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Violence from Below: Explaining Crimes against Civilians across Soviet Space, 1943–1947

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Abstract

The end of World War II brought little relief to the lands its ravaged most. Mass wartime violence continued in the Soviet space beyond the ‘false peace’ of 1945. Historians have sought to explain this violence in terms of the ‘wartime brutalisation’ of state and citizens alike, though this approach is limited in explaining how and why violence continued after 1945. This article shifts focus from psychology to social history to argue that the disintegration of Soviet state control is central to explaining the enduring violence after 1945 and understanding its emergence as much ‘from below’ as ‘from above’.

AT THE FOOTHILLS OF THE CAUCASUS IN LATE 1941, THE ONCE quiet sanatorium town of Essentuki was terrorised by soldiers convalescing in the local hospital. They fought against one another in the streets in drunken brawls, murdered the local militia boss with a fork, extorted drugs from medical personnel

and raped women at will. Locals were in fear until a paratroop unit was assembled in the area and restored order by force. The commander was unwilling to tolerate what he saw in the town and ordered his men to use their weapons against the marauders if necessary (Chukhrai 2001, pp. 62–3).

Violence against civilians was a common occurrence in the lands over which Stalin claimed control in World War II. It engulfed both Soviet and foreign citizens, presumed enemies and supporters of Soviet power. It was committed by agents and agencies of the state, but also—as in the examples above—by non-state or sub-state actors. An example was the group of former Vlasov soldiers—more than 100 men—who descended on the Ukrainian village of Bakorin on 28 January 1945 to confiscate pigs, food, fodder, clothing and shoes (Plotnikov 1991, p. 54). Some months earlier, on 30 May 1944, Marshal A. M. Vasilevskii had complained about Red Army troops behaving likewise, committing ‘armed robberies, theft ..., and murder’ in liberated Soviet territory.¹ Others behaved even more outrageously, such as Ukrainian nationalists who in January and February 1945 alone drowned more than 100 supporters of Soviet rule under the ice of the frozen river Goryn', or mutilated the bodies of captured Soviet militia members before hanging them from their feet in their families' villages (Plotnikov 1991, pp. 56, 59–60). While the borderlands were thus embroiled in a variety of civil wars (Rieber 2005), lethal violence spread westwards as Soviet troops advanced. The German settlement of Friedrichsthal, close to Oranienburg, north of Berlin, was liberated by the Red Army on 23 April 1945. Shortly thereafter, attacks on the local population began. Armed gangs descended on Friedrichsthal both during daylight and in the cover of darkness, broke into homes, abused the inhabitants, stole a variety of household items as well as what little food was left. When women were present, they were often raped, and those who resisted were killed. The perpetrators were liberated Soviet prisoners of war as well as former slave laborers, who had been deported by the Nazis to Germany. Their base of operation was the former German concentration camp of Sachsenhausen, located nearby.²

¹ ‘Prikaz zamestitelya narodnogo komissara oborony o beschinstvakh, vooruzhennykh grabezhakh, krazhakh u grazhdanskogo naseleniya i ubiistvakh, trovimyk otel'nymi voennosluzhashchimi v prifrontovoi polose, i meropriyatiyakh protiv nikh’, 30 May 1944, No. 0150, reprinted in Zolotarev (1997, pp. 290–92).

² German Communist party (KPD) official Friedler to Political Sector of Soviet Military Administration of Brandenburg, 19 October 1945, Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiskoi Federatsii (hereafter GARF), fond. r-7077, opis. 1, delo. 178, list. 30.

Violence even emerged between rival representatives of Soviet power. Several months after the Friedrichsthal incidents, an NKVD officer, known locally for his violent behaviour against civilians, tried to force the manager of a cinema in the town of Neustrelitz to play his favourite Soviet films instead of the scheduled programme. A political officer with the Soviet Military Administration (SVAG) intervened, but was berated by the policeman, who accused him of sabotage and opened a case against him. Similar theatre and nightclub incidents were punctuated by shootouts and brawls between officers and men from competing Soviet agencies across occupied Germany (Slaveski 2013, pp. 46–8, 50–3, 54–7).

Meanwhile, civilians continued to fall victim to troop violence. On 15 April 1946 a large group of Soviet soldiers confined to a camp for sufferers of venereal disease broke out of their confinement and descended on the small town of Luckenwalde just 100km south of Friedrichsthal, stopped cars, forced the occupants to give up their vehicles, and stole their watches. They raped women, young and old, in restaurants and public spaces, or in the surrounding woods. The few local people who tried to intervene were killed. The violence continued into May, when the Soviet authorities finally established control over the city.³

Do these instances of violence during the war and its aftermath have anything in common? At first glance, they do not. The cases cover a wide variety of types of behaviour: rape and robbery, murder and beatings, armed robbery, destruction of property and intimidation, deprivation of freedom and armed altercations. These acts were committed by a variety of actors ranging from rank and file soldiers, to civilians, irregular troops, displaced persons, and freed prisoners of war. The violence these actors committed took place across the vast expanse of Soviet controlled territory. And yet, as we shall argue in this article, there is a thread tying these different histories of violence together into a larger whole.

