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Stalinism and Nazism

Stalin Handed Hundreds of Communists Over to Hitler

- Features -

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During the 1930s, many communists and socialists from Germany and Austria sought refuge from the Nazis in the USSR. But in a shocking betrayal, the Soviet secret police handed over hundreds of them to Hitler's Gestapo.

The Soviet Union's 1936 constitution afforded "the right of asylum to foreign citizens persecuted for defending the interests of the working people." But Soviet authorities shamefully broke this promise when dealing with hundreds of German and Austrian exiles, handing them over to the Nazis from the late 1930s on. The victims included veteran revolutionaries, Jewish communists, and militant anti-fascists.

One of the deportees was the German communist Margarete Buber-Neumann. Her memoir, published in 1949 in English with the title *Under Two Dictators: Prisoner of Stalin and Hitler*, is probably the best-known account by one of the deportees. Buber-Neumann described the moment that Soviet officials transferred her to Nazi custody with twenty-nine others:

> At last the train came to a halt, and for the last time we heard the familiar shout: "Get ready. With things." The compartment doors were unlocked . . . a little distance away was a station. We could just see the name on a nearby signal box: Brest-Litovsk.

Buber-Neumann went on to recall watching a group of men from the Soviet secret police — the NKVD, still often referred to by its old name as the GPU — cross the bridge into German territory and return after a while: "There were SS officers with them. The SS commandant and the GPU chief saluted each other." The Soviet commander began to read out the names of the prisoners:

> One of them was a Jewish emigrant from Hungary, another was a young worker from Dresden, who had been mixed up in a clash with Nazis in 1933 as a result of which a Nazi had been killed. He had succeeded in escaping to Soviet Russia. At the trial, the others had put all the blame on him, knowing, or, rather, thinking, him safe in the Soviet Union. His fate was certain.

Seeking Refuge From Hitler

Born in 1901, Buber-Neumann had joined Germany's communist youth movement in 1921 and the senior party, the KPD, five years later. From 1928 onward, she worked for the journal of the Communist International, *Inprekorr*. There she met Heinz Neumann, a member of the KPD leadership, and the two became partners. After the Nazis seized power in Berlin, they both sought refuge in the Soviet Union.

But the purges launched by Josef Stalin in the late 1930s turned the USSR into a place of mortal danger for German Communists. The NKVD arrested Heinz Neumann on trumped-up charges of espionage and executed him on November 26, 1937. They imprisoned Margarete Buber-Neumann as well and eventually deported her in 1940 to

Nazi Germany.

Several different groups of German citizens were living in the Soviet Union at the time. Some had come there for work. Many in this category had communist sympathies but were not necessarily party members. Then there were the political exiles, Communists, and other anti-fascists, including Austrians who had officially become German citizens after the Nazi annexation of Austria in 1938. Others had acquired Soviet citizenship.

Information on the fate of these people is spread out over multiple archives, some of which are still inaccessible to researchers. It is thus difficult to be sure how many people suffered the same fate as Buber-Neumann. A conservative estimate is that over six hundred were deported or expelled.

Franz Koritschoner's Fate

The exiles sent to Nazi Germany included veterans of the Communist movement such as Franz Koritschoner. Born in Austria-Hungary in 1892, this young Jewish socialist had opposed support for the war effort by Social Democratic parties after 1914. In 1916, Koritschoner met Vladimir Lenin during the Kienthal Conference, a gathering of revolutionary antiwar socialists.

Koritschoner went on to play a leading role in the Austro-Hungarian strikes and protests of January 1918. The same year, he joined the newly founded Communist Party of Austria (KPÖ). Koritschoner edited the KPÖ's journal and translated works by Lenin, who addressed him as a "dear friend." From 1918 to 1924, Koritschoner was a member of the KPÖ's central committee.

In the late 1920s, he went to the Soviet Union to work for the Red International of Labor Unions (Profintern), joining the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1930. The NKVD arrested Koritschoner in 1936, accusing him of being a counterrevolutionary. The Soviet authorities decided to hand him to the Gestapo in April 1941.

