

GLIMPSES OF THE PAST

NKVD AND GESTAPO
—PARTNERS
BY
VOCATION

This is an extract from the book of reminiscences by Margarete Buber-Neumann, entitled *Als Gefangene bei Hitler und Stalin*, brought out in Frankfurt on the Main in 1949.

Neumann's book was followed by other memoirs, but until recently, the statements they contained were not confirmed by documents. It is common knowledge that it is still not so easy to get access to our archives, but in Germany one could easily get to them. Austrian historian Hans Schafranek picked out of the "Politisches Archiv aus Würtigen Amtes" of the German Foreign Ministry corresponding nazi documents and published them in his book *Zwischen NKVD und Gestapo*, (ISP Verlag, 1990, Frankfurt am Main). So, at last now there is a source where one can learn the details of Stalin-Hitler games before and after the pact.

BEFORE THE PACT

The extradition of Germans arrested by the NKVD is usually associated with the 1939 pact. But owing to Hans Schafranek's study in the archives it becomes absolutely clear that intensive deportation (isolated cases happened even before) started early in 1937. So, even before the pact a few hundred people were sent from the Soviet Union to Germany, the total number of extradited and deported people was about one thousand.

How did it happen? Early in the autumn of 1936 German Ambassador von der Schulenburg conveyed to Molotov and Litvinov the wish of his government that German nationals under investigation by the NKVD, who pleaded non-guilty, or those against whom there was no sufficient evidence, be deported from the USSR. In November 1936 von Schulenburg appealed to Litvinov again, asking him to find out the fate of arrested Germans. Litvinov informs about 22 cases, and what's more, all of them are accused either of "espionage" or "subversive nazi activity". But the Soviet side makes it clear for the first time that deportation is possible.

Early in 1937 Krestinsky, Deputy People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs, informs Schulenburg that ten people are being deported from the USSR to Germany under the verdict of the Special Conference (a kind of a military court).

In practice the procedure is the following: the German Embassy appeals to the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs and, after that, its officials contact the NKVD. In its reports to Berlin the embassy keeps complaining of the difficulties—no sooner a contact is established with some Soviet official during the talks about deportation, than he disappears immediately "on a prolonged leave". Nevertheless, deportation continues more or less intensively. The German Embassy sends the lists to the Commissariat. In reply, it provides the German side with other names, and, no matter how hard the nazis try to guess the reason for deporting one or another particular person, they cannot understand the logic of the NKVD. Among the deportees are "specialists", political émigrés (quite often the German authorities had no idea that these people were in the USSR) and people who had lived in Russia for decades. They had one thing in common—all were arrested. How did the deportees take their sentence? There were people who believed that it was better to serve the sentence at home, regarded the sentence fair and even insisted on being deported. But quite often it was regarded as a tragedy. The German counsellor who was allowed to call on the deportees in the presence of staff members of the NKVD and People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs reported the following: "Pfeiffer, completely worn out from being in prison, declared straight away that he could not return to Germany because he was a communist and would be arrested there immediately."

Naturally, Pfeiffer was deported and his future is unknown. On the other hand, well-known (from the report of Berlin's Gestapo, kept in the same "Politisches Archiv...") is the fate of an-

How antifascists were transferred from Soviet to German prisons

December 1939. "We were 28 men and three women... All our faces seemed stiff with fear. We stood and looked at the railway bridge that separated nazi-occupied Poland and the part of it occupied by Russians. A military officer moved slowly towards us across the bridge. When he came closer, I saw his SS cap. The NKVD and SS officers saluted each other. The Soviet officer took out a list from a narrow light-brown case and began to call out names. At that moment three of our group moved aside, rushed to the NKVD-man and began to emotionally explain something to him. Someone next to me whispered: 'They refuse to cross the bridge!' One of the three was an émigré Jew from Hungary, two others were Germans: König, a teacher, and a young worker from Dresden, who had participated in an armed skirmish against the nazis, fled to Soviet Russia and, in Germany, was sentenced to capital punishment in absentia. Of course, all three were urged to cross the bridge..."

other deportee—lithographer Otto Walther, who had been residing in Leningrad since 1908. He spent many months in prison, later was deported and, immediately on his arrival in Berlin, jumped out of the window of the boardinghouse where he lived.

Sometimes a person was deported without being arrested. This is what happened to the popular German actor Erwin Geschonneck. In the German theatre in Odessa in 1937 he played the role of an NKVD investigator who succeeded in uncovering a sabotage. But the NKVD staged its own plays: the company was broken up, Geschonneck was expelled from the party and in three days deported from the USSR to be placed, after some time, in a concentration camp in his own country.

FROM STALIN TO HITLER
ACROSS THE BRIDGE

The situation with deportations changes after the 1939 pact. Now the German Embassy no longer asks and doesn't act overcautiously, but demands saying: "...genuine friendly relations between the Third Reich and the USSR are incompatible with so many German subjects being kept in Soviet jails" (it concerned about 500 people). On November 11, 1939, in reply to Schulenburg's insistent demands, the then Deputy People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs Potyomkin asks him to directly appeal to Stalin and Molotov. On October 14, 1939, Schulenburg was received by Molotov who assured him he would take up this matter.

The German Embassy doesn't mention names, doesn't demand concrete persons, so the NKVD could use its discretion. Finally, a corresponding agreement is being signed on November 27 and the first group—a Christmas present of the NKVD to the Gestapo—is being deported.

