

*Жертвы двух диктатур. Остарбайтеры и военнопленные в Третьем Рейхе и их репатриация* by P. M. POLYAN. Moscow: Vash Vybor TsIRZ, 1996.

Reviewed by **YU. L. Pivovarov**  
*Institute of Geography of the Russian  
Academy of Sciences, Moscow*

The Great Patriotic War, which ended more than half a century ago, has been the subject of thousands of books. Yet the truth about the war was parcelled out to us in tiny bits. The victory was shrouded in lies. Thus, many significant events of this most bloody war in the history of mankind had been invariably passed over in silence until recently, such as, for instance, the amazing unpreparedness of the USSR to fight Hitler's Germany with the ensuing consequences – a series of shattering defeats sustained by the victor at the first stage of the war, the political improvidence and strategic incompetence of the leaders and marshals, which resulted in huge losses in the armed forces and among civilians.

Among the banned topics was also the tragic fate of Soviet prisoners of war and civilian workers (*ostarbeiters*) driven by the German invaders to Germany during World War II for the purpose of forced labour. And this tragedy fell to the lot of many millions of Soviet people. As it appears, prisoners of war numbered over 5.7 million; the civilians displaced from the USSR to the territory of Germany or that of its allies, amounted to nearly the same number – 5.4 to 5.5 million. Imagination is struck not only by the sum total of these figures but also by what actually stands behind them. Thus, 3.3 million prisoners of war (i.e. 57% of their total number!) perished in captivity, about 2 million having perished before February 1942; about one million served in General Vlasov's Army and other volunteer units; 0.5 million made their escape from camps or were rescued by the Red Army, and only a mere 930 thousand managed, by the end of the war, to preserve both their lives and the war prisoner's status (p. 66).

But even those relatively few who survived (16–17% of the total number of prisoners of war) as well as those driven by force to German slavery had, till the

end of their days, to bear the stigma of a traitor, fascist hireling and accomplice, who, through their labour, had strengthened the enemy's might and thus betrayed their homeland. In the country of absolutely no rights, the rights of these millions of unfortunates were more infringed than those of the rest. They had to avoid any mention of their forced journey to the Third Reich.

The cruel fate and grim life of war prisoners and *ostarbeiters* melted their tragedy into one common historical theme. It is this that determined the theme of P. M. Polyan's monographic research.

The reviewed book centres around one of the least studied (yet already fairly entangled) and dramatic stages in the common fate of prisoners of war and other Soviet citizens driven by war to Germany – their repatriation to the USSR that started before the Yalta agreements (February 1945) and lasted for as long as seven postwar years. The sources traced by the author in the archives of Russia (and, partly, in western archives) enabled him to analyse this scantily explored yet essential process in a most thorough fashion. Such issues as being taken prisoner, “recruitment”, and the hardships that prisoners of war and *ostarbeiters* went through in the enemy's country are discussed in a succinct manner since these issues have been described most exhaustively in western, particularly German, historical literature.

Hence, the author strictly delimits his “pioneer” theme. And this self-restriction enables him, through relying on vast archival and documentary materials, to tell the shattering truth about the tragedy of millions of Soviet people who found themselves, as fate willed it, between Stalin's “hammer” and Hitler's “anvil” and who fell prey to two dictatorships.

P. M. Polyan has coped with this task brilliantly.

The success derives from many factors without which it would hardly have been possible to overcome various difficulties facing the author. Among these factors we can single out the author's great enthusiasm for the theme; recognition not only of its vast scientific, but also moral significance; extensive experience in handling archive sources (due to his serious archive-based study of O. E. Mandelshtam's work) and demographic statistics (as a professional geographer); a rare opportunity of making a sufficiently thorough use of the archives and literature of “both sides” – Soviet and western, especially German; the ability to organise scrupulously and effectively the painstaking job of processing the vast and scattered primary material; and the multiple approbation of the obtained results among historians, geographers, archivists, and politologists in Russia as well as abroad (see p. 15). In this connection it is essential to stress a conceptual vision of the problem, the clarity and well-structured pattern of the author's conception, which contributed to lucidity in presenting the multilevel results of the research.

As a result, P. M. Polyan has written the first truly thorough monograph that makes the destiny of Soviet prisoners of war and *ostarbeiters* an independent historical phenomenon. For this purpose he made extensive use of diverse



materials available not only in Russia but also in Germany and Austria, which cover mainly the years 1941–1956. The book is published under the auspices of the Institute of Geography (the Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow) and the War Consequences Research Institute, named after L. Boltzman (Graz-Vienna).