Much of the literature on war and post-war violence has focused on the motives of perpetrators. An entire school of historical inquiry has debated the brutalising influence of World War I on European societies (Edele & Gerwarth 2015), while others, ever since Sigmund Freud (1957), have questioned whether or not war experience leads to the barbarisation of individuals (Bourke 1999). The Soviet Union in World War II should be a perfect case study of the brutalising impact of war, given the

³ Lieutenant Gusenko to Major Luzan, 27 April 1946, GARF, f. r-7077, op. 1, d. 196, ll. 80–87; Mel'khiker to Sharov, 4 May 1946, ll. 88–89.

brutality of Germany's offensive (Merridale 2000). With 27 million Soviet dead, the majority of them civilians, unheard of destruction, and the engagement of the largest land forces in history in some of the most destructive battles of the twentieth century, the killing fields of the German–Soviet war were a major part of what has been called the ‘bloodlands’ (Snyder 2010). Did this experience of mass killing and mass dying brutalise Soviet society? For the Soviet case of World War II, the ‘brutalisation thesis’ has largely played itself out in two contexts. First, historians have explored the roots of the barbarisation of warfare in the German–Soviet war and the extent to which Soviet behaviour contributed to this deterioration of war making (Bartov 1986; Hoffmann 1996; Musial 2001; Arnold 2005; Weiner 2006; Hartman 2010; David-Fox *et al.* 2012; Edele 2014). Another debate focuses on Soviet conduct in 1944–1945, examining the roots of rape warfare in Germany's east (Naimark 1995; Stites 1995; Zeidler 1996; Beevor 2002; Sander & John 2005; Geyer & Fitzpatrick 2009; Kershaw 2011; Stelzl-Marx 2012). Only one study has followed Freud’s lead and mobilised overwhelming empirical evidence against the idea that Red Army soldiers returned psychologically brutalised from this war (Dale 2010, pp. 193–234).

Building on such approaches, we focus on violent practices and actors and the spaces of their actions. We argue that attention to the context rather than the motivation of violent post-war action allows a new path to understanding the severity and duration of violence in the post-war period. We focus on the entire Soviet space including the unoccupied Soviet Union in pre-1939 borders, the newly acquired western borderlands, and also occupied territories in Europe and Asia. Our argument is that the disintegration of state control is central to explaining why actors were able to continue their violent practices after the war. In many cases, violence against civilians did not emanate from above, but from below, and typically it was perpetrated not by individuals, but by collectives. Like in an earlier period of civil war, the decrease of state control enabled militant groups to inhabit and exploit the resulting spaces of violence (Schnell 2012; Novikova 2013).

The loss of control during wartime

The history of the Soviet state during the war with Germany is usually told as one of centralisation: with the establishment of the State Defence Committee (GKO) all state authority was united in a new powerful organ headed by Stalin. From here, the tentacles of the wartime state spread across the land (Cherepanov 2006), which was run as ‘a single forced labor camp’ (Berkhoff 2012). However, this

centralisation was restricted to fields essential to the war effort: production of war materiel, mobilisation, basic security, the requisitioning of foodstuffs, and their supply to the Red Army. Control over most other fields, in particular civilian consumption, was given up and devolved down to local government, enterprises, and families (Moskoff, 1990; Barber & Harrison 1991, pp. 48–50; Hachten 2005). The constriction of the state's reach even affected regular policing. The expansion of Soviet territory in 1939–1941 and then again from 1944 was not matched by a growth in police capability. Once the war broke out militiamen were drafted to fight the invader, which further thinned their ranks (Shelley 1996, p. 35). By 1946, 'police ranks were stretched dangerously thin, more so than at any time since the early 1930s' (Shearer 2009, p. 410). Large numbers of documents were destroyed or lost and blank forms circulated on the black market. As a result, policing 'based on documented identities', long central to Stalinist control, became 'ineffective' (Shearer 2009, pp. 410–2). Control of the vast reaches of the Soviet Union was patchy enough to allow significant numbers of desertions from the army. According to one quite conservative recent estimate, at least 4.4 million Soviet citizens 'attempted to avoid service, or fighting', a number which includes those who 'actively sided with the enemy' (Reese 2007, p. 270). The Soviet authorities detained 1.5 million army deserters and draft evaders and arrested 42% of them (Krivosheev 2001, p. 94), while Soviet statistics list 212,400 individuals as 'not found after deserting, becoming detached from a troop convoy or missing in military districts in the interior' (Krivosheev 1997, p. 91).

