The 'Chechen Problem': Handling an Awkward Legacy, 1918–1958

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The study of the 'Chechen problem' from the civil war period to the aftermath of the 20th Congress of the CPSU highlights a major topic in recent historiography of the Soviet period: the resistance to the regime. The various ways in which the Chechens resisted sovietisation over several decades provide a fine illustration of the highly complex notion of 'social resistance' in the Soviet Union. In the Chechen case, the manifestation and expression of resistance were rooted either in deeply ingrained social identities, community and tradition or in national and universal strategies of popular collective action. But the 'Chechen problem' also provides a good example of the different reactions and policies of the Soviet state when faced with this kind of 'multi-dimensional' resistance. These policies changed and evolved over the years: armed operations aimed at the 'eradication of Chechen banditry' in the 1920s and 1930s, total deportation in 1944 and, after 1956, the removal of most of the limitations imposed on the 'punished' national group.

A few months before Stalin's death in October 1952, the 9th Department of the Ministry of State Security (MGB) prepared an extensive report on 'The Situation in the Special Settlements'. Among the numerous contingents of special settlers, the report singled out the Chechen-Ingush (deported in 1944 to Kazakhstan and Kirghizia) as 'totally incorrigible'. They

> refuse to work, organize mass disturbances, get involved in fights with local inhabitants, and continue their bandit-like activities, robbing private property and stealing kolkhoz [collective farm] property . . . The most hostile elements are even engaged in clandestine anti-Soviet activities . . . It is particularly difficult to struggle against these people. Police infiltration is hopeless, because the Chechens and the Ingush have a specific genotype and are fanaticized by pan-Islamism.

The report went on to discuss the proposal, sent a few months earlier by the highest authorities of the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) to G. Malenkov, a member of the Politburo and a trusted aide to Stalin, to deport 'further away, to the most distant and remote areas of Kazakhstan, the Chechen and Ingush special settlers

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living around railway stations in cities, who lead a parasitic way of life based on theft and speculation' (altogether no fewer than 37,000 families totalling approximately 125,000 people!). The MGB considered 'a second deportation [to be] inappropriate and useless . . . Deporting these people to ever more remote areas will not solve the problem'.[1]

Clearly, the MGB officials had no answer; nor did Stalin and his closest advisors. Eight years after the Stalinist regime had tried to 'solve the Chechen problem once and forever' (in the words of Bogdan Kobulov, the Deputy Minister of the Interior), the 'problem' remained. The attempt to eliminate the Chechens and the Ingush, their culture, way of life, history and, most of all, their group consciousness by deporting and dispersing them, had failed. With the Khruschev thaw, a new and risky policy – the return of the deported to their homeland – was launched after many discussions. Once again, this policy turned out to be particularly hazardous, especially in the newly reinstated Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) – it led to severe ethnic conflicts with the Russian (and other) colonial settlers who had meanwhile been installed in places previously inhabited by deportees. A major incident occurred in Groznyi, in August 1958, one of the most important 'mass disorders' of the Khruschev era.

Ethnic deportations were, as recent research has shown,[2] a major orientation of Stalinist repressive policies. Over a period of twenty years (from the beginning of the 1930s to the beginning of the 1950s), over three million Soviet citizens were subjected to ethnic-based resettlement. The scope, implementation, context and reasons for these numerous deportations varied considerably, however. It has also been argued that they can be viewed as part of a more general engagement of the Soviet state in population politics which, in various forms and to a varying extent, had been implemented since the second half of the nineteenth century by several European states, and by the Russian empire in particular, in borderlands such as the Caucasus, or 'colonial zones' such as Central Asia, where levels of violence and instability were particularly high.[3] During the Soviet period, three main categories of nationalities were the target of these 'population politics' (which also concerned, of course, a much wider spectrum of 'class' categories, such as 'kulaks', 'socially harmful elements', 'former people', etc.). These were the diaspora nationalities, connected to nation states or large communities outside the Soviet Union (Soviet Germans, Poles, Bulgarians, Greeks, Meskhet Turks); nationalities that resisted sovietisation, that is, the regime's efforts to remake their traditions and reform their cultures and way of life, and did not merge into the new Soviet community (Chechens and Ingush, among

1 V. A. Kozlov and M. E. Kozlova, 'Paternalistkaia utopia i etniceskaia realnost: Cecentsy i Ingusi v Stalinskoï ssylke, 1944–1953', *Vestnik Arxivista*, 3–4 (2003), 259–61.

2 Among recent studies on the subject see T. Martin, *The Affirmative Action empire* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001); Martin, 'Origins of Soviet Ethnic cleansing', *Journal of Modern History*, 70 (1998), 813–61; P. Polian, *Ne po svoei vole* (Moscow, 2002); N. Bugaï and J. Stalinu, *Soglasno vashemu ukazaniju* (Moscow, 1995); N. Bugaï and A. M. Gonov, *Kavkaz. Narody v eselonax* (Moscow, 1998).

3 This point has been convincingly put by Peter Holquist, 'To Count, to Extract, and to Exterminate. Population Statistics and Population Politics in Late Imperial and Soviet Russia', in Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin, eds., *A State of Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 111–44.

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other Northern Caucasus nationalities, belonged to this category); and nationalities that had lived in lands outside Soviet control before and during the Second World War (western Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians). One of the key features of this 'population politics' was, of course, the inheritance from the tsarist period of endemic unstable and unassimilated borderlands. Three major borderland zones, where the population was extremely diverse in its ethno-linguistic and religious composition, largely as a result of centuries of state-sponsored and spontaneous migration, colonisation and forced resettlement, were particularly affected by the Soviet 'ethnic cleansing' enterprise: the Polish–Ukrainian–Russian borderland, the Baltic–Belorussian–Polish borderland and the North Caucasus.

The 'Chechen problem' throws light on several much wider issues which have been recently discussed in the published literature. The first issue is the characterisation of Soviet policies on nationality, and Soviet ethnic cleansing: did traces of racial politics creep into these practices, or was the issue of allegiance the prevailing theme?[4] The second question relates to the civil wars in the borderlands (raised by Alfred Rieber in relation to the Second World War years,[5] but the issue is equally important for the First World War period, immediately followed by the civil wars in the ex-tsarist empire). The third relates to the very complex questions of the use by the Soviet state of ethnic conflicts in the borderlands and of the permanent reshaping of administrative divisions and national identities, especially in these parts of the Soviet Union; the more general question of the forms of 'resistance' – including the remarkable phenomenon of 'social banditry' or 'primitive rebellion' (in the words of Eric Hobsbawm[6]). Finally, how a specific 'second-class' category of Soviet citizens, the 'special settlers', was made, and the 'technology of violence' as revealed in an in-depth study of the preparation and implementation of one of the largest and most condensed ethnic cleansing operations ever performed in the Soviet Union (in the six last days of February 1944, half a million Chechens and Ingush were arrested and sent by goods trains to Kazakhstan and Kirghizia).