We know a little about the last weeks of Koritschoner's life because he shared a cell with Hans Landauer, a member of the International Brigades who survived the war. According to Landauer, Koritschoner was a gravely weakened figure, bearing scars from the torture he had received at the hands of the NKVD and the Gestapo. He had no teeth left, telling Landauer he had lost them because of scurvy in a labor camp in the Soviet far north. On June 7, 1941, the Nazis sent Koritschoner to Auschwitz, where he was killed two days later.

Betrayal of the Schutzbündler

The purges that swept through the Soviet Union under Stalin's rule affected ever wider circles of people. One group that fell victim were former members of the Austrian *Schutzbund*, or Republican Defense League, the paramilitary wing of the Austrian Social Democratic Party.

On March 4, 1933, the Austrian chancellor, Engelbert Dollfuß, suspended parliament and inaugurated a fascist regime. In February 1934, members of the Schutzbund took up arms against the new system, but they were no match for the government army's heavy weaponry. Around two hundred lost their lives in the fighting or were summarily executed.

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The Communist movement celebrated the resistance of the Schutzbund, and the Soviet Union offered them asylum. Many Schutzbund members, disappointed by the lack of militancy that Social Democracy displayed in the face of fascism, joined the Communist Party. Some 750 Schutzbündler went into exile in the USSR.

However, just a few years later, their Social Democratic past made them a target for persecution. While around half left the Soviet Union, most of the remaining Schutzbündler became victims of the purges. The NKVD deported many of those who survived to Nazi Germany.

A group of twenty-five deportees transferred in December 1939 included ten Schutzbündler. One of them was Georg Bogner. He had fought during the February 1934 uprising in his hometown of Attnang-Puchheim before fleeing to the Soviet Union. The Soviet secret police arrested Bogner in 1938. By late December 1939, he was in the custody of the German intelligence service, the Sicherheitsdienst, in Warsaw. What happened to him next is unknown.

Before the Pact

In August 1939, the Soviet Union signed a nonaggression pact with Nazi Germany. A week later, the Wehrmacht invaded Poland. Soon afterward, Soviet forces attacked the country from the East. Before the fighting was over, the two governments had agreed to the "German-Soviet Border and Friendship Treaty" in September of that year.

The agreement went beyond a mutual promise of nonaggression: the parties pledged not to support a coalition directed against the other, and to exchange information "concerning mutual interests." There were also secret protocols added to the treaties whereby Moscow and Berlin divided the territory of the Baltic states and Poland between them. [1] The Soviet Union did not officially admit the existence of these protocols until 1989.

Many considered the deportation of anti-fascists to Nazi Germany to have been linked to the friendship treaty. Margarete Buber-Neumann saw them in this light, as "Stalin's gift to Hitler," and other writers have used the same metaphor. However, the connection between the deportations and the pact appears to have been less direct than this would suggest.

The Soviet Union had already deported anti-fascist prisoners to Nazi Germany before the pact was signed. In 1937–38, some sixty exiles, with Jews and Communists among them, were deported. The deportees included a young man named Ernst Fabisch.

Born in Breslau to a Jewish family in 1910, Fabisch had joined the Communist Party of Germany (Opposition), or KPO, when he was nineteen. Led by Heinrich Brandler and August Thalheimer, the KPO was a communist current that formed part of the so-called "Right Opposition" in the movement, associated with Soviet politicians such as Nikolai Bukharin, Stalin's last major rival. It rejected the KPD's sectarian hostility toward Social Democrats and other socialists and argued for unity against fascism.

After the arrests of leading KPO members by the Nazis in 1933, Fabisch joined the new, underground leadership, many of whom were arrested in turn by 1934. He escaped to the Soviet Union but was soon in danger again. The NKVD arrested Fabisch in 1937 and deported him to Germany the following year. The Gestapo immediately took Fabisch into custody, and he was killed in Auschwitz in 1943.

