"Forced Repatriation to the Soviet Union: The Secret Betrayal"

Nikolai Tolstoy

Editor's Preview: At the end of World War II, two million Russians—including White Russians, Cossacks, Slovenians, Croats and Serbs who were POWs or simply living in exile—were forcibly repatriated to the Soviet Union. Men, women and children were turned over to the Russian secret police at gunpoint. Non-Soviet citizens were supposedly exempt, but historian Count Nikolai Tolstoy charges that they were secretly betrayed by a few key military officials, a future British prime minister among them.

This tragedy, although nearly a half-century old, ought not be forgotten. What happened in 1944-47 was more than a sinister episode. Even in this era of 'glasnost,' the Soviet Union still denies freedom of emigration, one of the most fundamental human rights, to its people.

Our thanks to the U.S. Business and Industrial Council who co-sponsored this Shavano Institute for National Leadership lecture on the Hillsdale campus in the fall of 1987.

The last world war was a long time ago, and for many of us, even those with first-hand experience, it does indeed seem to have become a distant memory. Yet some images remain vivid. Only a child at the time, I remember the London bombing raids as if they happened yesterday. But the particular experience which has occupied much of my adult concern, oddly enough, involves a story which I understood very little of in the 1940s or for many years afterward. I had heard people talking about it in the Russian church where emigres and refugees gathered in London, but the rest, for me, came later. Though the story is over forty years old and may not be widely known, it is one which continues to gain in significance—and tragedy.

Prisoners of War

In 1941, after the demise of the brief cynical alliance between Hitler and Stalin, Germany invaded Russia and advanced very swiftly. The German forces took several million prisoners in the first three months of their offensive. Mistakenly, many of these prisoners and the inhabitants of the invaded regions regarded the Germans as liberators who were expected to overthrow the hated Stalin and restore their freedom. Some surrendered Russian Army units marched to meet their supposed liberators with bands playing, and Nazi propaganda films depict Russian peasants cheering as the German troops paraded through their villages in flower-strewn glory.

What happened to the Russian POWs after that, however, was far from glorious. They were thrown into wired camps on the open steppe. During the cruel winter of 1941-42, without shelter or proper food, millions died. This is a Nazi war crime, undeniably, but it is not one which should be laid exclusively at Hitler's door.

During World War I, Russian prisoners received the same treatment as the British, French and American troops; they were all signatories of the Hague Convention. Ironically, it was not Imperial Russia under Czar Nicholas II which refused to be bound by the Hague agreement but the new Soviet regime which supplanted it in 1917. Twelve years later, the world powers reached a more detailed agreement, the Geneva Convention, but the Soviets remained aloof. Throughout World War II, Russian POWs were completely unprotected. Except on a few rare occasions, the Red Cross was forbidden to enter the camps and Stalin refused to discuss the issue even though Germany urged Red Cross intervention.

Often with nothing but a barbed wire fence to separate them, the beleaguered Russians were forced to watch their British, French and American counterparts receive food parcels, clothing and letters from home. Still on record in the British Foreign Office are documents discussing requests from White Russian immigrants in Britain who pleaded for permission to help their countrymen. Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden said, in effect, "Well, for some reason which we know nothing about, Stalin is determined that nothing should be done for the Russian prisoners" and nothing
Russians. For those who recalled his brutal Africa, work as forced labor in Germany. Great soldiers captured was in reality a sorts of reasons, not the least of which was six million a problem. They had no way of assessing enemy army. Estimated that one out of every ten German citizen. or anywhere else, for that matter, but huge numbers of refugees fled eastward for all sorts of reasons, not the least of which was to get out of the line of fire during the German retreat.

Consequently, at the war's end, some six million Soviet citizens were located in Central Europe. The Allies were completely unable to comprehend the scale of such a problem. They had no way of assessing how many Russians were inside Germany or anywhere else, for that matter, but huge numbers of them showed up in North Africa, Persia, Normandy, and Italy too. During the D-Day invasion in June 1944, British and American military authorities estimated that one out of every ten German soldiers captured was in reality a Soviet citizen. Of all the nations in Europe, the USSR was the only one to witness nearly a million of its subjects enlisting in the enemy army.

Many of the Russian prisoners were transported to Britain and were held in training camps originally used for British officers. Of politics, most of these men knew nothing. All their lives they had been harried hither and thither in the name of confused ideologies by commanders whose languages more often than not they could not understand. Among the more educated, knowledge of their precarious situation only contributed to a typically fatalistic attitude.