The constriction of the reach of Stalin's state also involved the partial breakdown of the distribution of news and propaganda on the home front (Brody 1994), and even a temporary collapse of the state's monopoly of force (Baberowski 2012, pp. 407–12). Perhaps the best known cases for this collapse are the riots against Soviet officials leaving Moscow during the 1941 panic, when mobs pulled evacuating functionaries out of their cars with shouts of 'beat the Jews' (Manley 2009, p. 112; Edele 2013, p. 249), or the instances of other anti-Semitic violence by war invalids against Jewish evacuees (Kostyrchenko 2001, pp. 242–43). Less well known are violent strikes, which drew on a long tradition of working-class resistance (Werth 1994; Tochenov 2004; Rossman 2005; Cherepanov 2006). Criminal violence also increased, both in reality and in post-war public perception (Burds 2000, pp. 169–88; Gorinov 2000, pp. 453–86; Zubkova 2000 pp. 89–101; Zubkova *et al.* 2003, pp. 189–210). The crime statistics for 1939–1954 show an immense growth of violent crime from 1943/1944 to 1947 (Zubkova 2010, p. 175). Sometimes, the perpetrators were soldiers, as in the already mentioned wartime

Essentuki, or as in another instance, when members of a penal unit killed their host, threw his body into the basement, pushed his aging wife after him, and raped his 12-year old granddaughter (Daines 2008, p. 336). The kind of behaviour of Soviet troops, normally associated with the Red Army in Germany, took place on Soviet territory as well, including assaults on men trading on the market, rape after the liberation of Soviet villages, or armed robbery and the murder of civilians (Daines 2008, pp. 162–65, 254, 271, 290–91). Such ‘excesses’ were not confined to penal units. Soldiers sent east in the preparations for the Soviet–Japanese war distinguished themselves along the way through ‘group binges, shootings, theft, burglary, rape’ and other crimes.⁴ In one region of the Russian Far East, 47% of all murders were committed by soldiers.⁵

Soldiers were not the only perpetrators, though. The transformation of state power during the Great Patriotic War opened spaces where small groups of armed men—the average size of the ‘bandit’ groups was seven⁶—could fight their own war. To the delight of the Germans,⁷ bands of deserters lived in the woods and off the land behind Soviet lines in the vicinity of Leningrad in September 1942, or roamed Turkmenistan in 1943.⁸ The largest bands existed in the Northern Caucasus, where the average size of bandit groups was 22 (calculated from data in Table 1). Warlordism had a long and deep history in this region, which had never been more than under tentative control. The smoldering civil war was, from 1940, transformed into a guerrilla movement led by the Israilov brothers, Hassan and Hussein, who planned a general uprising against Soviet power. While such a coordinated effort never eventuated, there were many examples between 1941 and 1943, of local uprisings, raids into Soviet controlled territory, destruction of documents and murder of officials (Armstrong 1964, pp. 567–68; Naimark 2001, pp. 92–6; Statiev 2005; Cherepanov 2006, pp. 79–82, 326; Burds 2007, pp. 292–95).

In Chechnya banditism had clear political overtones, rooted in the long history of resistance to first Russian, then Soviet colonial rule. In the rest of the pre-1939 Soviet Union, many of these groups

⁴ Shamarin (Kemerovo) to Beria, before or on 23 July 1945, GARF, f. r-9401, op. 2, d. 98, l. 11.

⁵ Data for the third quarter of 1944, *Primorskii krai*, Report by UNKVD boss Zakusilo to Beria, GARF, f. r-9401, op. 2, d. 96, ll. 316, 317–18.

⁶ The average group size was calculated by dividing the number of bandits in Table 1 by the number of bandit groups in the same table.

⁷ *Fremde Heere Ost*, reports from 1943 and 1944, Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv Freiburg (BA-MA) RH 2/1925.

⁸ Beria to Stalin, 14 July 1943, see Khaustov *et al.* (2006, p. 389).

were apolitical criminals. The vast majority (78%) of the reported cases of 'bandit activity' were robberies of civilians rather than attacks on representatives of Soviet power or its institutions. Moreover, in the regions represented in Table 1, the main problems were caused by deserters and draft dodgers. While 46,382 'bandits' were 'liquidated' in these regions, the NKVD also rounded up 206,118 people who had tried to avoid military service.⁹

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Violent collectives and the monopoly on violence