The work consists of two parts. Part I, entitled “Russians in the Reich: the first and the last” (three chapters), comprises a condensed outline of status definitions and numerical characteristics of Soviet war prisoners and *ostarbeiters* in the Third Reich. The author describes the circumstances under which they were taken prisoners, their captivity as such, forced “recruitment” and deportation to Germany as well as the most essential facts of their daily life and labour.

Part II – ““Motherland is waiting for you, bastards!”: Repatriation and escape from it” (four chapters) – shows the diversity of fates that fell to the lot of former Soviet prisoners of war and *ostarbeiters* on their return from Germany. The author consistently discloses preparations for repatriation in 1943–1945, its actual course in 1944–1952 as well as the filtration of repatriates and their reintegration into Soviet society. It should be stressed that alongside the general democratisation of the totalitarian Soviet regime, the basic reason for putting an end to hushing up this sorrowful topic comprised the recently gained access to the previously secret, extremely rich Russian archive stocks.

Of great value are also the voluminous appendices containing information little known to the reading public, especially to the reader in this country. These comprise official documents, both Soviet and German, dating back to those years, statistical data, a list of works cited, explanations to illustrations, indices of names and toponyms. All this takes up as much as one-fifth of the whole volume, successfully supplementing its basic content and testifying to a high standard of the reviewed publication. It should be noted in this connection that each subchapter (and there are 38 in all!) is supplied with informative and detailed end-notes providing the reader with additional interesting information. Also, the reference body of the book is marked by its high standard, which is especially important for using such vast and diverse materials.

P. M. Polyan’s work is, first and foremost, a thorough scientific research although its significance (as will be shown below) reaches far beyond. The book is based on a strict system of analysing and proving the theses and conclusions put forward by the author. It is characterised by a conceptual insight into the essence of the historical phenomenon under discussion, which, in brief, comes down to the following: those millions of Soviet people who, mainly due to the unpreparedness for war on the part of the USSR, headed by “the father of the peoples,” had been taken prisoners or herded into German slavery, found themselves doomed on their return home (those who survived), through the same man’s evil will, to camps and afflictions, being forced to carry the life-long stigma of traitors and the enemy’s henchmen who betrayed their homeland.

This harsh conclusion calls for equally strong evidence. And this evidence is presented in the reviewed book. For this purpose, the author does not confine

himself to analysing and comparing divergent literature, although different views on the given issue are of great importance, representing, in a sense, the “second reality.” P. M. Polyan has also widely drawn on the essentially “intact” materials of Russia’s largest archives (first of all, the State Archives of the Russian Federation, the former Special Archives, the archives of the former KGB, the former Central Party Archives of the Marx-Engels-Lenin Institute, and others) as well as German archives (the Federal Military Archives, Freiburg; the Federal Archives in Koblenz, Potsdam, etc.). To sources of paramount importance belongs the personal evidence of *ostarbeiters* and prisoners of war, including the diaries of *ostarbeiter* V. M. Baranov (dating September 1943 to January 1944) and prisoner of war S. Voropayev (dating March 1944 to March 1945), home-sent letters as well as the memoirs of former Soviet prisoners of war published in the West – those by non-returnees N. Vashchenko, I. Lugin, P. Palii, F. Cheron, and others. Finally, it is necessary to mention separately the results of the selective questionnaire-based survey carried out among the former *ostarbeiters* in 1991–1992. Apart from valuable information, this survey stimulated the very shaping of the reviewed book’s conception.

Thus, P. M. Polyan’s research is founded not only on standard (yet necessary) literary sources but also, to a great extent, on unique, little known materials, which makes the author’s standpoint most convincing.

That is why the reader is so impressed by the panorama of this historical phenomenon, enormous in its scope and significance – the movement of millions of people “there and back,” from one dictatorship to the other, depicted in an austere, accurate, and almost unemotional tone. Yet, already from the very first pages of the book, the reader is captured by the analysis of little known, tragic data about the sustained losses, prisoners of war, the civilians driven to Germany as labour force from the Ukraine, Byelorussia, Russia, the Baltic republics, and, further on, by the description of the incredible misadventures that became part and parcel of repatriation conducted the Soviet way. It seems unbelievable that such an epopee could have been concealed for so long; even the epoch of *glasnost* unveiled but little in the history of *ostarbeiters* (p. 4).