**“Eden’s detailed plan for forcible repatriation was formulated before Stalin or any Soviet official had raised the issue.”**

Soon the British authorities received their first glimpse of what it meant to be faced with the possibility of compulsory return to the world’s first Marxist state: Russian POW suicides began in July of 1944. The matter was brought before the British Cabinet (the Americans were only marginally involved at this time because they had been delivering all captured Russians into British hands), but already the decision had been made: All Russian POWs would be returned to the Soviet Union, whatever the fate in store for them.

One member of the government who spoke up for the unfortunate prisoners was Lord Selborne, then Minister of Economic Warfare, who was also responsible for occupied Europe’s sabotage and espionage operations under the Special Operations Executive. Russian-speaking officers under his direction recorded dozens of appalling stories of suffering from the POWs. Common to all of them was an absolute dread of returning to the Soviet Union. They were certain that they would be killed or, at the very least, sentenced to the unspeakable horrors of the labor camps. Selborne wrote to Winston Churchill, who promised to consider the matter again. But at a second Cabinet meeting, Selborne, not being a Cabinet Minister, was barred from presenting his evidence and Anthony Eden was able to convince the Prime Minister that all Russian POWs must be repatriated, forcibly if necessary.

**About the Author**

Count Nikolai Tolstoy, heir to the senior line of the world-famous literary family, is the author of a number of books, including *The Minister and the Massacres*, *Victims of Yalta*, *Stalin’s Secret War*, *The Tolstoy’s Twenty Four Generations of Russian History*, *The Quest for Merlin*, and, *The Coming of the King: The First Book of Merlin*. He is president of the Association for a Free Russia and the Soviet Prisoners in Afghanistan Rescue Committee. Inquiries regarding the forced repatriation defense case mentioned in this essay may be directed to Messrs. Rubenstein Callingham, Z, Raymond Buildings, Gray’s Inn, London, WC1R 5BZ, England.

**Return to the USSR**

In December of 1944, the first shipload of Soviet soldiers sailed around the North Cape of Murmansk by the White Sea. Nothingly overtly terrible was witnessed on this occasion, but rumors of the fate that awaited the Russians abounded and were verified later by first-hand and other reliable accounts of mass executions in abandoned quayside warehouses and factories. The prisoners were marched to these after disembarking and divesting themselves of the clothes and possessions the Allies had given them. Many were allowed to live, and were sent to “educational” camps. Regarding the other group however, here is one British observer’s account:

The disembarkation started at 1830 hrs. and continued for 4 ½ hrs. The Soviet authorities refused to accept any of the stretcher cases as such and even the patients who were dying were made to walk off the ship carrying their own baggage. Two people only were carried off, one man with his right leg amputated and left one broken, and the other unconscious. The prisoner who had attempted suicide was very roughly handled and his wound opened up and was allowed to bleed. He was taken off the ship and marched behind a packing case on the docks; a shot was then heard, but nothing more was seen. The other 32 prisoners were marched or dragged into a warehouse 50 yards from the ship and after a lapse of 15 minutes, automatic fire was heard coming from the warehouse; twenty minutes later a covered lorry drove out of the warehouse and headed towards the town. Later I had a chance to glance into the warehouse when no one was around and found the cobbled floor stained dark in several places around the sides and the walls badly chipped for about five feet up. These were not the only victims in this incident. Altogether, about 150 Russians were separated from the rest and marched behind sheds on the quayside. There they were massacred by executioners, many of whom appeared to be youths aged between 14 and 16.
Repatriation Policy

It must be remembered that the early debate over the Russian prisoners had been won on Eden's insistence (1) that it was vital to placate the Soviet government if British POWs liberated in Russian-controlled zones were to be safely returned and (2) that Stalin would not help them win the war unless his demands were met. What is surely suspicious, however, is the fact that Eden's detailed plan for forcible repatriation was formulated before Stalin or any other Soviet official had raised the issue.

When Churchill and Eden traveled to Moscow in October 1944 to meet with Stalin, the Foreign Secretary offered the unconditional return of all Russian POWs. To Vyacheslav Molotov's suggestion that Soviet citizens should be returned regardless of their personal wishes, Eden replied that he had no objection. At Yalta in February of 1945, however, the Americans balked. All prisoners captured in German uniforms were considered protected by the provisions of the Geneva Convention. U.S. Secretary of State Cordell Hull telegraphed a message to Ambassador Averell Harriman in Moscow the previous September to state unequivocally what had been American policy since December of 1943: No Russian POW could be returned by force. After the Yalta Conference it was agreed, however, that those designated as Soviet citizens would be forcibly repatriated.* With the surrender of the Nazis in May of 1945, the logistics of repatriation became much easier. The repatriation candidates had either been repatriated or had escaped, often with the help of sympathetic Allied soldiers, including officers, who provided them with false papers or simply looked the other way at the right moment.