Recent research on the 'Chechen problem' – a field explored by a few Russian historians – has been mainly devoted to the central episode of the February 1944 deportation,[7] a first account of which appeared in the 1970s in a book by Alexander Nekrich. The civil war period of the 1920s and 1930s, the years immediately preceding the deportation, the specific problems raised by Chechen and Ingush 'special settlers' in deportation, and the question of their return after 1956, however, have hardly been explored.[8] Answers are now possible, with many new archival

4 See the important debate around these questions in the *Slavic Review*, 61, 1 (Spring 2002), articles by Eric Weitz, Francine Hirsch, Amir Weiner and A. Lemon.

5 Alfred Rieber, 'Civil Wars in the Soviet Union', *Kritika*, 4, 1 (Winter 2003), 129–62.

6 Eric Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, new edn (New York, 1999); Nicolas Werth, 'Les rebelles primitifs en URSS', *Communisme*, 70–71 (2002), 60–91.

7 See the numerous works of N. Bugaï on the subject. See also Norman Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in 20th Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

8 Except by Kozlov and Kozlova, 'Paternalistkaia utopia', and the chapter devoted to the 1958 Groznyi events in V. A. Kozlov, *Massovye bezporiadki v SSSR pri Khrusceve i Brejneve* (Novossibirsk: Iz.Sibirskii Xronograf, 1999).

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sources on some of these topics recently declassified and published in collections of documents, such as the reports (*svodki*) of the Tcheka special troops (for the Civil war) and of the OGPU, or secret police (for the 1920s and the first half of the 1930s). These documents contain interesting, albeit one-sided, information on 'banditry' and 'resistance' to Soviet order during these years. From 1938 on, documents of the Anti-banditry Department of the People's Commisariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) (MVD) shed light on the very complex and unsettled situation in this part of the North Caucasus just before the war, and in the wake of the German penetration into this region in summer 1942. For this decisive period, research in the field is still handicapped by the inaccessibility of military archives kept in the Central Archive of the Ministry of Defence. For the post-deportation period, the vast archival documentation of the Department of Special Settlements of the GULAG[9] is a very rich source of bureaucratic information on the situation of the numerous groups of special settlers, including the Chechens and Ingush, a particularly troubled group. Finally, two archival collections of very different scope and nature (the huge collection of the Procuracy and the much smaller 'Special file' of Nikita Khruschev – a selection of documents sent by the Ministry of the Interior on important matters such as 'mass disturbances') provide some interesting information on ethnic conflicts involving Chechens and Ingush in the mid-1950s, before and during their return from the special settlements.

In the short space of this paper I shall discuss some of these issues relating to the history of the Chechens and Ingush, bearing in mind that the story of the period from the first years of the Soviet regime to the end of the 1950s should, of course, be placed in the more general context of Muslim opposition to Russian imperial rule (eighteenth–nineteenth centuries) along the southern and south-eastern frontier zones from the Crimea to the North Caucasus. The warrior societies of the North Caucasus proved to be the most difficult to conquer and the most persistently rebellious, the Murid uprising under Chamil in the 1850s being the best-known episode of this endless conflict. Indeed, the 1860–4 campaigns in the Caucasus represented a 'major departure in population politics' implemented by the tsarist state.[10]

The White General Denikin characterised the Caucasus as a 'volcano'. This comparison certainly aptly describes the eruption of political and national passions and rivalries, and the upsurge of ethnic conflicts in this region in the years following the Bolshevik revolution. The 'Soviet power' in the North Caucasus, notionally governed by different entities such as the 'Tersk soviet republic', founded in March 1918 in Piatigorsk, and the 'Kubano-Black Sea soviet republic', established the next month in Ekaterinodar, was almost immediately challenged by a Muslim power, the 'Confederation of the Gorski people of the Caucasus', established in May 1918 in Dagestan. This proto-state, whose leader was a Chechen, Tapa Cermoev, placed

9 GARF (State Archive of the Russian Federation), fond. 9479. This immense collection is now available on microfilm at Stanford and Harvard.

10 Holquist, 'To Count, to Extract, and to Exterminate', 118.

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itself under the protection of Turkey and was officially recognized by Germany and other states such as Azerbaïdjan and Georgia which had just gained their independence in these borderlands of the former Russian empire. At the same time, the Cossack minority in the area established its own government, the 'Tersk Provisional government', which at once took an anti-Bolshevik position, making common cause with the Cossack movement already involved in a major conflict with the Bolshevik power. In August 1918 the Terek Cossacks launched a military operation against local Bolshevik forces, succeeding, for a while, in driving the 'Reds' out of the strategic town of Vladikavkaz. Soon, however, the Cossacks had to face a short-lived Bolshevik–Muslim coalition as recurrent ethnic conflicts between Cossacks and Chechens resurfaced, while Stalin's Narkomnats strongly backed the cause of 'the Gorski proletarian masses', with Chamil acknowledged surprisingly as 'a great leader who had fought for dozens of years against tsarism and in the interests of the Gorski people of the Caucasus'. In autumn 1918, under the pressure of Chechen and Ingush armed militias, the Terek Cossacks were driven out from several *stanitsy*.

The balance of forces changed dramatically with the arrival in February–March 1919 in this region of Denikin's White Army. Denikin demanded that the Chechens declare allegiance and send armed units for the White Army, and in exchange promised 'a form of self-government' in the future Russian state. The Chechen representatives gathered on 29 March 1919 in Urus-Martan and formally accepted the conditions presented by General Denikin in person. In the following months, however, none of these demands were implemented. In August 1919 a major insurrection broke out under a Chechen warlord, Cheikh Uzun-Khadji, who proclaimed a 'North Caucasus Emirate', based on the principles of the sharia. In their struggle against Denikin, the armed forces of Cheikh Uzun-Khadji received support from North Caucasus Bolshevik leaders and army commanders. Units from the 5th Red Army, under the command of Nikolaï Gikalo, a major figure of local Bolshevism, joined Cheikh Uzun-Khadji forces in December 1919–February 1920 to drive out Denikin from the North Caucasus.

Victory over the Whites and the sudden death of Cheikh Uzun-Khadji in April 1920 for a very short time gave the Bolsheviks the illusion of controlling the territory. Taking advantage of an apparently favourable situation, the Bolsheviks engaged in ambitious population politics. While the tsarist regime had tried to push out the Muslim mountain people by promoting Cossack settlements, the Bolsheviks tried to reverse this trend by 'punishing' the Cossacks who had joined the 'counter-revolution' and giving their land to Chechens and Ingush. In October–November 1920, following a Politburo decision, Soviet forces burned a Cossack *stanitsa* to the ground, entirely 'cleansed' another one, and deported the entire male population of five *stanitsas* to the north for forced labour (approximately 9,000 families were subject to deportation). Houses and land were to be transferred to Chechen mountain people, 'who have always been faithful to Soviet power', stated the operational order issued by S. Medvedev, in charge of this operation.[11] His statement clearly reveals the

11 For this episode, see *Bolseviskoie Rukovodstvo. Perepiska* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1999), 164–7.

