407; Naimark, N. 71

⁴⁰ Naimark, M. 70; Majstorovic, V. 407-408.

lesser extent. Similarly in Bulgaria Soviet attitude to local civilian population was warmer. This was often due to political reasons such as the fact that Bulgaria did not participate in the invasion of the Soviet Union in any major way, and similarly the Bulgarian population has been pro-Russian for a long time which meant that the local population greeted the Soviet Army favorably after switching sides. A good way to see the difference in treatment by the Soviet forces, it is worth noting that according to statistics, between 2420-24 380 women were raped in Yugoslavia, meanwhile in neighboring Romania a figure of 355 200 women was reported to be raped, according to local governments. ⁴¹

The crimes of the Soviet army would turn out to be much worse in occupied Germany. Soviet propaganda by newspapers and individuals demanded that the Soviet soldiers should remember the crimes that the German Army did in Soviet Union, and to humiliate Germany and make it repay for its evil. Soviet propagandist Ilya Ehrenburg would chant “We shall not speak any more. We shall not get excited. We shall kill. If you have not killed at least one German a day, you have wasted that day... If you Kill one German, Kill Another – there is nothing funnier for us than a pile of German corpses.” And “Hang them and watch them struggle in their nooses. Burn their homes to the ground and enjoy the flames.” These chants were printed and spread on the frontlines to the soldiers. Marshal Zhukov ordered the first Belarussian front “Woe to the land of murderers” “We will get our terrible revenge for everything”. For every kilometer the Soviet army came closer to Germany, hatred for everything German intensified. The final directive of the Political Administration of the soviet army stated, “on German soil there is only one master – the Soviet Soldier, that he is both the judge and the punisher for the torments of his fathers and mothers, for the destroyed cities and villages... Remember your friends are not there, there is the next of kin of the killers and oppressors.” Despite Nazi propaganda the German populations were caught in shock and unaware. It was not unusual for the Soviet Troops to rape every female over the age of twelve or thirteen in villages, cities, and countryside, killing many in the process, pillaging the homes for food, alcohol, and loot. Reports of women being subjugated to gang rapes and night rapes are too numerous to have been considered isolated incidents. ⁴²

⁴¹ Majstorovic, V. 399-402

⁴² Naimark, N. 72-73

There is an incident of a Soviet officer by the name of Lev Kopelev trying to stop a group of rampaging soldiers but being accused of “bourgeois humanism”. Marshal of the Soviet Union Rokossovskii in charge of the front would try to restore order to limit berserk behavior and save local villages and buildings from total ruination. It proved to do little as the brutal repression continued in the countryside so much that the German civilians committed suicides en-masse, this was especially prevalent among the female population that suffered mass rape. This oppression continued even after the surrender of German soldiers, and especially rape of German women would often continue at a similar scale. Food was scarce to the German population and reports stated that any woman found wandering in search for food often returned brutally assaulted or often would not return at all. Communist German Mayor Matzowski would comment that “Russian soldiers actually seemed to have permission for every kind of transgression against the Germans.” “Men were beaten, most women were raped, including my seventy-one-year-old mother, who died by Christmas.” There was little to no official statements or punitive action against these crimes and on the contrary the reverse was done with signs and men shouting to “take revenge on the Hitlerite’s” being everywhere. German social democrat August Sander would further state “Soviet soldiers again took their revenge on helpless women and girls, often – as in East Prussia – while under the influence of alcohol. One German village captured on February 26, 1945, was systematically plundered, and virtually all the women were raped.” – “The screams of help from the tortured could be heard day and night”- “Twenty-five to Thirty were left pregnant; some one hundred females contracted some form of sexual disease”.⁴³

Other populations such as Poles and Silesian Slavs were not spared the horrors of the Silesian campaign either. Many Soviet soldiers refused to acknowledge that they were not Germans and probably were indifferent in their rampage. Certain Soviet soldiers would show examples of kindness one report states that a Soviet soldier finding a family planning on committing suicide after their friends and family were raped promised to give them protection. Another statement talks about two soviet soldiers fighting marauding soviet soldiers planning on raping a family. These instances were, however, rare. Polish communist government would worsen the situation by forced expulsion of German population from East German lands that now belonged to the Communist Polish state. The Polish state being subject to the Soviet

⁴³ Naimark, N. 73-74

Union and concerned with their own situation, rarely stepping in to protect the German refugees.⁴⁴

As the conclusion of the war happened the Soviet administration started limited efforts to hold some sort of discipline on the front. Stalin investigated created a communist state in the new German lands and would ask the soldiers to not act with “indiscipline”. Meanwhile Marshal Zhukov would state “Soldiers, make sure that in looking at the hemlines of German girls you don’t look past the reasons the homeland sent you here”. These statements rarely did much and most of the lower ranks would continue their debauchery. Throughout the war the soviet propaganda machine would show the population and soldiers pictures and stories of German crimes in Soviet lands. The soldiers were fuming for revenge. Many soldiers were also resentful of the wealth of western Europe, which was also mentioned earlier in Budapest. One Soviet soldier mentioned “They lived well, these parasites. Great big farms in east Prussia, and pretty posh houses in the towns that hadn’t been burned out or bombed to hell. And look at the datchas here! Why did these people who were living so well have to invade us?”.⁴⁵

5.0 Conclusion

In conclusion I have provided a comprehensive examination of the motivations, methods, and consequences of Soviet deportations and war crimes during World War II. In efforts to showcase the legal definition of what a war crime is I included direct references to sources given by the International Red Cross committee and relevant authors. By showcasing the legal framework of international law, I have provided proof of violations done by the Soviet government in foreign lands they occupied. The explanations given through statements and sources of the Soviet view of these events gave us a quite disregarding view of these laws. Furthermore, due to the chaotic events of the Second World War the Soviet government managed to get away with a lot of these crimes.

By tracing the chronology of events from the early deportations of various ethnicities to the escalation of coordinated deportations during the war, this thesis has highlighted the extreme brutality with which these operations were carried out by the Soviet regime. The Soviet army

⁴⁴ Naimark, N. 75

⁴⁵ Naimark, N. 77-79

rarely respected the individuals and people living in the lands they conquered. Most of the time the people were at best deported to harsh work camps, and at worst tortured and executed. Among the greatest crimes was the repeated sexual assaults on the female population which included teens and even children. These scenes were widespread in many of the regions where the Red Army was present. Countries that fought against Soviets would face the harshest examples of war crimes. Countries such as Poland, Germany, Romania and Hungary often bore the blunt of soviet exploitation. On the other hand, ideological allies such as Yugoslavia would be spared from widespread war crimes on its soil by the Red Army. Upon exploration of the ideological underpinnings of Soviet views on war crimes, we have seen the emphasizing done by the soviet regime and its insistence on holding all perpetrators accountable and seeking a punishment for the Axis forces which is saw as criminals. This was often espoused without fear of widespread brutality that would arise from such statements. Uncaring attitude of the Soviet high command including Stalin and many of the red marshals, showcased a truth about the disregard for human life by the Soviet leadership. By viewing these actions within the broader framework of wartime behavior and ideological indoctrination, this thesis seeks to give an understanding of the complex motivations driving Soviet deportations and war crimes based on revenge and ideological disregard.

Ultimately, I hope my research has given the importance of confronting and acknowledging the atrocities of World War II. My efforts to include different sources with unique backgrounds was to create a clear understanding based on multiple viewpoints about the events during the war. This led me to research different regions of the conflict that lived through these crimes. Writing about these crimes provided an insight into the mentality of the Soviet leadership responsible for these crimes.

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