In 1946 and 1947, the policy known in Italy as Operation Keelhaul was typical. Unlike earlier repatriation efforts carried out in the chaotic final days of the war, Operation Keelhaul was very carefully executed. The officers who actually conducted the screening felt privately that it was up to them to shield as many Russians as possible. But it was made clear to them that they were to fill their 'quota,' else the SMERSH agents would take things into their own hands.

In May of 1947, Operation East Wind handed over its final contingent of repatriates, bringing the long sad story of forced repatriation to a close, for the moment. Ironically enough, another simultaneous operation in the British Army, code name Highland Fling, was assisting Soviet soldiers to defect as the Cold War commenced.

Forced Non-Soviet Repatriation

Over thirty years later, I wrote a book on the history of forced repatriation called Victims of Yalta, which appeared in the U.S. as The Secret Betrayal. At the time, I thought that my research, based on numerous documents and eyewitness accounts, had also drawn to a close. I never dreamed that within a decade, I would be publishing an even longer book on a single repatriation operation.

The new book, The Minister and the Massacres (1986), describes the fate of some 40,000 Cossacks, White Russians, Slovenes, Croats and Serbs, including many women and children, who were interned in Austria after the British military authorities accepted their surrender in 1945. One group, the Fifteenth Cossack Cavalry Corps, had been fighting in Yugoslavia against Tito. Large numbers within this group and others were not Soviet citizens. They had escaped Russia during or before the Revolution, rescued in British and French warships. They had taken new citizenship or possessed League of Nations passports attesting to their stateless status.

Throughout the repatriation campaign, both British and American authorities had adhered to an extremely legalistic view of their obligations. Even the British Foreign Office stated after the Yalta Conference that

---

*Only one country stood firm against Stalin's demands: tiny Liechtenstein, with an entire population of less than 13,000 people, most of them farmers, no army, and a police force of eleven men. No refugees. Soviet citizens or otherwise, would be sent back to Russia by force, the government of Liechtenstein courageously declared to the Soviet delegation which came to claim them in 1945.
only Soviet citizens, i.e., residents of the Soviet Union after September 1, 1939, were to be compelled to return. This order was echoed in writing by the Supreme Allied Headquarters. Field Marshal Alexander accordingly issued stringent orders against the use of force.

But in May of 1945 the British Army in Austria handed over thousands of non-Soviet citizens, men, women and children, by the most brutal means imaginable. How did it happen? Was it an accident—a case of mislaid orders and fouled up communications—or was it a deliberate act, covered up these past forty years?

After examining the relevant evidence and talking to the soldiers involved, I came to the conclusion that the “accident” theory was untenable. First, it was clear that the presence and status of the non-Soviet Cossacks was well known at all levels within the British Fifth Corps, the unit to which they had surrendered at the close of hostilities. Second, all orders relating to the handover of the Cossacks emphasized that non-Soviet citizens were to be screened and retained in accordance with policy laid down by the British government. Given these indisputable facts, how could the surrender of Tsarist exiles be attributed to an oversight?

**Deception and Betrayal**

Among the Cossack officers were many famous heroes who had led the White Russian Army in alliance with the British, French and Americans during the Russian civil war. One, General Andrei Shkuro, had been honored for gallantry by King George V with the Companionhip of the Bath, whose cross he still wore on his uniform alongside others awarded by King George’s cousin, Emperor Nicholas II. SMERSH operatives, significantly, had detailed lists of all former White Russian officers on which they checked off the names as the British relinquished custody of them. These same operatives arranged to have Shkuro detained in secret by the British before he was forcibly repatriated. When he was handed over, the General tore the cross from his chest and threw it at the feet of the attending British officer. He and the Ataman of the Don Cossacks, Peter Nikolaevich Krasnov, one of the most famous Russian leaders of all, were hung together in the Lefortovo prison courtyard.

Beyond a brief notice in Pravda, their passing went unnoticed. Their helpless compatriots lie buried in mass unmarked graves in Gulag forced labor camps. It seemed that two versions of the event existed. According to the official record, preserved among War Offices files, the non-Soviet Cossacks were screened and retained in British custody, and nothing in the files suggests that anything but this took place. In reality some two or three thousand Tsarist emigres, holding foreign or League of Nations passports and for the most part dressed in flamboyant Tsarist uniforms, were deceived into travelling to the Soviet lines at Judenburg. We seem to be inhabiting two different worlds: one fiction and one tragic reality.