Not all such violence originated in frontline regions: students of military schools conducted themselves no more peacefully, and there were cases of brutality by troops on Soviet territory both in the immediate post-war years and in the 1950s, during the confusing time following Stalin's death, the later cases perpetrated by recently conscripted soldiers too young to have seen combat (Kozlov 1999, ch. 2). Indeed, war veterans were a minority among the violent post-war criminals. Ministry of the Interior reports on the liquidation of bandit gangs in 1947 and 1948, for example, rarely mention war veterans.¹⁰ Instead, the war-induced wave of violent crime, reinforced by the post-war famine, was driven by largely parentless non-combatant juveniles (Zima 1994; Fürst 2010, ch. 5); in 1946, nearly half of all crimes were committed by youths, often operating in groups.¹¹ A notable exception were instances of revenge killings by Jewish veterans of those who had denounced their families' hiding places to the Nazis during the war (Prut 2000, pp. 300–3).

A common element of most war-time and post-war crime was that it was committed by collectives. In the Russian Far East, where 47% of murders were committed by soldiers, the perpetrators were organised in criminal gangs recruited among regimental comrades.¹² Robberies were typically conducted by groups of soldiers rather than individuals, ranging from pairs of two to groups

⁹ Beria to Stalin, 14 March 1945, see Khaustov *et al.* (2006, p. 499).

¹⁰ Reports dated 6 December and 14 December 1947, GARF, f. r-9401, op. 2, d. 171, ll. 372-74, 411; report dated early 1948, GARF, d. 199, ll. 208-12.

¹¹ GARF, f. r-9401, op. 2, d. 168, l. 349.

¹² Data for the third quarter of 1944, *Primorskii krai*, Report by UNKVD boss Zakusilo to Beria, GARF f. r-9401, op. 2, d. 96, ll. 316, 317-18.

of four, five, or even up to eighteen.¹³ Collectives of similar size committed much of the sexual violence in gang rapes (Stelzl-Marx 2012, pp. 415–20). In Germany, new troops sent to occupy the country learned how to behave from those already there, quickly understanding what was permissible in the eyes of their officers and what was not. Perpetrators were protected by their commanders and their comrades-in-arms from prosecution (Slaveski 2013, pp. 32–4, 45–6). Violence during demobilisation, likewise, was perpetrated by soldiers still in uniform and functioning as a unit (Edele 2008, pp. 26–8). Such violence tended to end once the collectives producing it, military units or groups bonding in military hospitals, were broken up through demobilisation and the reintegration of veterans into civilian society.

A variety of collectives thus challenged the state's monopoly of force during the war and post-war years, yet only the most serious among them challenged Soviet rule directly. In the early stages of the war, the Soviet police, thinned by wartime losses and mobilisation to the frontline, struggled to fight against 'deserters, resisters, marauders, "panickers" and rumormongers' (Shelley 1996, p. 35). Attempts to break up violent collectives continued throughout the war and post-war years and formed a central plank of the re-establishment of Soviet power in the liberated regions. In 1943, for instance, the NKVD, 'cleaning up' behind the advancing Red Army, liquidated 114 armed gangs with 636 members, made up of 'protégés and supporters of the German occupants and former Red Army soldiers, who have deserted from their units and took to banditism' (Khaustov *et al.* 2006, p. 407). Their weapons were no match for those of the security forces. About a quarter of the bandits had no firearms and about 7% had to do without any weapons or grenades (Khaustov *et al.* 2006, p. 407). Such battles often descended into a simple slaughter of the under-equipped bandit groups. In 142 clashes taking place in early 1944 between Ukrainian nationalists and NKVD troops behind the lines of the First Belorussian and First Ukrainian Fronts, 2,564 of the nationalists were killed, while the Soviet forces suffered only 124 deaths; a ratio of 1:21.¹⁴ By the final months of the war, the NKVD was able to amass a force of

¹³ For an example of large groups: Beria to Stalin, Molotov, and Antonov on marauding soldiers, 20 July 1944 see, Khaustov *et al.* (2006, p. 441). For groups of two to five see, 'Prikaz zamestitelya narodnogo komissara oborony o beschinstvakh, vooruzhennykh grabezakh, krazhakh u grazhdanskogo naseleniya i ubiistvakh, trovimyk otel'nymi voennosluzhashchimi v prifrontovoi polose, i meropriyatiyakh protiv nikh', 30 May 1944, No. 0150.