The panoramic vision of this historical phenomenon is masterfully combined with striking, so far quite unknown details. Thus, speaking of mass forced deportation from the USSR (let it be reminded that deportation involved 5.5 million civilians), the author adduces facts that are hard to apprehend rationally and that have been overlooked by everybody else: Russian and Ukrainian workers had been in the Reich... before Germany attacked the USSR (pp. 75–76). Yet the mass deportations of Eastern workers began in spring 1942. For this purpose, Hitler set up the post of General Commissioner for Utilising Labour Resources and in March 1942 appointed Fritz Zaukel to this position. The book renders a most vivid description of this figure, one of the major war criminals later sentenced to death at the Nuremberg Trials (1946). Although the four so-called “Zaukel’s Programmes” (1942–1944) failed to solve the problem of



manpower (the monster of war economy was insatiable), the Department for Utilising Labour Resources had supplied Germany with nearly 5.4 million foreign workers. And towards the end of the war their total number was estimated at 10–12 million, i.e., every fifth workman in the Reich appeared to be – a foreigner (pp. 118–119).

In an equally fascinating way, P. M. Polyan portrays the chief repatriator of the Soviet Union (later Marshal of the Soviet Union) – Philip Golikov, who in October 1944 in the rank of major-general became the head of the newly formed Office of the Commissioner of the Soviet of People's Commissars of the USSR for repatriating USSR citizens from Germany and the countries under its occupation. At the new stage of his career, this colourful figure was assigned the part of a Soviet Fritz Zaukel, or, to be more exact, anti-Zaukel. By promises or by threats, by hook or by crook, he had to secure the return of millions of hands scattered abroad to his Communist State, rendered largely depopulated in the course of the war (p. 190). And he proved to be worthy of his "counterpart" who came to such a bad end. Within a short space of time, in close co-operation with the NKVD, NKGB, SMERSH, and other punitive bodies, Ph. I. Golikov managed to set up, apart from his own Central Office, a whole infrastructure of camps, transportation, organisationally related units, etc., as well as a network of repatriation bodies in the Field Forces, in the rear, and "locally" – in the republics and provinces of the USSR and nearly all over the world. Besides practically all the countries of Europe, foreign-stationed "missions" of the Repatriation Office emerged in the U.S.A., Korea, China, Canada, Lebanon, Argentina, etc., (see Supplement 4.4., pp. 383–388) whose function consisted in reaching non-returnees wherever these happened to be. The camp-oriented machine of repatriation described in detail by P. M. Polyan was set in full motion in the hot summer of 1945, following the "agreement" eventually made with the allies to conduct repatriation the Soviet way. As a result, by 1. September 1945, the total number of repatriates had exceeded 5.1 million. The notorious Zaukel had not even dreamt of such speed!

Dwelling on methods of repatriation, the author concludes that these, especially in the beginning, strikingly resembled the methods of German "recruitment" – the same commissions, the same threatening notices on posts, the same lists, the same official chasing of human beings, the same cattle carriages for transporting people, the same humiliation, insults, and violence (p. 233).

Exposing "Philip and his team," the author, relying on documentary evidence, shows in detail that their activities would never have gained such a scope, especially in the summer of 1945, if the allies – Great Britain and the USA – had not shamefully agreed to practically all the USSR demands concerning forced deportation of millions of "former Red Army soldiers, civilian working-men, and other enemy accomplices." The downslide of the "gentlemen and democrats" from the standards of international law, particularly the Geneva convention of 1929, to the agreement in Yalta (February 1945), the latter representing in essence the

“legal basis” of lawlessness and consent to forced repatriation, is analysed with frightening simplicity (pp. 196–203). A classical example of the consequences of this position adopted by adherents of western democratic values, including the rights of the individual, was the British who most shamefully extradited to the Soviets tens of thousands of Kuban, Tersa and Don Cossacks in Austria in late May – early June 1945; by the same British extraditing 150 000 Croatian refugees to Marshal Tito and, especially, the extradition of Russian emigrants of the Civil War period, among them famous White Army generals P. N. Krasnov, A. G. Shkuro, K. Sultan-Girey. The latter fact ran counter not only to international conventions; this went far beyond even the Yalta Treaty, the “legal basis” of repatriation in the Soviet spirit.