Further research revealed that elaborate precautions had been taken to ensure that the Soviets regained this particular group of their most inveterate enemies, and that equally skillful measures had been adopted to prevent this aspect of the operation from becoming known outside the Fifth Corps. In short, the evidence suggested strongly that the tragedy resulted not from the muddle or oversight that one could so readily envisage in the chaotic circumstances of the time, but was planned and implemented throughout with great care and forethought in deliberate contravention of orders from above.

But if this view were correct, who could have been responsible for flouting undeniably clear government instructions in order to perpetrate an atrocity greatly beneficial to the Soviet government, but of no perceptible advantage to British interests? What was the motive for such action? These were questions which I was unable to answer in *Victims of Yalta*, and I was compelled to conclude my investigation with the admission that, “whether we shall ever know the full story is questionable.”

For the time being matters were left in this unsatisfactory state. Some years later I discovered that Winston Churchill himself, with all the resources of the Cabinet and War Office at his disposal, had been similarly unable to penetrate the secret. In the spring of 1953, disturbed by allegations received from an emigre Cossack general, he ordered a full enquiry. After an exhaustive search among the files, Brigadier Latham of the Cabinet Office was obliged to confess that “though we know most of the details of what happened we are at present unable to say why these events
took place."

On first launching into research for Victims of Yalta, I addressed appeals for information to all the surviving protagonists. The response was fruitful, with one remarkable exception. As Minister Resident in the Mediterranean in 1945, Harold Macmillan bore responsibility for providing political advice and decisions in British-occupied Italy and Austria. In view of his high authority in a region where many thousands of Russians fell into British hands and were subsequently repatriated, he was an obvious person to consult. At the same time I had no reason to believe that he had been directly involved in the business with which I was concerned, since the decision to repatriate Soviet citizens had been made at the Cabinet level. His task, on the face of it, had merely been to transmit and explain that decision to the Supreme Allied Commander, Field-Marshall Alexander.

It was with some surprise, therefore, that in April 1974 I received a curt reply from Mr. Macmillan, informing me simply that, "I am sorry that I cannot be of help to you." Though he was clearly under no obligation to assist every historian approaching him, this refusal appeared perplexing and, as I was later to learn, unusual. My suspicions were aroused, and his name moved to the forefront of my concern.

At the time of the public outcry which greeted the appearance of Victims of Yalta, I was approached on different occasions by Yugoslav emigres, who urged me to write about the parallel plight of thousands of their compatriots handed over to be slaughtered by Tito at the time of the Cossack tragedy. I was strongly sympathetic to their cause, but had to reply that as the Yugoslavs did not come under the Yalta Agreement, and as my field of study lay largely if not exclusively in Russian affairs, I felt their story should be told by a Yugoslav specialist.

But then it happened that my friend David Floyd wrote an important article on the subject at the end of 1979, published in the magazine Now. I read it with detachment interest until I came across this quotation from a report by a Foreign Office official: "The handing over of Slovenes and others by the Eighth Army in Austria to Tito's forces at the end of May was, of course, a ghastly mistake which was rectified as soon as it was reported to headquarters."

It was the phrase "a ghastly mistake" which attracted my attention. Two "ghastly mistakes" occurring at the same time and place appeared an improbable coincidence. I saw at once that the Yugoslav tragedy represented not only a subject in itself worthy of study, but one which might open up fresh avenues in an investigation which for some time seemed to have reached a dead end.

Examination of the relevant Foreign Office and War Office files revealed anomalies even greater than those attending the Cossack handovers. The Cossacks were divided into two categories, Soviet and non-Soviet, repatriable and non-repatriable, which might (but for the evidence I had uncovered) suggest a source of confusion. In the case of the Yugoslavs, however, there existed no ambivalence of any sort. The British and American governments had throughout maintained a consistent policy that no Yugoslav citizens falling into British hands were to be returned against their will. Despite this, thousands had been surreptitiously handed over. Something was very wrong, and it looked as if the twin operations might represent aspects of a single covert exercise. So at least I reasoned.

Gradually the evidence began to accumulate. It soon began to look as if some hand had been at work, altering and removing documents, with the apparent purpose of implicating Field-Marshall Alexander. By this stage, however, the existence of what could only be a deliberate false trail merely provided further evidence of the extraordinary thoroughness with which the real culprit had covered his tracks. Slightly unnerving was the discovery that a crucial public document which I had actually handled had some time after been removed or destroyed.

Then came the moment in a hotel room in Toronto when my friend, the Croatian scholar Dr. Jerome Jareb, handed me a copy of Alexander Kirk's revealing report of May 14, 1945. Now I felt I knew who my man was! But the manner in which he deceived not only his Cossack and Yugoslav victims but his own colleagues, at Fifth Corps Headquarters in Austria and Allied Force Headquarters in Naples, the Foreign Office and the Cabinet, was so complex and ingenious that it was still no easy task to unravel the skein of events.