¹⁴ Beria to Stalin, Molotov and Antonov, 11 July 1944, report on period April to June 1944, see Khaustov *et al.* (2006, p. 439).

almost 60,000 men to patrol the rear of the Red Army's fronts in Eastern Europe in search of anyone who posed a potential security threat. By April 1945, they had detained 138,200 people, mostly Germans who were suspected of being part of the occupation machinery and ended up serving relatively short sentences (if they survived) in German concentration camps appropriated by the Soviet forces.¹⁵

Thus, once the tide of the war had begun to turn, the Soviet state was able to deploy greater and better organised force. Pacification continued well into the post-war years. In the first nine months of 1947, for example, the MGB detained 13,107 armed opponents in Western Ukraine, while killing 3,391. In a flanking manoeuvre, insurgents' families were rounded up in a mass operation. Altogether 77,806 people, or 26,644 families were deported by a force of over 40,000 security troops.¹⁶

In the western borderlands these deportations happened relatively late and involved a relatively targeted group of victims. They were part of an overall counter-insurgency strategy, which combined military operations against insurgents with underground police work, the mobilisation of local Red Army veterans into militias, and the targeted removal of families of insurgents, with promises of amnesty for those who gave themselves up and cooperated with the authorities (Statiev 2010). Some of the earlier efforts, by contrast, were much more indiscriminate. In the Caucasus and Crimea, 'pacification' involved the deportation of entire populations presumed to be hostile to Soviet power. As policing operations in the Caucasus had failed repeatedly in the past, the authorities now switched, in 1944, to ethnic cleansing to 'solve the "Chechen problem"' (Gerlach & Werth 2009, p. 159). Within the unoccupied regions of the Soviet Union, the re-establishment of a monopoly of violence followed somewhat less violent paths. The crackdown on breaches of the collective farm regime was conducted by Party activists supported by NKVD agents (Lévesque 2006, pp. 21–3), while the police slowly reined in the black market (Hessler 1998, pp. 516–42). Criminal gangs were rounded up, one after the other, and prosecuted.¹⁷ Overall, within the pre-1939 borders of the Soviet Union, the

¹⁵ Beria to Stalin, 17 April, 1945, see Mironenko (2001, pp. 14–6).

¹⁶ L. M. Kaganovich, N. S. Khrushchev, V. S. Abakumov to Stalin, 28 October 1947, see Khaustov *et al.* (2007, p. 67). For more detailed data on this operation, see Khaustov *et al.* (2007, pp. 148–50).

¹⁷ For example: NKVD reports to Stalin, 26 January 1945, 13 July 1945, 10 April 1946, 10 July 1946, 14 July 1946, 4 December 1946, 10 December 1946, 21 December 1946, 19 January 1947, 2 Feb. 1947, 7 February 1947, 26 February 1947, 6 March 1947; GARF f. r-9401, op. 2, d. 92, ll. 209-10;

war and post-war years saw a shift ‘from administrative repression based on categories of identity to judicial convictions for breach of law’ (Shearer 2009, p. 405). In occupied Germany, by contrast, mass troop violence continued until numbers were drastically reduced by demobilisation, from 1.5 million to 350,000 by September 1947. The smaller contingent could now be interned successfully in barracks and their contact with the occupied population curtailed (Naimark 1995, pp. 17, 92–7).

The root of the problem

The monopoly of violence was thus re-established in different parts of the Soviet space at different times and by different means. First came the liberated regions of the pre-1939 Soviet Union. Here, once the army had liberated the territory and continued westward, it was left to the security police to eliminate threats and facilitate the reconstruction of civilian power. Functionaries were brought in from Moscow and other major unoccupied cities to staff the government and party apparatus which sought to function according to the pre-war norms. There was no violent competition for authority among Soviet organs. Instead, the pre-war dictatorship was slowly but surely reconstructed (Lieberman 1994, pp. 49–67; Weiner 2001, chs 1, 2). In the regained western borderlands (Western Ukraine and Belorussia as well as the Baltic republics), this re-building of dictatorship presupposed the elimination of local nationalist resistance. As viable military forces, the Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian, and Ukrainian groups had been eliminated by 1945, their ranks depleted under the weight of Soviet operations as well as by incentives created to attract their members to the Soviet side. The remnants of these movements lurched towards naked terrorism against civilian ‘collaborators’, demonstrating their transition from competitors for state authority to simple insurgents (Statiev 2010, pp. 105–23).

The situation was significantly less straightforward in occupied Germany. While elsewhere security forces cleared the ground for a smoother re-establishment of civilian power, in Germany the security police were one of many competing authorities pursuing contradictory policy aims. Four major agencies made up the Soviet occupation regime: the Group of Soviet Occupation Forces in Germany (*Gruppa sovetskikh okkupatsionnykh voisk v Germanii*—GSOVG), the Soviet Military Administration in Germany (*Sovyetskaya Voennaya Administratsiya v Germanii*—SVAG), the security forces (*Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del*—NKVD, *Narodnyi Komissariat gosudarstvennoi*

GARF f. r-9401, op. 2, d. 97, ll. 342–43; GARF f. r-9401, op. 2, d. 135, ll. 257–59, 138, 44–45, 149–50; GARF f. r-9401, op. 2, d. 139, ll. 453–56, 487–94, 533–39; GARF f. r-9401, op. 2, d. 168, ll. 114–15, 250–53, 270, 382–83, 411–34.