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Bolsheviks' deep misunderstanding of the situation. While Bolshevik leaders built up ambitious plans to reverse the demographic and national situation in the North Caucasus and Central Asia, large insurrections broke out on the ground. In autumn 1920 Imam Nijmutdin Gotsinskii, supported by Saïd Bek, the grandson of Chamil, led a major insurrection which lasted until summer 1921. At its height, the 'Sharia Army of the Gortsy People' numbered over 10,000 horsemen and controlled large towns such as Derbent and Makhackala. The 9th Red Army, under the command of M. K. Levandovskii and the political control of Sergo Ordjonikidze, engaged in massive military operations against so-called 'bandit elements', a term which was widely used at the time for all peasant insurgents, and subjected them to similar harsh military 'eradication', through the use of the most sophisticated modern war techniques (deploying aircraft, heavy artillery and even poison gas).[12] Officially, units of the 'Sharia Army' were completely defeated in June 1921, and 'Soviet power solidly established'.

Judging from the OGPU *svodki* (an important, albeit very specific and one-sided source[13]), throughout the 1920s and 1930s banditry remained an 'endemic disease' in large parts of Chechnia and other areas of the Northern Caucasus, especially in the mountains. According to police statistics, in the years 1921–1941 twelve large insurrections (with between one and five thousand active and armed participants taking part in the action) broke out in Chechnia-Ingushetia. Understanding very little about the inner processes of these warrior Muslim societies, the OGPU 'analysts' tended to reduce many different forms of resistance, social insubordination and deviance to the general phenomenon of 'banditry', categorized into two types: 'political banditry'(*politbanditism*) and 'social banditry' (*bytovoï banditism*). The real question behind the permanent lament about the omnipresent 'Chechen bandit elements' was: what kind of Soviet power could be enforced in a very unstable and unruly region where ethnic conflicts remained strong, and the number of reliable people committed to Bolshevism was very few. 'In 90 per cent of Chechnia and Ingushetia, there is no Soviet power . . . Taxes are not levied, tax collectors are killed or arrested by armed militias and charged with "banditry" by illegal Muslim courts operating in the aouls [fortified villages]'.[14] Another recurring theme was that of the degeneration of the fragile local Soviet and even Party institutions 'perverted by reactionary mullahs'.[15] The general suspicion of the Gortsy people of the Caucasus led the authorities to exclude them from conscription into the Red Army and engagement as policemen in their region.[16]

12 D. Gakaev, *Ocerki politiceskoi istorii Cecni* (Moscow, 1997), 76–80; 'Cecnia:voorujennaia bor'ba v 20-30ye gody', *Voienno-Istoriceskii Zhurnal*, 2 (1997), 118–28.

13 For a critical assessment of this source see N. Werth, ' Une source inédite: les svodki de la Tcheka-OGPU, NKVD', *Revue des Etudes slaves*, 2 (1994), 17–27; N. Werth and G. Moullec, *Rapports secrets soviétiques. La société russe dans les documents confidentiels* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 10–20.

14 Spetzpolitsvodka OGPU 13/216, 15.01. 1923.

15 Otcet o I siezde Sovetov Cecenskoi Avtonomnoi Oblasti (1924) (GARF, 1235/118/5).

16 *Voienno-Istoriceskii Arxiv*, 2 (1997), 124.

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After the reappearance in 1924 of one of the leaders of the 1920–1 insurrection, Imam Nijmutdin Gotsinskii, on 25 August–12 September 1925 Soviet forces conducted a massive military operation throughout Chechnia, aimed at 'extracting the bandit elements'. A total of 242 mountain aouls were disarmed (some 4,000 rifles were seized), and over a hundred villages were bombed by artillery and aircraft. Important figures of the Chechen resistance, including Imam Gotsinskii, were arrested.[17]

The next massive military operation was launched in December 1929, on the eve of the collectivisation and 'dekulakisation' drive. What is remarkable about this operation is that it was implemented as a preventive measure before any major trouble had occurred. Several thousand men (OGPU detachments and regular Red Army troops) were engaged in the 'cleansing and extracting of bandit elements' in several mountainous districts of Chechnia.[18] Hundreds of 'bandits' were arrested and killed. By March–April 1930, although collectivisation was pursued much less vigorously in these unruly North Caucasus mountainous areas (the same can be said about the eastern national regions, except Kazakhstan, where a specific 'de-beysation'[19] had taken place already in the first half of 1929), Red Army troops were fighting ten-day battles with armed bands typically numbering from 200 to 1,000, but in one case including a force of '1,200 bayonets, 400 sabres and artillery'.[20] Armed rebellion continued on a smaller scale during the following two years. One of the largest rebellions, documented in OGPU *svodki*, broke out in Chechnia in March 1932. It involved around 2,000 armed insurgents and was the last of a series of mass uprisings the Soviet state had to face during the collectivisation drive – a phenomenon which was, of course, not limited to the North Caucasus mountainous Muslim societies, but stretched from the west Ukrainian borderlands to Kazakhstan and Central Asia.[21]

According to police and Party reports, from 1932 onwards Chechens engaged in other forms of resistance to sovietisation. One of the 'most vicious forms' was, according to numerous bureaucratic reports, the 'perversion of the kolkhoz principles'. What did the officially proclaimed 'victory of the kolkhoz order' in the Chechen-Ingush ASSR in the second half of the 1930s really look like? The overwhelming majority of the 400 kolkhoz were in fact 'fake-kolkhozy':

> The whole accountancy is false, *trudodni* [workdays] are fictitious, every family or clan keeps cultivating its traditional own piece of land and breeds its own cattle. Cheikhs – leaders of Muslim sects – continue to possess immense herds, and thousands of acres, privately owned, are counted as 'small individual kolkhoz plots'. In order to avoid trouble, most of these fake-kolkhozy manage to 'fulfil just the average percentage of state procurements and taxes', but the whole process is perverted, as it is entirely in the hands of leaders of Muslim sects acting through at least 20,000 Murids [members of Muslim fraternities] ... who allocate everyone's share. Cheikhs and mullahs

17 *Istocnik*, 5 (1995), 140–51; Holquist, 'To Count, to Extract, and to Exterminate', 111.

18 *Voienno-Istoriceskii Arxiv*, 2 (1997), 134–6.

19 That is the 'elimination as a class' of the beys, the local feudal lords.

20 *Voienno-Istoriceskii Arxiv*, 2 (1997), 140; N. Ivnitskii, *Kollektivizatsia i raskulacivanie* (Moscow, 1994), 156–7; *Sovetskaia derevnia glazami VCK-OGPU-NKVD*, 3 (1930–1).