Patterns of Complicity

As there was no direct border connecting the Soviet Union with Nazi Germany at this time, their respective authorities coordinated the travel of prisoners between the two states. Soviet officials gave them passes that were only valid for travel toward Germany and informed their Nazi counterparts of the names and backgrounds of the deportees. Such files, which can be found today in the archives of the German embassy and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, are an important source of information on the victims.

The deportations did not begin with the signing of the Hitler-Stalin Pact and the carving up of Poland, and the fate of such prisoners does not seem to have been part of the discussions between Moscow and Berlin. However, the number of deportations did increase in number from that point.

Most of those deported in this period were political exiles, reflecting the profile of those Germans and Austrians who had remained in the Soviet Union up to this stage. Sometimes the German authorities requested the deportation of particular individuals. At other times, however, the Nazis did not seem very interested in the deportees.

Documents from the German embassy that the Austrian historian Hans Schafranek cites in his book *Zwischen NKWD und Gestapo* illustrate the latter point. In the majority of cases, the deportations happened without any reciprocal gesture by the Nazis to transfer prisoners sought by the Soviet authorities. The deportations continued into May 1941, just weeks before Operation Barbarossa, when relations between the two states were already deteriorating.

The impulse behind the deportations was primarily internal to the Soviet system. Stalin's purges had begun as an attack on a well-defined group of people: communists who were seen as potential supporters of the opposition. Over time, the use of torture and other forms of pressure to coerce suspects into naming names combined with a generalized atmosphere of paranoia and distrust and the bureaucratic imperative of arrest quotas to widen the number of targets inexorably.

Fantasies and Fabrications

The accusations against alleged traitors and spies grew ever more bizarre. A former leader of the KPD's paramilitary wing, the Roter Frontkämpferbund, was supposed to have organized a terrorist "Trotskyite-fascist" organization. Soviet officials even accused the children of exiled communists of forming an underground Hitler Youth.

As a rule, foreign communists like Heinz Neumann faced charges of being in the pay of their respective "home countries." Stalin disbanded the Polish Communist Party in 1938 and had its members executed or sent to the Gulag, accusing them of working simultaneously as agents for the Warsaw government and Leon Trotsky. As historian Hermann Weber pointed out, out of forty-three top leaders of the KPD, more died in the custody of the Soviet secret police than were killed by the Nazis. Hundreds of German exiles were executed straightaway, while many others died in prison camps.

Born in 1887, Hugo Eberlein was a founding member of the KPD. He had replaced Rosa Luxemburg as the party's representative at the founding congress of the Communist International in 1919. Eberlein arrived in the Soviet Union in 1936, but he was arrested the following year for allegedly engaging in "terrorist activity" on behalf of the Nazis.

A letter to his wife that was later found in the NKVD archives described his ordeal, forced to stand constantly while

being interrogated "for ten days and nights without pause," denied the opportunity to sleep, and receiving hardly any food. The guards beat Eberlein relentlessly: "On my back there was no skin left, only the naked flesh. For weeks I couldn't hear in one ear and one eye was blind for weeks." The NKVD finally killed him on October 16, 1941.

Victims of a Witch Hunt

Buber-Neumann, Fabisch, Bogner, Eberlein, and many others were victims of a witch hunt. Their ultimate fate depended on arbitrary bureaucratic decisions. In several hundred cases, the Soviet authorities chose to let the Nazis deal with the victims rather than doing it themselves.

The Nazis sent Margarete Buber-Neumann to the Ravensbrück concentration camp for women. In April 1945, with the regime collapsing, she was released. Afraid that she might be arrested again by Soviet officials as the Red Army advanced, Buber-Neumann made her way 150 kilometers to the west, where US troops were the main occupying force.

Buber-Neumann died in 1989, a few weeks before the fall of the Berlin Wall. She had become a right-wing conservative, arguing that her own experience showed that fascism and communism were ideologies of similar criminality. If socialists want to counter such arguments today, we cannot ignore these shameful case histories. Our own understanding of socialism should keep its promises and have human dignity at its core. We owe the victims nothing less.

*Source: 22 August 2021 **Jacobin**.*

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[1] https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110994.pdf?v=61e7656de6c925c23144a7f96330517d