bezopasnosti—NKGB, and *Smert' shpionam*—SMERSh), and the Special Committee in charge of dismantling factories and infrastructure (*Osobyi Komitet*). The occupation forces had to use force to seize local resources in order to feed their soldiers and attempted to protect offenders from within their ranks from interference by other organs. SVAG was charged with feeding civilians from the same local resources, and with bringing law and order to the occupation zone by arresting soldiers breaking the law. The security forces, in turn, had to eliminate any source of potential resistance and ensure that compatible political parties emerged victorious in the new people's democracy, while also keeping an eye on the growing number of occupation personnel so enamoured by their glimpse of bourgeois Europe that they threatened to sow dissent in the ranks or flee to West Germany, making easy recruits for allied intelligence services. The dismantlers, focused entirely on extracting as much industrial and agricultural capital as possible in the shortest amount of time and sending it back to the Soviet Union as reparations, gave no heed to other policy considerations held by rival organisations. SVAG was, in effect, given the task of running Germany, feeding its people and operating basic services, without the necessary authority to do so properly. This authority was tied up in the security forces and dismantling groups who pursued policies antipathetic to SVAG's task and implemented them with such caprice and violence to make SVAG's officers wary of crossing them.

The resulting internal strife can be traced back to the aims of the Soviet occupation, which were ill-defined apart from an immediate focus on removing industry to compensate both domestic war losses and prevent the resurgence of German militarism; meanwhile Soviet security organs were left to their own devices to eliminate any resistance (Rieber 2005, p. 154). This vagueness reflected Moscow's uncertainty about what post-war Germany would look like under joint Soviet-Allied control. Assigning competing occupation organisations with contradictory policies limited the degree of influence that some could obtain in order to achieve their aims. This limited the power of these organisations, especially the military, operating far beyond the direct control of Moscow. The problem for SVAG officials, however, was that this polycracy¹⁸ constrained them from redressing the most pressing problems besetting the country: feeding the German population and stopping Soviet troops from rampaging in the post-war chaos.

¹⁸ Polycracy is the rule by many competing entities. The classical formulation is Broszat (1969).

The German situation was extreme not only in comparison with territories reintegrated into the Soviet state proper, but also compared with other occupied foreign territories. In the Polish–German borderlands, for example, still occupied in 1945 before their handover to Poland, although the structure of occupation was similar to Germany (here, too, we find the four agencies, SVAG, GSOVG, security forces, and dismantlers, their aims were more in harmony. While preparing to hand over administration to the new Polish state, SVAG did not have to worry about feeding the local population, a problem left to the Poles. Meanwhile, all occupation authorities concentrated on removing as much equipment and livestock as possible before they left. In this quest, they were unified by a common enemy, armed groups of Poles who attempted to take back the reparations and to attack local German civilians. The Polish military authorities were either complicit in this violence or they ignored it. The result was a unified occupation policy, held together by the glue of a common enemy (Slaveski 2008).

The occupation of Germany resembled more closely the occupations of ‘partisan regions’ during the war, where Soviet irregular troops had carved out an area under their control within the sphere of German occupation. Here, too, personal rivalries between military leaders, ‘turf wars’, and conflicts over who had the right to plunder the civilian population led to brawls, shootings, and even the use of mines. Grafted onto these internal struggles within the ‘Red partisans’ (who in principle but seldom in practice were controlled by Moscow) were violent conflicts between their component groups. The so-called ‘partisan movement’ was composed of: partisan groups formed behind enemy lines and subordinated (in theory but seldom in practice) to the Central Staff of the Partisan Movement; scouting and diversion groups of the Red Army operating behind enemy lines, subordinated to Red Army command; and NKVD groups operating also behind enemy lines, subordinated to NKVD. Then of course, there were also clashes with Germans and with Ukrainian, Polish and other irregular troops as well (Musial 2009, pp. 345–51; Gogun 2012).

Thus, the centre of the problem was not what caused the violence but what prevented the authorities from reining it in. Comparing violent actors on their return to the Soviet Union during demobilisation with those who remained in occupation forces is instructive in this respect. Returning groups with still armed, and frequently intoxicated servicemen robbed train stations, assaulted railway personnel, raped and plundered, and at times resisted arrest by force of arms (Edele 2008, pp. 26–8). In an instance reminiscent of what happened among occupation forces in Germany, intoxicated army officers clashed with MVD personnel during a concert in Moscow in 1946, a conflict escalating to ‘a

shootout on the city's main street and use of machine guns by the soldiers against the local law enforcement' (Stotland 2010, pp. 268–69). Demobilisation eventually decreased such violence by disbanding military units whilst the prohibition of veterans' organisations after the war kept former soldiers from re-uniting in an organised fashion (Edele 2008, ch 7).