21 On the March 1932 revolt in Chechnia see *Voienno-Istoriceskii Arkhiv*, 2 (1997), 113–18.

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are all formally members of kolkhozy, but they do not work. These '*kolkhozniki*' live at the expense and work of others ... Here, the kolkhoz remains an empty shell.[22]

In 1937, in the course of the implementation of the infamous NKVD Order No. 00447 of 30 July 1937 (which launched on a grand scale the largest of all the 'mass repressive actions' of the 'Great Terror' of 1937–8), the Chechen-Ingush ASSR, like all other regions of the USSR, was allotted its 'quotas' of people 'to be suppressed in the first category' (shot) and in 'the second category ' (ten years' confinement in a labour camp). Surprisingly, at first sight, the proposals sent by local NKVD and Party leaders of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR, and agreed upon by the Politburo and the NKVD headquarters in Moscow, were very modest in comparison with other 'turbulent' areas, such as the Northern Caucasus, Central Asia or Western Siberia. In Chechnia-Ingushetia, 500 people labelled 'ex-kulaks', 'criminals', 'bandits' and 'counter-revolutionary clergy' were to be suppressed 'in the first category', and 1,500 in the 'second category'. In comparison with the population of the republic (approximately 700,000), the proportion of targeted 'enemies' (0.3 per cent) was much lower than in, for example, Dagestan, (0.6 per cent), Turkmenistan (0.6 per cent) or Western Siberia (0.7 per cent). These surprisingly low figures for Chechnia-Ingushetia were in fact largely due, in the words of a NKVD official, 'to our poor *agentura* and insufficient intelligence networks'.[23] In view of the situation local NKVD and Party authorities in Chechnia-Ingushetia did not ask for any 'supplementary quotas' (as most did in other areas of the USSR). Moreover, they seemed to be incapable of fulfilling even the initial quotas, because of the resistance to NKVD forces in the process of the 'mass operation'. 'The Chechen-Ingush ASSR', wrote the newly appointed NKVD chief in Groznyi (February 1938), 'is the *only* place in the USSR where banditry is still active, especially in its overtly counter-revolutionary form, and capable of putting up armed resistance to our troops'.[24] Between February and December 1938 the NKVD reported nearly a hundred 'bandit raids'. In mid-July, the newly appointed first secretary of the Party regional committee, F. P. Bykov, sent a rather forceful telegram to the central committee in Moscow, asking for the setting up of a new *troïka* (three-man extrajudicial tribunal) to 'liquidate banditry once and for ever in the next four–five months'.[25] Judging from the numerous reports of the Anti-banditry NKVD Department for 1939–40, the situation remained tense in several parts of Chechnia-Ingushetia, even if the number of 'identified' gangs and bandits was not very high (around a hundred gangs and a few thousand bandits). Meanwhile, however, the Soviet authorities managed to carry out two important operations, whose results would have significant implications in the future: the population censuses of 1937 and 1939. The detailed information contained in the census, on individuals, their place of residence, occupation and nationality, was to be

22 GARF, 9479/1/925/3-20. I am grateful to Pavel Polian, who gave me a copy of this report ('A Short Historical Note on the Political and Economic Situation of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR, 1937–1944', 27 Aug. 1956).

23 GARF, 9478/1s/2/38.

24 Ibid., 9478/1s/2/30.

25 RGANI, 89/73/147/7.

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used – together with pieces of *agentura* gathered over the years by the NKVD – in the course of the preparation of the February 1944 deportations. Clearly, despite the fact that Chechnia-Ingushetia was being permanently singled out as a particularly unruly territory, surveillance and control was slowly improving over time.

As war against Nazi Germany broke out, the local authorities in Chechnia-Ingushetia were faced with the problem of mobilisation. Until 1938, the Chechens and Ingush were systematically excluded from military conscription, but from 1939, thousands were drafted according to new military rules. In the second half of 1941, over 22,000 men were to be taken into the Red Army, but less than a half actually appeared at the *voienkomaty* (military commissariat). This proportion went down to only a third in the first quarter of 1942. In April 1942 the Ministry of Defence issued an order stopping the conscription of Chechens and Ingush into the Red Army. However, a few months later, the same ministry allowed 3,000 volunteers to be levied from the Chechen-Ingush Republic.[26] Meanwhile, military and police operations against 'gangs of bandits and deserters' continued. In late 1941, three new 'bandit leaders' (Xasan Israilov, Mairbek Seripov and Imam Djavotkhan Murtazaliev) emerged in the course of a large insurrection and within six months controlled several mountainous districts. The German penetration into the Kuban and parts of the Northern Caucasus (excluding Chechnia-Ingushetia), and the disarray of Soviet authorities, stimulated the formation of new bands as well as a series of assassinations of party and NKVD personnel. In summer 1942 most of the kolkhozy (which were, for the large part, 'fake-kolkhozy') disintegrated. The situation became chaotic. Later on, the NKVD accused the 'bandit leaders' of close contacts with German 'diversionist forces' parachuted into the area in autumn 1942, and of having created 'fascist parties', such as 'The National Socialist Party of the Caucasian Brothers' (led by Xasan Israilov) or 'The National Socialist Underground Chechen Group' (led by Mairbek Seripov). These very dubious labels were clearly invented by the NKVD report compilers. Another accusation, put forward to 'justify' the deportation of half a million people in February 1944, was that 'practically every single Chechen and Ingush took an active part in terrorism and banditry against the Soviet power and the Red Army'. The reports of the NKVD Anti-banditry Department show, however, that the numbers involved in 'bands' remained in the range of a few thousands, which had been a fairly constant figure over the previous two decades.[27]

The preparation and implementation of the deportation of the Chechens and Ingush at the end of February 1944 is amply documented.[28] I shall underline here its most remarkable features. The preparation of this grand operation (half a million people were to be deported) took nearly a year. The initial resettlement plans changed several times, as the Novossibirsk, Krasnoiarsk, Omsk and Altaï régional Party authorities refused to accept a new batch of deportees – especially Chechens, who had

26 GARF 9478/1s/8, 32–33; GARF, 9479/1/925/10–12.

27 GARF, 9478/1s/42/70–71.

28 Among numerous studies on the subject see Bugaï, op.cit; Bugaï and Gonov, *Kavkaz*; Polian, *Ne po svoei vole*.

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a particularly bad reputation and were considered a poor workforce. Finally, after long negotiations involving half a dozen central economic ministries, the NKVD central and regional branches, and regional Party authorities, Kirgizstan and Kazakhstan had to accept this new wave of deportees, after having negotiated more funds and money from Moscow to 'accommodate' and 'put to work' these 'special settlers'. These long negotiations were not unusual following the catastrophic experiment of 'deportation and abandonment' carried out during the first stages of 'dekulakisation' (1930–1). The mass deportations of Poles (in 1940) and Germans (in 1941–2) had raised similar issues. However, the resettlement of such 'unruly contingents' as those coming from the North Caucasus provoked considerable fear and anxiety at all levels of the bureaucratic machineries.

