

23 February: World Chechnya Day



Introduction

On 23 February 1944, Stalin ordered the deportation of the entire Chechen and Ingush population to Central Asia. More than half of the 500,000 people who were to be forcibly transported died in transit or in massacres committed by Soviet troops. Those who survived the journey were left facing starvation and disease in the harsh winters of Siberia and Central Asia.

Within days an entire people had been erased from the land of their ancestors. Overnight Chechnya and Ingushetia were emptied of their native inhabitants, and every reference to Chechnya was removed from official maps, records and encyclopaedias. In 2004, sixty years after the event, the European Parliament passed a motion that recognised this catastrophe as Genocide.

23rd February is **World Chechnya Day**. It is a day that few are aware of and yet none should forget.

World Chechnya Day is being commemorated to:

- Recognise the suffering and genocide of the Chechen people as a human catastrophe of historic significance
- Respect all victims of Stalinist deportations
- Raise awareness and understanding of the Chechen genocide as an issue of importance to humanity
- Ensure that the horrendous crimes, racism and victimisation that were committed during the Chechen genocide will never be forgotten or repeated, in Europe or elsewhere in the world
- Reflect on contemporary atrocities that raise similar issues
- Educate subsequent generations about the genocide and the continued relevance of the lessons that can be learnt from it
- Assert a continuing commitment to oppose racism, victimisation and genocide
- Support shared aspirations for the ideals of justice, security, dignity and peace for all

To learn more about World Chechnya Day, to find out how you can help, or to visit any of the commemorative events around the world, please visit:

www.worldchechnyaday.org



History

On the 23 February 1944 the Soviet Union set in motion the immediate deportation of the entire Chechen and Ingush peoples to the steppes of Central Asia. In the depths of winter they were subjected to summary massacres and food shortages: it was a solution no less final or less brutal than the one being inflicted at the same time in Europe on the Jews. By conservative estimates half of the population died; the proportion that perished is probably much greater.

In early January 1944, tens of thousands of NKVD troops had started to arrive in the tiny mountainous republic, and fanned out to almost every settlement in the region. On Red Army Day, February 23, in every town and village the men were summoned to meetings in the local Soviet building. None suspected the calamity that was about to befall them; all came willingly. Instead of commemorating the Day, the crowds were read the Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, which announced the complete deportation of the Chechen and Ingush people for treason and collaboration with the German enemy.

There was no evidence to support the claim of Chechen collaboration with the Nazis, which Stalin used as a pretext for disposing of a population that had continually refused to submit to Moscow's will. In fact, the German advance had never reached Chechen soil, stopping just short of the border. Moreover, Chechen soldiers had distinguished themselves in major actions throughout the Second World War, and been awarded a larger number of medals than was proportional to their numerical weight in the Soviet army. However, in the end even soldiers were not spared: they were removed from their units and sent directly to the deportation camps in Central Asia.

In each town Studebaker trucks (provided by the United States to her wartime ally under lend-lease) rolled up to be loaded with Chechen men, women and children at gunpoint. The trucks transported their cargoes to the nearest railway points, where the people were crammed into bare cattle-trucks with no food and utterly inadequate clothing. Villagers from the remote mountain settlements were forced to march down to the plains. Stragglers were shot, as was anyone who resisted. Pregnant women, elderly people and others deemed to require too much effort to transport were killed. One documented example of this is the instance of 700 women, children and old people who were burnt alive in the mountain village of Khaibakh. However, massacres like this took place all over the republic, and the *Aûls* (mountain villages) smouldered for weeks after.

Within days, with ruthless efficiency, an entire people had been erased from the land of their ancestors. Overnight Chechnya and Ingushetia were entirely depopulated; cartographers were instructed to expunge all references to them from official maps, records and encyclopaedias.

On February 29 Lavrentii Beria, Chief of the NKVD Secret Police, wrote to Stalin:



"I report the results of the operation of resettling Chechens and Ingushi. The resettlement was begun on February 23rd in the majority of districts, with the exception of the high mountain population points... 478,479 persons were evicted and loaded onto special railway cars, including 91,250 Ingush. One hundred and eighty special trains were loaded, of which 159 were sent to the new designated place."