Neither demobilisation nor any other policy managed to reduce significantly the violence in occupied Germany until 1947. In fact, demobilisation contributed to the increase in the level of violence at first, as it removed the oldest and more educated soldiers and NCOs in late 1945 who had formed the disciplinary backbone of the army. During 1945 and 1946 this left intact units of young rank and file soldiers who generally lacked the same respect for the NCOs and junior officers who replaced their more mature predecessors (Slaveski 2013, pp. 35–6). To make matters worse, the security forces were less interested and capable than their counterparts in the Soviet Union in controlling the troops, while SVAG and even the military command lacked the jurisdictional power to enforce their own disciplinary orders (Slaveski 2013, ch 3). When SVAG and military commands teamed up to implement a joint disciplinary policy to rein in the violence in August 1945, Stalin stifled them and warned the generals against any such initiatives in the future (Slaveski, 2013, pp. 38–40). The polycratic structure of control in Germany would continue no matter the cost.¹⁹

Unlike the polycracy in Germany, in the Soviet Union it was clearer who was in charge of law and order. No alternative sources for power to the dictator were tolerated. In case the victorious generals harboured any Bonapartist aspirations, Stalin incarcerated and even executed some of them as a warning to others, and transferred others to provincial posts (Pikhoia 2000, pp. 35–43). Stalin was the clear focal point for conflict resolution in the Soviet state. He often resolved disputes where he felt they needed resolution and let or helped others intensify when conflict, or at least the lack of unity, suited his purposes—as it did in Germany (Harris 2003, pp. 375–86; Wheatcroft 2004, pp. 79–107; Davies & Harris 2005; Khlevniuk 2009).

Collectivities, violence and the state

¹⁹ This structure began to change in late 1946 in accordance with the broader shift from a short-term rapacious occupation policy toward a new long-term policy aimed at seriously rebuilding Eastern Germany.

Histories of violence in Eastern Europe during and after World War II typically stress states as the major actors (Beyrau 2000; Prusin 2010; Snyder 2010). This is a completely reasonable approach, particularly as far as the German side is concerned: neither the violence of the Holocaust, nor the war against the Soviet Union can be understood as anything other than state projects, even if large numbers of ordinary men and women collaborated in their implementation (Hilberg 1961; Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung 2002; Browning 2004; Römer 2008; Longerich 2010). On the Soviet side, too, the Polish mass shootings of 1940 (in Katyn) and their associated deportations, the Baltic deportations of 1940–1941, the execution of thousands of prisoners in the western borderlands in 1941, the wartime deportations of Finns, Germans, Kalmyks, Karachai, Chechens, Ingush, Balkars, Crimean Tatars and Greeks, Meshketian Turks, Kurds, and Khemshils, the post-war counter-insurgency operations, and the renewed deportations from the western borderlands were all state directed acts of violence, ordered from above and executed by the state apparatus (Pohl 1999; Wolff & Moullec 1999; Gross 2002; Berkhoff 2004; Cienciala *et al.* 2007; Zubkova 2008).

However, states were not the only violent actors in Soviet controlled space, as this article has argued (Baberowski 2007; Edele 2015). Much of the violence against civilians in Soviet territories during the war emanated from below. This violence was usually triggered by the habitual problems faced by the army and Soviet society in their transition from war to peace, particularly demobilisation, tension between military and police forces, population dislocation, and endemic shortages of food, housing, and consumer goods. This violence was vested in violent collectives rather than the state. It was the very weakness of the state during the years of war that allowed this violence to continue, as was demonstrated most clearly in the case of Germany. Here the lack of a focal point for the resolution of conflicts between competing Soviet agencies rendered ineffective all policies implemented to curb the continuation of troop violence and mass chaos. Only the disbandment of the occupation force by mass demobilisation and the internment of the smaller remainder by 1947 calmed the situation. Outside Germany, only the re-establishment of a monopoly of force ended this kind of mass violence and replaced it with another, somewhat more predictable kind. In World War II and its aftermath, in this region the alternative to a violent state was not a peaceful society, but the rampage of non-state violent collectives with grudges against the state, the civilian population, and one another.²⁰

²⁰ Of course there was also violence perpetrated by individuals which is much less visible in sources relating to the issue of security. Research on domestic violence in Soviet society is in its