Police identity checks of people to be deported, based, in part, on the 1939 census, including scattered communities of Chechens and Ingush in Dagestan and Vladikavkaz, some of whom were even officers and soldiers serving in the Soviet Army, and the locating of 'socially harmful' and 'bandit' elements to be arrested preventatively also took several months. The logistical preparations were meticulously planned and overseen personally by Lavrenty Beria, chief of the Soviet security and police apparatus, and his two deputies, Ivan Serov and Bogdan Kobulov, all of whom travelled to Groznyi on several occasions (between October 1943 and February 1944) to supervise the operation in its final stage. Stalin was kept informed on a daily basis of the progress of this highly organized operation. A total of 194 convoys of goods trains were to transport some 495,000 men, women and children. Some 119,000 soldiers and officers of special NKVD units were mobilized for the deportation, constituting an unusually high ratio of troops to people to be arrested and deported, determined by the special nature of the situation.[29] A large part of the NKVD units mobilized for 'Lentil' (the code name of the operation) had just successfully completed the deportation of approximately 100,000 Kalmyks.[30] The whole operation was to last no more than a week – three days for the arrest and loading in convoys of 300,000 people in non-mountainous parts of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR, and four days for the arrest and loading of the remaining 200,000 people in the mountainous parts.[31] This huge deportation bore three main characteristics of other twentieth-century ethnic cleansing: 'a hierarchy in the structure of command, a sealed-up theatre of

29 For 'ordinary families, without men listed on the police records' the ratio was: one 'operational group', consisting of four men, for the arrest of two families; for 'elements on police records' the ratio was one 'operational group' for the arrest of two 'elements'.

30 The Kalmyks were the first national minority of the Caucasus to suffer mass deportation during the Second World War. The Kalmyks suffered terribly from both the German occupation and the Soviet return. They supplied fighters to both sides: 20,000 men to the Red Army and 5,000 cavalry placed under German command. After Stalingrad, the rapid reconquest of the region led to a contest between the advocates of rehabilitation (mainly local party officials) and the NKVD, which won in the end. In October 1943, the Politburo approved Beria's recommendation for deportation as a punishment for fighting against the Red Army.

31 See the documents on the preparation of the February 1944 deportation in N. Sidorenko, *Istoriceskii Arkhiv*, 4 (2000), 35–52.

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operations and a culture of impunity'.[32] Deportees had an hour or so to gather a few of their belongings (100 kg per family) before being herded onto trucks and then into sealed unheated goods trucks. According to the daily reports sent by Beria to Stalin, the whole operation was a 'remarkable success from the logistical and organisational point of view': at the end of the first day of the operation (23 February), 333,739 people had been arrested, and 176,950 had already departed to Kazakhstan; only three 'minor incidents' had been registered that day.[33] The end of the operation, however, saw several 'major problems' occur. Because of bad weather conditions in mountainous and isolated parts of Chechnia, some NKVD squads got stuck with their herd of victims. Several massacres were perpetrated in the Galançjoïskii district, where the NKVD's General Gvichiani was in charge of the deportation. Estimates of the numbers of people (mostly elderly persons, women and children) 'liquidated' in this district, in the words of an alleged report from Gvichiani to Beria,[34] vary between 100 and 700. In the course of the deportation, over 3,000 'bandits' were arrested and 600 killed while resisting, and over 20,000 fire weapons were confiscated.[35] On arrival after a journey of three weeks to a month to Kazakhstan or Kirghizia, in the course of which, according to official figures, 1,361 out the 494,456 people deported died (1,070 more being 'taken to hospital during the journey'),[36] the deportees were dispatched, generally in groups of two to five thousand people, to kolkhozy, *sovkhozy*, forestries, construction sites, mines and factories. According to the 'plan of relocation' prepared by the GULAG Department of Special Settlements, in Kazakhstan 309,000 deportees were to be sent to kolkhozy, 42,000 to *sovkhozy* and 49,000 to industrial sites.[37] Uprooted from their homes and environment, they faced not only appalling living conditions in the so-called 'special settlement villages', but also enormous difficulties in adapting themselves to a totally new, and generally very hard and hostile, social, ethnic and working environment.

The archives of the Special Settlements Department provide interesting information on these living conditions in the first stages of resettlement. First, the rates of mortality among the deportees: a first general registration of deported Chechen and Ingush, in January 1945, showed that 55,000 deportees (11 per cent of the total) had 'disappeared'. Most of them had died, but around 15–20,000 had fled.[38] From January to April 1945, another 16,262 died (while only 540 were born),[39] a figure which represents an annual death rate of 15 per cent. In October 1948, a general report of the Special Settlements Department calculated that, of the people deported in 1943–4 from the Caucasus and Crimea, nearly one in four had died by mid-1948,

32 For an analysis of these characteristics, see Jacques Sémelin, 'Analysis of a Mass Crime: Ethnic Cleansing in the Former Yugoslavia, 1991–1999', in Ben Kiernan and Robert Gellately, eds., *Genocide in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 353–72.

33 Bugaï, op.cit., 153–4.

34 See the discussion about this report in N. Sidorenko, art.cit; see also Polian, *Ne po svoei vole*, 123.

35 GARF, 9401/2/64/161.

36 GARF, 9401/2/1/325–8.

37 GARF, 9479/1/182/65–8.

38 GARF, 9479/1/640/4–10.

39 V. N. Zemskov, *Spetzposelentsy v SSSR, 1930–1960* (Moscow: Nauka, 2003), 119.

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a period of just over four years. While 200,000 had died, only 35,000 were born. However, this trend was changing: as time passed, births were catching up.[40] Lack of food, epidemics (typhus in 1945–6), and an absence of medical care were the main visible causes for this very high mortality rate.

Reports written in summer 1944 emphasized the situation of conflict created in many Kazakh and Russian kolkhozy and small towns, both by the fact that most of the deportees had been billeted in houses already occupied by local people (in bureaucratic jargon this practice was called *uplotnenie*)[41] and by widespread prejudice towards the deportees.[42] Rumours spread about 'Chechen bandits' having 'cut the throat' of several kolkhoz chairmen. All this led to numerous incidents involving fights and beating. This tense situation further deteriorated as the local administration tended to divert, for the needs of 'its own people', the meagre funds allotted for the 'installation' of the deportees. In May–June 1944 a special commission, headed by Krouglov, the Vice-Minister of the Interior, was sent to Kazakhstan by order of the highest Party authorities in Moscow to check the situation of the deportees from the North Caucasus, and to 'fight against the numerous excesses and errors in the treatment of special settlers by local administrations'. After having deported hundreds of thousands of people in extremely harsh conditions because of their 'wrong' nationality, the most senior police officials played the game of a 'paternalistic utopia' (in the words of V. Kozlov), sending orders to Moscow, to different economic ministries, for 'urgent allocation of one million metres of cotton cloth to North Caucasus deportees' and dismissing local bureaucrats for their 'inhuman attitude towards the special settlers ... and their total misunderstanding of the national characteristics of the resettlement of people from the North Caucasus'.[43] What was the 'misunderstanding' about? At the highest level, the first objective was to keep a tight, bureaucratic control over the situation at a time when the overall numbers of special settlers exploded, over three million people having been deported since 1940. 'Excesses' of all kinds, leading to inter-ethnic conflicts (which were at the root of the problems in Northern Caucasus) were to be avoided. 'Excesses' could only crystallise national identities and cultures and threaten the realisation of the central objectives of the deportation: the extinction of national cultures and 'ethnic characteristics' in the vastness of the alien Kazakh or Kirghiz 'special settlements'. Following the deportation, a series of measures were taken to eradicate the national cultures of the 'punished nations': the Chechen-Ingush ASSR (as well as all administrative units of other 'punished' nationalities) was suppressed, place names changed, and the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia was purged of Chechen national figures in a far-reaching

40 Ibid., 193, 197. In 1945 there were twenty times as many deaths as births; in 1946, three times as many; in 1947 and 1948, 1.5 time as many; by 1949 the trend was reversed: births exceeded deaths by 40 per cent.