For almost half a million Chechen and Ingush people on their black odyssey across the frozen tundra, an ordeal of monumental suffering had just begun. The sealed trucks were crammed with families – men, women and children of all ages – in freezing, cramped conditions with no toilet or washing facilities. Typhoid epidemics swept through the crammed cattle-trucks, killing many in scenes that must have resembled those of Buchenwald and Auschwitz. Little food was provided; the weak and ill were finished off by hunger and cold. Along the way they were treated to contempt and abuse by the local people, who had been told that the people in the trucks were being punished for collaboration with the enemy.

At one of the railroad stations Dimitri Gulia, the prominent Abkhazian educator, witnessed a scene of surreal despair:

"... an unbelievable sight: an extremely long train... jammed full of people who looked like Caucasian Mountaineers. They were being sent off somewhere east, women, children, old people, all. They looked terribly sad and woebegone... These are the Chechen and Ingush and they were not travelling of their own free will. They were being deported. They had committed 'very serious crimes against the Motherland'..."

The trucks were frequently searched for corpses, which were simply thrown to the side of the rail tracks and left. To avoid this fate for their relations, the Chechens tried desperately to disguise or hide the corpses in the hope of giving them an Islamic burial at their journey's end. After several weeks of travel the Chechens were scattered in remote locations across present-day Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Little or no provision was made for food or shelter for the hundreds of thousands of deportees, who were mostly left to fend for themselves.

As a historian at Moscow State University wrote two decades later:

"...The most fearful and irremediable blow to the Chechen-Ingush people was struck in the first two or three years, when starvation and the most dreadful diseases obliged them to bury tens of thousands of their fellow tribespeople in the steppes of Central Asia."

In the years that followed thousands were to die of pneumonia and hunger. It was a dark episode in the tumultuous history of the Chechens, who had already suffered a long war against the full military might of the Russian Empire in the mid-nineteenth century, followed by large-scale forced emigration. Many families were scattered and were never able to reunite.

The settlements of the deportees were in effect large penal colonies. The most trivial infringements of the rules were punished by imprisonment or hard labour. Yet as the Russian



writer and dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn described in *The Gulag Archipelago*, the Chechens' will to survive endured.

"There was one nation which would not give in, would not acquire the mental habits of submission -- and not just individual rebels among them, but the whole nation to a man. These were the Chechens... I would say that of all the special settlers, the Chechens alone showed themselves unbroken in spirit. They had been treacherously snatched from their home, and from that day they believed in nothing... The Chechens never sought to please, to ingratiate themselves with the bosses; their attitude was always haughty and indeed openly hostile... And here is the extraordinary thing: everyone was afraid of them. No one could stop them from living as they did. The regime which had ruled the land for thirty years could not force them to respect its laws."

Conditions for the Chechens remained harsh until after the death of Stalin in 1953. Soon afterward Chechens were making official representations in Moscow for permission to return to their homeland; indeed, a trickle of Chechens had already started to return to their homes. In 1956, at the 20th Party Congress, the Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev acknowledged the wrongs that had been done the Chechens and the other exiled peoples. The trickle had by this time become a flood, despite the authorities' best efforts to prevent the Chechens returning -- often bringing with them the bones of their kindred in order to bury them in their ancestral graveyards.

But their lives could never really return to what they had been before 1944. The evil of the deportations lived on in memories, poverty, ill-health, and the bitterness spawned by these sufferings. Returning Chechens also found that their homes had been given to Russian and Dagestani settlers, from whom they had to be bought back; few were able to do so.

The deportations were not only a personal catastrophe for each of the Chechens; they were also a collective disaster for the Chechen nation as a whole. Many of the ancient mountain *Aûls* were in ruins and uninhabitable, forcing most of the Chechen people to live in the plains for the first time in their history, and irrevocably altering their mountain ways. Moreover, the massive loss of life among the elderly disrupted a rich oral tradition stretching back through many centuries, inflicting grave damage on Chechen culture.

The trauma and disruption inflicted by the genocide and the Chechens' subsequent ordeals cannot be overestimated, and the memories and grief of those terrible years are keenly felt by the Chechen people to this day.

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