Patiently I built up a circumstantial case which proved, to my satisfaction at least, that Harold Macmillan (later, Lord Stockton and Prime Minister of Great Britain) had himself largely engineered the whole affair. I published the fresh evidence, such as it was, concerning the Cossacks in Stalin's Secret War (1981), and on the Yugoslavs in an article in Encounter (May 1983).

The case I presented was admittedly circumstantial and speculative, leaving considerable room for differing interpretation even if the salient points appeared clear enough. It also included a number of errors of commission and omission. I would regret what proved to have been a jejune premature venture more than I do, were it not that publication stimulated anew public interest in the matter. As a result I began to receive a fresh flow of information, some of it implicating Toby Low, at the time Brigadier-General of Fifth Corps: the man who signed the orders arranging the handovers of Cossacks and Yugoslavs. Today, Toby Low is Lord Aldington.

Harold Macmillan died several years ago without answering the charges leveled against him in The Minister and the Massacres. Reluctantly, Toby Low has been pressured into a court case to which I am a party. The full facts will, I hope, come to light in the near future. Whatever vindication comes for the victims of forced repatriation, it comes too late.
A sense of overweening self-importance is not unknown in academic circles. Finding our works on a bookstore shelf, being asked by a reporter to comment on a breaking current event, or delivering a lecture and seeing that look in a student's eyes that says "I finally understand," all can pump us up emotionally.

More often than not, however, the scholar's problem is just the opposite: How to live with the suspicion that all those years spent toiling in the ivy-covered world of ideas might really have been beside the point. After all, most of the time it appears as if the outside world — the real world — doesn't give a hoot about the arcana rattling around inside academic brains.

That depressing thought underlies Henry Kissinger's observation that disputes among scholars are so vicious because "the stakes are so low."

But every now and then, the stakes are not low, especially when faculty bickering gets caught up in partisan or ideological disputes. Then the fights really get dirty. This is what is happening on the campus of Stanford University.

Stanford has been playing political hardball with the Hoover Institution, which was established on the campus by the late U.S. president. After years of uneasy coexistence with the semi-autonomous "think tank," Stanford's board of trustees recently announced that it would enforce a campus policy on mandatory retirement against Hoover's director Glen W. Campbell. When he turns 65 next April he'll have to step down. Interestingly, the trustees also appointed a former Stanford president to a five-year term as head of a new campus institute, despite the fact that he is several months older than Campbell.

I ideological conflict at its lowest, mixed with academic jealousy at its pettiest, has resulted in campus politics at its filthiest.

Campbell was Herbert Hoover's hand-picked successor. Since taking over from the late president in 1960, he has transformed the institution into one of the nation's most dominant intellectual centers. Some of America's most brilliant free-market, pro-liberty scholars are in residence there, and many of them exercised enormous influence over the development of Reagan administration policies.

And therein lies the problem.

Eighty percent of Stanford's faculty are registered Democrats (10 percent are Republican, 10 percent independent). The university's president, a former Carter administration official, has campaigned on behalf of many liberal Democrats even as he called the Hoover Institution "too political." Stanford also is the university that wanted nothing to do with the Reagan presidential library and that gutted its curriculum to create room for more female and Third World writers.

Since both Campbell and his think tank are generally recognized as conservative, no wonder the sensibilities of Stanford's "progressive" academics have been ruffled. But the animosities between the university and institution are complicated by factors other than philosophical differences.

Even a small sampling of the intellectual heavyweights whom Campbell has recruited — and the visibility they have attained — suggest why Stanford's academics might find Hoover so vexing.

There's Milton Friedman. Perhaps the single most influential economist of the past two decades, he has acquired a popular following through his public television series "Free To Choose."

There's political philosopher Sidney Hook. The one-time socialist's recent book, "Out of Step," has been hailed by reviewers all over the country.

There's Thomas Sowell. The "infamous black conservative," who, in challenging the idea of racial disadvantage and the government's automatic need to correct it, is making the Republican Party a viable option for many blacks.

There are others. What describes them all is that their "ideas have consequences" (to borrow a phrase from the late educator Richard Weaver) and, as a result, these intellectuals have basked in the well-earned — and highly public — glory of their accomplishments.

This is the essence of Stanford's power play against Campbell and the Hoover Institution: ideological conflict at its lowest, mixed with academic jealousy at its pettiest, resulting in campus politics at its filthiest.

Regrettably, this is not a new academic brew. It is a stain on the halls of ivy, and it will take Stanford a long time to clean it up.