Now it is no longer a matter of mere deportation but a direct handing over. Prior to 1939 a deportee was issued a passport, although with a short-term visa. There was a chance to run away en route since there is no common border with

Germany. After the pact, no passports were issued, except a document common for all extradited persons. An NKVD officer handed it over to his Gestapo counterpart on the bridge in Brest-Litovsk, together with the persons mentioned in the document. In 1937-1938 people were deported by the sentence of the Special Conference after an investigation, whereas in 1939 only those were extradited, who had already spent from 2 to 3 years in Soviet prisons and camps. Emaciated people from the camps and prisons are transported from Orel and Yaroslavl, from Norilsk and Vorkuta and put in special cells of the Butyrka prison. They are given extra food, some clothes and prepared for the extradition. Just as it was in 1937 and 1938, these cells are now more stuffed with those who had every reason to fear the Gestapo. But this time the NKVD did not hesitate at all. At first the German side refused to accept Jews and denaturalized persons, but the NKVD insisted. Not to delay the extradition process, they agreed to accept all, moreover, if the nazi Foreign Ministry hesitated about communists and denaturalized persons, the Gestapo became interested in them.

From December 1939 to April 1941 the NKVD and Gestapo established contacts which resemble a game when partners sitting around a table try to cheat one another.

In his book of reminiscences, *Hexensabbat*, well-known physicist Alexander Weissberg-Cybulski describes the atmosphere reigning in special cells: "Those kept in these cells were under the pressure of two repressive organizations, they still feared the NKVD and were already afraid of the Gestapo. A single imprudent word could spark persecutions from the Soviet side. On the other hand, too great devotion to the communist regime a few weeks later caused persecutions by the Gestapo. One had to be overcautious not only because informers of the NKVD but also future informers of the Gestapo could be planted in these cells. With their treachery they were already prepared to buy the Germans' trust."

It is hard to imagine what happened to the people who got into these devilish circumstances. Those prepared for extradition to Germany were compelled, so to say, to become NKVD agents, to sign forged money receipts. Those who refused were threatened with compromising material about them (if it concerned communists) to be sent to the Gestapo. There are proofs that such materials were really placed at the disposal of the Gestapo. Gertrud Meyer, a German communist deported from the USSR, writes in her reminiscences that when she was interrogated by the Gestapo she realized they had information about her life and work in the Soviet Union, which could be obtained only from the NKVD.

ACROSS THE LINE OF
DEMARCATATION

As soon as the pact on non-aggression and the partition of Poland was signed, the SD (Sicherheitsdienst) in Warsaw and Krakow acted on the instructions of the Imperial Security Ministry to enter into close contact with the NKVD services in Peremyshl and Brest to guarantee safe crossing of the border by extradited persons.

If extradition really caused "no problems", the so-called resettlement didn't go so smoothly. Very little is known in our country about the monstrous episodes of this resettlement, because the war that broke out shortly later covered up everything. What happened in reality? Under the agreement signed by Germany and the Soviet Union on November 16, 1939, people of German origin from the Soviet-occupied Polish territory were moved to Germany, and the Ukrainians and Byelorussians from the general governorship were deported to the USSR.

On the German side this job was done by the resettlement team mainly consisting of SS-men. For two months it had acted quite freely in the Soviet-occupied zone of Poland and controlled, together with corresponding services of the NKVD, the deportation of many thousands of people—Germans by birth. Much greater complications arose with reverse resettlement of, say, Ukrainians who did not dream at all of moving to the USSR. But the most terrible lot was in store for many thousands of Jews residing in those places. The Soviet as well as the German authorities tried to "shove" into the trains, ready to depart, thousands of Jews or, without notifying the other side, simply push them over the line of demarcation.

On December 5, 1939, Colonel-General Keitel reported to the German Foreign Ministry: "The deportation of Jews to the Russian territory was not as smooth as was probably expected. What really happened was that in a quiet forest one thousand Jews were deported across the Russian border, 15 km from that place they return again to the border accompanied by a Russian officer who wanted to make his German counterpart take them back."

The German archives still keep the text of the conversation between SS official Otto Gustav Wächter and the chief Soviet representative Vladimir Yegnarov (Major-General Yegnarov was transferred to the reserve from the MVD in July 1956). Asked if he wanted to accept the Jews, as there is no anti-Semitism in Soviet Russia, Mr. Yegnarov replied in the negative and added: "In our country we shall find other ways of eliminating Jews".

The war that broke out in June 1941 put an end to this "peaceful cooperation". Many German emigrants earmarked for extradition could not be transported to Moscow from distant camps because they had to spend there another ten years. But those extradited had different fates. There were clear-cut instructions in Germany on that score: those with compromising material against them were sent to a concentration camp; people whose reputation was not spoiled and who had a suitable age were called up to the Wehrmacht. The Jews were undoubtedly to be deported to ghettos and from there to a death camp.

In his book Hans Schafranek tried to describe the lives of many Germans and Austrians deported and extradited by the NKVD. For the umpteenth time the pages of our history are being opened in the West, and it is high time for us to start doing it likewise.

Irina SHCHERBAKOVA

Address: "MOSCOW NEWS", 16/2 Tverskaya St., MOSCOW, 103829, USSR.
TELEPHONES: 229-81-86 (information), 209-17-47 and 202-85-52 (letters),
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