41 According to the 'plan of relocation' sent by Nasedkin, head of the Gulag, to Beria on 29 February 1944, the great majority of the deportees (75 per cent) were to be billeted in houses occupied by local *kolkhozniki*; the others were to occupy 'empty buildings of all kinds' (GARF, 9479/1/182/65).

42 Kozlov and Kozlova, 'Paternalistkaia utopia', 232.

43 Ibid., 235.

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attempt to wipe out Chechen and Ingush territories, culture, history and group consciousness. Deported children (45 per cent of the deportees were under 16), when given a place in the few schools organized in the 'special settlements', were to be taught in Russian.[44]

However, reports from the Special Settlements Department for the second half of the 1940s clearly reveal not dispersal and integration (that is what the authorities hoped would happen) but rather consolidation and cohesion among the deported Chechen and Ingush communities. This cohesion took several 'traditional' forms: the strong authority of the 'elders' set up as self-appointed 'judges' in local communities; systematic refusal to enter into mixed marriages (despite the fact that for a female 'special settler' to marry a 'free' citizen was the only way to be reinstated as a full Soviet citizen); active mutual aid; activisation of the Murid fraternities and religious sects; and, finally, a very efficient system of collective self-defence, based on the oath, taken by every member of the community, not to denounce anyone to 'the Russians'.[45] MVD documents also reported numerous forms of social insubordination such as collective refusal to work, intimidation and threats against local officials, illegal appropriation of kolkhoz plots of land and, above all, 'permanent infringement of laws regulating the special settlers' (the obligation to report every ten days to the local *kommandatura*, the prohibition on travelling further than a few miles and so on). The MVD found it particularly difficult to recruit informers and *agentura* among influential members of the community. Out of the thousand mullahs approached by MVD agents, only 170 were considered 'politically reliable to influence positively the masses'![46] For the police authorities, the main problem remained the 'very low percentage of special settlers regularly reporting at the *kommandatury*' and the 'great number of deportees illegally wandering around markets, railway stations and in town squares, leading a parasitic way of life and creating in these places an insecure atmosphere'.[47]

Altogether, noted a report, 'these people are firmly convinced that Soviet power continues the Russian tsarist policy, acting even more ruthlessly, trying to crush the pride and honour of the Chechen people. Everything is viewed in terms of an ancestral ethnic conflict between the Russians and the Caucasian people'.[48] The only note of optimism came from a report written in summer 1946, just after the suppression of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR (decreed on 7 March 1944) had been announced in the press. According to MVD reports written at that time, 'after this announcement, the Chechens and Ingush finally lost hope of going back and resigned themselves to settling their lives in Kazakhstan and Kirghizia'.

44 However, this regulation was not always implemented, since many of the teachers were Chechens. Reports regularly complain that many children are taught in koranic circles by mullahs (see, for example, GARF, 9479/1/183, 45).

45 Kozlov and Kozlova, 'Paternalistkaia utopia', 239–45.

46 Ibid., 247.

47 GARF, 9479/1/294/65.

48 GARF, 9479/1/292/128.

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At the beginning of 1948, from many aspects, a turning point in the post-war years,[49] the central authorities decided to strengthen control over the special settlers. A decree of the Council of Ministries of the USSR (21 February 1948) ordered the MVD to tighten the surveillance of the special settlers, to reinforce 'the struggle against banditry and crime in the special settlements' and to put everyone to 'productive work'. In the following months many inspections were carried out; they discovered that, in the case of the deported people from Northern Caucasus in particular, between 10 and 15 per cent of the special settlers had simply 'vanished' (this was, of course, not counting the 'registered deaths'); an even larger proportion hardly ever reported to the *kommandatury*. The alarming results of these inspections served as a justification for the very harsh decree passed on 26 November 1948 by the Praesidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. This decree considerably increased the sanctions for special settlers who fled their places of confinement or who infringed the innumerable regulations governing the 'special settlements'. Penalties were as high as twenty to twenty-five years of forced labour. Another very important part of the decree stated that the people deported between 1941 and 1945 as 'special settlers' would retain their status 'in perpetuity'. Thus every member of the 'punished nation' seemed to be identified 'as a carrier of the same suspect traits that he or she transmitted, necessarily, to the next generation'.[50] Considering this specific aspect of Stalinist ethnic cleansing, Eric Weitz argued that 'racial logic was at work' and that 'traces of racial politics crept into Soviet nationalities policies'.[51] In an important debate over these issues[52] Francine Hirsch challenged this argument, arguing that the Soviet regime did not persecute nationalities because of suspected 'biological weaknesses' and did not aspire to eliminate races, genotypes or racial traits. Its aim was to control and eradicate all national features that did not fit into the global project of the Soviet empire of nations, disrupted the ongoing Soviet community-structuring enterprise and delayed the realisation of the communist utopia. Based on the conviction that nationalities, like classes, were sociohistorical groups with a shared consciousness and not racial-biological groups, the Soviet regime's treatment of targeted nationalities was rather, argued Francine Hirsch, 'a form of ethno-historical excision'. It was their national, cultural and historical identities that the regime sought to eradicate rather than the physical existence of every member of the community.[53]

But what if these people did *not* merge into the Soviet community or did *not* comply with the rules and if the bureaucratic system of surveillance did *not* work? One (desperate) solution was simply to pretend, as Krouglov, the head of the MVD did, when reporting to Stalin, that 'the situation is totally under control' and that

49 After the postwar crisis of 1946–7 (marked by terrible economic difficulties, a widespread famine and relatively loose control over a society that during the war had gained some 'breathing space'), the following years saw both economic recovery and a tightening of political control in most spheres of social, economic and cultural life, in a very tense international context.