This argument is not an apology for Stalinist excesses, in particular mass deportations. In the early 1930s, the removal of entire groups might have been the only method a clumsy police force could use to get rid of perceived enemies, but by the 1940s, the Soviet state could do much better. As the policing of the ‘old’ Soviet territories showed, the Soviet authorities were by now able to accomplish social control through much more rule-bound judicial processes. These led to the incarceration of unprecedented numbers of people for minor property offenses, but they still differed from the mass operations of the 1930s (Solomon 1996, ch 11; Shearer 2009, ch 12). Returning displaced persons, too, were subjected to a screening process which was relatively discriminating. While the Stalinist understanding of what constituted ‘treason’ was extremely wide, the majority of those undergoing ‘filtration’—less among soldiers than civilians—were not sent to the Gulag or shot. Instead, they were recruited into the army or sent back into civilian life. The majority of those who returned to a life on the collective farm also went unmolested in further life, despite the atmosphere of suspicion and discrimination against those who had been on enemy territory. Filtration of returning prisoners of war, then, contrasts sharply with the procedure of the Great Purges, where entire categories of people were incarcerated or shot for the simple reason for being part of the category in question (Boeckh 2007, pp. 293–319; Edele 2008, ch 5).

The ability of the Stalinist state to engage in relatively discriminating, rule-bound processes of social policing by the 1940s put its behaviour in the western borderlands into even sharper relief. Here, counter insurgency operations were embedded in mass deportations as the major means of quashing violence by removing the families of those willing (in the minds of the Stalinists and sometimes also in reality) to sustain it. This procedure was far from any type of regular policing and more reminiscent of the anti-kulak operations at the start of the 1930s. It also had the same effect—the destruction of the potential to real resistance alongside the victimisation of people who had never contemplated it in the first place. At the same time, however, these operations were not akin to the mass operations of the Great Terror, either. There was no post-war Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian, or Ukrainian Katyn, that is, no mass shooting of presumed enemies of the Soviet state (Penter 2008, p. 343). The deportations of

infancy and faces serious source problems. It remains to be seen if we will ever know the extent to which violence between spouses increased during the war (Lapierre 2012). As far as the criminal violence of individuals is concerned, insofar as it was perpetrated by demobilised soldiers, it can be argued that the reason was not habituation to violence, but failure ‘to find a place in post-war society’ (Dale 2010, p. 193).

1949 were also not as all-encompassing as their wartime equivalent in the Caucasus or Crimea, where entire peoples were deported indiscriminately. In the western borderlands, by contrast, the deportations focused not on entire ethnic groups but on family members of insurgents as well as what the Soviet authorities perceived as ‘socially dangerous’ individuals (class enemies). This might have been, as Khrushchev would claim in 1956, because there were too many Ukrainians to deport them all, but the effect was still different (Khrushchev 1956; Statiev 2010, pp. 175–79).

What does our discussion imply for the debate on the brutalizing impact of war? First, Soviet state practice was not brutalised by the war (Edele 2015). As we have argued above, state representatives acted in more differentiated ways after the war than they did before. If anything, the war seems to have led Soviet officials to act in a somewhat more discriminatory manner. Why this was the case is still a matter of conjecture. One explanation focuses on the development of the Soviet state: as the police apparatus, in particular, but also the rest of the administration, began to work in more regular, more bureaucratic, more predictable ways, random terror could be replaced with policing (Solomon 1996, chs. 10, 11; Shearer 2009, ch 12; Edele 2011, chs 2, 5). A variant to this argument is the hypothesis that the re-established apparatus functioned as a break on Stalin’s violence (Baberowski 2012, p. 476). Whatever the answer to the question of why the Soviet state’s behaviour was not brutalised, our focus in this article was less on the state’s violence and more on the barbarity of non-state collectives (Viola 2013; Smith 2013). It was groups of men, often only loosely organised and frequently uncontrollable by legally constituted authorities, who victimised many civilians in Soviet space during the mid-1940s. This focus on sub-state and non-state collectives shifts the debate from ideology to sociology: the focus on violent groups rather than brutal individuals focuses research on social history rather than psychology. For this reason we are quite consciously not dealing with the question of whether individuals were ‘brutalised’ during the war. What seems more important to us is that whatever impact wartime behaviour had on perpetrators and victims alike, the important question is why and under what circumstances this violence spilled over into post-war life. The main determinant for post-war violence, we suggest, was the continued existence of violent collectives: once these were broken up, most violent individuals ceased to act in such violent ways. This finding implies that historians need to look closer at the groups which make violence possible: gangs of men, be they soldiers, irregulars, or civilians operating in spaces where state authority is uncertain and thus contested. In doing so, future research might return to psychological explanations, not those concerning

individuals, but rather groups. It could ask what it was about the dynamics of these groups that made them so violent. It is quite easy to speculate on the basis of comparative cases and theoretical literature (Edele 2015, pp. 492–94). The challenge for historians will be to find the sources to support or refute such claims. This task, however, goes well beyond the confines of this article.

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