50 Eric Weitz, 'Racial Politics without the Concept of Race', *Slavic Review*, 61, 1 (Spring 2002), 18.

51 Ibid., 3.

52 See note 4.

53 Francine Hirsch, art. cit., 40.

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'thanks to the decree of 26 November 1948, the special settlers have understood that they have no alternative and they are now starting to work conscientiously, to settle their lives accordingly to their new status of deportees in perpetuity'.[54] However, many other sources, including internal police reports, give a very different picture of the situation. Despite the draconian edict of 26 November 1948, during the following year 'only' 1,932 runaways were sentenced to twenty years of forced labour. This was due not to the fact that there were fewer runaways (more than 16,000 were caught by the police that year), but because of the chaotic state of the records kept in the *kommandatury*.[55] In April 1950 Stalin finally decided to transfer to the MGB the whole administration and management of the 'special settlers', the MVD 'having failed in the task of improving the surveillance and the economic exploitation of the workforce'.[56] In August 1950 the Minister of State Security of the Kazakh SSR, A. Byzov, sent an alarming report to Abakoumov about the 'numerous problems created by deportees from the Northern Caucasus and the Chechens-Ingush in particular'. Among the most serious problems were the 'permanent ethnic conflicts' occurring in towns with a large concentration of deportees from Chechnia and Ingushetia, such as Karaganda (16,000 deportees), Leninogorsk (6,500), Alma-Ata (4,500), Akmolinsk (4,500), Pavlodar (3,000) and Kzyl-Orda (3,000). In some of these places the deportee communities were so united and impervious to authority that the local police forces did not even venture into 'Chechen territory' as local inhabitants called these special settlements where Soviet order was 'outlawed'.[57] The situation did not improve in the following years, as the whole system of the GULAG and of the 'special settlements', at its height, entered into a deep crisis. In 1952 the highest authorities of the Kazakh SSR sent to Malenkov the memorandum quoted at the beginning of this article, suggesting a kind of 'second deportation', into the depths of the Kazakh steppe, of a large part of the Chechen and Ingush special settlers who had managed to 'gather in larger cities, small district centres and around the railway stations', leading a 'parasitic way of life' while many stock farm kolkhozy and *sovkhozy* in remote parts of Kazakhstan were badly lacking manpower. According to the 'official accountancy' of the Special Settlements Department, approximately 75 per cent of the deportees from Chechnia-Ingushetia were assigned to agriculture. In fact, a much smaller proportion worked in kolkhozy and *sovkhozy*. The record keeping of the *kommandatury* clearly remained very problematical, despite the numerous bureaucratic campaigns undertaken to improve it. MGB officials continued to be particularly worried by the strong religious influence exerted by the Muslim authorities on the Chechen special settler communities, through the Murid fraternities; however, according to police sources, the mullahs themselves considered that the younger generation was being progressively 'assimilated' by 'Soviet culture'.

54 Kozlov and Kozlova, 'Paternalistkaia utopia', 256.
55 Ibid., 254.
56 GARF, 9401/2/269/347.
57 GARF, 9479/1/548/56–75; Kozlov and Kozlova, 'Paternalistkaia utopia', 258–9.

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After Stalin's death, hope arose that something might change in the status of the deportees, and grew after the press announced that Beria had been arrested as a spy and a traitor. A flow of petitions immediately followed. Those who had been deported on Beria's order in 1943 or 1944 took an active part in this petitioning; first among them were the Chechens. It was easy to argue that all these deportations, 'decided by Beria', had been 'terrible mistakes' or even worse, 'wrecking of the Soviet principles of national community building'.[58] While petitions of this kind were sent to the central authorities, the newly appointed MVD officials prepared several projects on the dismantlement of the 'special settlements'. As a first step, 1.8 out of the 2.8 million 'special settlers' were to be relieved of their status (but not allowed to return to their homeland). Significantly, deportees from the Northern Caucasus were not on the first list.[59] The long process of breaking up the 'special settlements' has been studied by V. Zemskov,[60] and I shall only briefly mention here some of the main measures related to the Chechens and Ingush. They were (with the Karatchaïs) one of the last categories of deportees to be relieved of the status of 'special settlers' by the decree of 16 July 1956, taken by the Praesidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, one year after the 'ex-kulaks', deported in 1930–3, of whom by 1955 fewer than 12,000 still remained in deportation, and eight months after the Soviet citizens of German origin, the largest contingent of 'special settlers' – more than 800,000, had been freed. In June 1956, the Minister of the Interior, Dudorov, wrote in a memorandum to Khruschev:

> Considering that most of the territory inhabited by the Chechens and Ingush before their deportation is now occupied by colonists, restoring the Chechen-Ingush autonomy to its previous boundaries is unrealistic. The return of these people to their previous homes will inevitably create a lot of trouble and will have many undesirable consequences.

Dudorov proposed to create an autonomous Chechen-Ingush region in Kazakhstan or in Kirghizia. This proposal was rejected, but the decree of 16 July 1956 clearly specified that the suppression of the status of 'special settler' did not mean that the deportees had the right to return to their homeland (nor were they entitled to any compensation). Deportees were asked to sign a paper stating that they would not go back and would not claim any compensation. It is remarkable that as many as one third of the deported Chechens and Ingush refused to sign this undertaking.[61] Tensions arose and many incidents with a strong ethnic component broke out, coinciding with the mass arrival in Kazakhstan of young Russian 'volunteers' recruited in the course of the 'Virgin Soils campaign' in 1954–6. Of the twenty-four important ethnic incidents reported by the MVD to Khrushchev between 1953 and 1960 (peaking in 1954–7), Chechens and Ingush were involved in nineteen. Most of these incidents

58 See the text of one of the numerous petitions signed by Chechens in *Rehabilitatsia. Kak eto bylo* (Moscow: Fond Demokratia, 2002), 45.
59 Zemskov, *Spetzposelentsy*, 228.
60 Ibid., 233.
61 Ibid., 254.

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took place in Kazakhstan, and Central Asia (especially in Kirghizia).[62] It is at this tense point – marked also by mass refusals of the deportees to sign an undertaking not to go home and the increase in interethnic conflicts in Kazakhstan – that the central authorities finally decided to restore the Chechen-Ingush ASSR (by a decree taken on 7 January 1957 by the Praesidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR), more or less with its previous boundaries (still, with about 15 per cent of the previous territory 'exchanged' with neighbouring Dagestan, North Ossetia and Georgia). Deportees were now allowed to return to their restored homeland. However, their return was to be organised and supervised by a special committee set up for this purpose. In the following months, tens of thousands started leaving 'spontaneously', creating a panic among the Russian colonial settlers in Chechnia-Ingushetia. At the beginning of April 1957 Dudorov ordered the police to prevent Chechens and Ingush rushing back home by intercepting, at railway stations and on trains, all those who were travelling without the authorisation delivered by the special committee. Tens of thousands, who had sold everything, and left their jobs and their homes in Kazakhstan or Central Asia, were removed from trains and got stuck at railway stations for weeks, and sometimes months. In these conditions, many incidents broke out, as hundreds (sometimes thousands) of desperate and angry people besieged the Party *raikom*, hoping to get at last the authorisation to move on. Concerning those who had not yet left, MVD issued special instructions to local authorities asking them to stop the departure of the deportees by all administrative measures at their disposal. Only those who left with an authorisation of the special committee were to receive some financial aid.[63]

As a result of all these measures, the 'spontaneous flow' of departures was in the second half of 1957 curbed for a short time. It resumed in 1958. By the beginning of 1959, the great majority of those who wished to go back, and they made up the overwhelming majority of the deportees from Northern Caucasus, had left. This contrasted with other nationalities, such as Soviet Germans for example, many of whom settled in the places to which they had been deported. The return of hundreds of thousands created innumerable problems. The authorities of the Chechen-Ingush ASSR had to organise, in a matter of months, the transfer of a large number of colonists brought in during the second half of the 1940s from Ossetia, Dagestan, Ukraine and Russia. Willingness or the desire to leave varied considerably: according to MVD sources, colonists from Dagestan were particularly anxious to leave; by April 1957, over 60,000 people had been transferred back to Dagestan (3.6 times more than the numbers initially planned).[64] But many Russian colonists were in a mood to resist. Numerous petitions were sent 'in the name of the Russian people' to Khruschev, Bulganin and Vorochilov, calling for 'help and interference' from the Soviet state. One of these petitions, sent by *kolkhozniki* of the village of Bukovka, claimed that the Chechens and Ingush who had come back from Kazakhstan 'just laugh at our

62 See in particular Kozlov, *Massovye bezporiadki*, ch. 3, esp. 100–4.
63 Ibid., 107–10.
64 Kozlov, *Massovye bezporiadki*, 130.

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achievements and our culture . . . try to convince us that private property – something that we have forgotten about long ago – is a good thing'. The Chechens and Ingush say that

> we shall change everything and organize things according to our habits. The land is ours, Russians have nothing to do here. We shall rule our own republic and shall bring back our Caucasian order. Everyone prays to God, mullahs rule . . . Our Russian women and children are terrorized . . . We, the Russian people, ask for your help and intervention in order to stop the counterrevolutionary actions of the Chechens and Ingush and to defuse this atom bomb full of lethal poison which represents a permanent menace against the Russians and our state . . . The Chechens say openly: we shall never live together with the Russians and the Dagestanis, two wolves cannot live together in a lair, one of the two people should be removed. We await your decision and your help.[65]

The 'Chechen problem', in the second half of the 1950s as in the previous decades, was not only a matter of 'high politics'; it was deeply rooted in the collective consciousness and in inter-ethnic conflicts at ground level. In 1957–8, the central authorities tried as hard as they could to avoid 'excesses' and to promote, once again, a kind of 'bureaucratic utopia', convinced that, by moving people from one place to another, the situation should settle down 'by itself'. At this stage, the trouble was to come from the 'masses'. It erupted not in the rural areas, where pressure was the strongest, but in the imperial capital of Chechnia, Groznyi, a town where Russians had always constituted the majority of the population. The 'mass disturbances' in Groznyi occurred at the end of August 1958. A typical fight between Russians and Chechens ended tragically, a Russian worker being killed by two Chechens (23 August). The funeral, attended by several thousand people, developed into a spontaneous political meeting, directed first against 'the Chechens who kill the Russians', but also against the local authorities. The *Obkom* and the KGB building were ransacked. The leaders of this riot prepared a resolution, stating that

> 1 – From this day, 27 August 1958, the Chechen-Ingush ASSR should be named Groznyi region. 2 – Chechen and Ingush should be allowed to live in this region in a proportion not exceeding 10 per cent of the total population of the region . . . Suppress all the specific grants and benefits given by the government to the Chechens and Ingush.

This resolution was to be transmitted to Khruschev, as the rioters demanded 'to be given direct telephone contact with Moscow'. After two days of chaos order was finally re-established on 29 August. Sixty-four 'rioters' were arrested. During the events, thirty-two people had been injured and two were killed. Inter-ethnic tensions did not, however, develop into a full-scale pogrom directed against the Chechen minority. They led to protests against the local authorities, which took exactly the same 'traditional' form as the urban riots which erupted in the Soviet Union at regular intervals. Significantly, the Groznyi riots were the only event of the kind to be put on the agenda of a central committee plenum (in September 1958).[66] No political solution, however, was put forward; the regional authorities were simply

65 Complaint from the Russian people of the village of Bukovka, Novoselskii district, Checheno-Ingush ASSR, 24 April 1957, in ibid., 126.

66 Ibid., 153. The Groznyi events are described in detail, ibid., 132–150.

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blamed for 'having been incapable of co-ordinating their actions' and 'having lost contact with the party activists and the working class'. This was the only reaction to the 'Chechen problem' at the time.

Conclusion

The study of the 'Chechen problem' highlights a major topic in the recent historiography of the Soviet period: the resistance to the regime. Recent work on the topic derives chiefly from new evidence surfacing in previously classified archival holdings, although the story of popular resistance in the Stalinist 1930s is not entirely new.[67] Over the past fifteen years or so the increasing interest in social history, in 'history viewed from below', but also in the history of the USSR as 'a state of nations'[68] has given rise to research on the spaces of impermeability in the regime, the zones of autonomy of socio-demographic behaviour, strategies of circumvention and survival, the character of deviancy, forms of social insubordination, opposition, dissent and passive or active resistance.

In many ways the questions raised by historians studying the forms and modalities of Soviet society's opposition and 'resistance' to the grip of the regime refer to a debate central to the historiography of Nazism. This revolves around the notions of *widerstand* (active and determined resistance to the regime) and *resistenz* (all behaviour revealing a limit to the total grip of the regime). The vast majority of historians of Soviet society have implicitly adopted the functionalist, behavioural and societal concept of *resistenz*, introduced for National Socialism by Martin Broszat.[69] This approach has enabled them to integrate a vast palette of collective and individual social behaviour in their analyses, moving from partial refusal to the most active forms of resistance, via various degrees of protest, dissent or social insubordination.[70]

The various ways in which the Chechens resisted sovietisation over several decades provide a fine illustration of the highly complex notion of 'social resistance' in the Soviet Union. In the Chechen case the manifestation and expression of resistance were rooted either in deeply ingrained social identities, community and tradition or in national and universal strategies of popular collective action. Nationality, whether consciously and politically expressed as nationalism, or simply evoked in customary behaviour, dress and speech, was construed as resistance.

But the 'Chechen problem' also provides a good example of the different reactions and policies of the Soviet state when faced with this kind of 'multi-dimensional'

67 Merle Fainsod's classic *Smolensk Under Soviet Rule* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958) provided many instances of popular resistance.

68 See Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin, eds., *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

69 For a discussion of these notions of *widerstand* and *resistenz*, see Ian Kershaw, *Qu'est-ce que le nazisme? Problèmes et perspectives d'interprétation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), esp. 284–333.

70 See Nicolas Werth, 'Forms of Autonomy in Socialist Society', in Henry Rousso, ed., *Stalinism and Nazism. History and Memory Compared*, (Lincoln, NE, and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), 111–42; werth, 'La résistance du social dans l'URSS stalinienne', in F. Marcot, ed., *Les résistances, miroir des régimes d'oppression* (Besançon: Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2006), 62–84.

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resistance. These policies changed and evolved over the years: from armed operations aimed at the 'eradication of Chechen banditry' in the 1920s and 1930s, to total deportation in 1944, and, following 1956, the removal of most of the limitations imposed on the 'punished' national group, and, more important, of all 'traces of racial politics' (Eric Weitz) which had crept into the Soviet system in the mid-1940s. During the postwar years, the period of 'late Stalinism', the regime came to define stigmatised groups as the bearers of an inherited, and sometimes immutable, essence that might not be marked by skin colour or biology, but had a cultural form so deep-seated that it was transmitted automatically and inevitably through the generations.

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