The book is permeated with less known events of those years, interesting documents, historical evidence. Yet the narrative is marked by a high degree of integrity. This is secured by the author’s clear-cut conception, structured most carefully, and his ability to render the fates of separate characters, never losing sight of the historical phenomenon to which the book is devoted. We are witnesses to a rare occasion when separate events, human destinies, and other details do not interrupt the narrative but, on the contrary, cement it, giving extra substance to the conclusions. Now the basic conclusion sounds fairly dismal: the millions who had suffered at the hands of both Hitler and Stalin – the main haters of humanity of the 20th century – found themselves, once back home, to be treated as second-rank citizens. And the author shows with conviction that, regrettably, this is the truth, based on the cruel fate of millions of outcasts; this and not the smooth propagandistic and literary fabrications presented for so long, concocted in the spirit of “I Want Back Home”, a play by S. Mikhalkov, a scribbler awarded the 1946 Stalin Prize of the Second Class.

It is essential not only to voice this truth but also to defend it, the more so that the first scientific publications that appeared in the early ‘90s relying on the archives that had become accessible and incorporating vast statistical data, still contain stale, bombastic ideologisms of the cold war period (V. N. Zemskov, A. A. Shevyakov). These publications preserve and, in a sense, even reinforce the customary Soviet myths, according to which the majority of the repatriates’ fate practically did not differ from that of ordinary people in the USSR, whereas forced repatriation itself was the most lawful and just solution, etc., etc. That is why the reviewed book allows considerable space for substantiating the groundlessness and danger of similar viewpoints expressed by the “new publishers and theoreticians” of the last tide.

P. M. Polyan’s book cannot be viewed solely as a contribution to historical science. It carries a great moral charge, exceptionally important for developing the self-consciousness of Russian society today. For one, it makes us change our attitude towards the outcasts who were treated so unjustly by the Soviet regime. And secondly, it shows once again, from a new angle, the dangerous steadfastness of the ideology of fascism (whatever form the latter may take – national-socialism



or communo-fascism) with its cynical attitude to the individual and freedom (do you remember a recent slogan – “the personal through the social”?) whereby the value of human life is reduced to zero.

Considered in this light, the book under review appears to be dangerously topical, as it were. Thus a question arises naturally – whether the comparatively recent tragic events in Sumgait, Baku, Tbilisi, Vilnius, the bloodshed in Chechnya (again to the accompaniment of the leaders’ enthusiastic speeches about all sorts of praiseworthy impulses like “enforcing the constitutional order”), or the present-day indifferent and often humiliating attitude to refugees in Russia, especially the senile ones, the attitude displayed also by the leaders of the Federal Migration Service (the newspapers abound in outrageous facts), which, by its status, is supposed to alleviate these people’s lot – whether all this is not a repercussion of the events and the ideology of disregard for the individual that are so forcibly shown by the author. Indeed, any historical research, especially the one written with concern and talent, is often very topical also for those living today.

Another strength of the book lies in its stylistic and literary peculiarities. The style of the narrative is precise, austere, laconic, yet at the same time colourful and rich in detail. The author never gives vent to emotions that are hard to keep in check while describing such tragic events. Yet, the stylistic peculiarities of his narrative differ vastly with respect to who is being discussed – the victims or the executioners. While speaking of the former, the author sounds compassionate and sympathetic. The description of the executioners and all those who supported them in this way or other is permeated with irony or sarcasm, which is managed splendidly. It is interesting to note that in the latter case, too, the text is devoid of strong epithets, abuses, or insults directed towards the “chief organizers” of antihuman actions, liars, and demagogues, whoever these turned out to be. And this manner of narration enables the reader to sense more acutely the whole range of the sufferings experienced by the characters of the book.

A fine specimen of publishing craft and design (artist V. Trofimov), the book, due to its literary language and the stylistic features noted above, is easy to read and secures mounting interest. It is a uniquely integral whole, written in one breath, as it were. At this point it should be noted that it took the author only five years to accomplish his extensive research and publish his findings! Unfortunately, the print-run is too small (850 copies), but such is the fate of the majority of scientific works today.

Russian society is gradually leaving behind the times when historical science needed myths and legends, not facts and the truth, to secure easier manipulation with public consciousness. At present, an increasing number of researchers is settling for the truth, however bitter this truth might be, as the basic target in analysing historical phenomena. If, in addition, the researcher possesses a conceptual vision of the subject of his research, a masterful technique of handling archival materials, an urge to penetrate into the essence of the historical phenomena under investigation, and, finally, an appreciation of the importance of

moral issues in assessing the past, however unsightly the latter may be, then success will be granted.

The reviewed book serves a vivid illustration of the previous statement.

Translated from Russian by Irina Ladusseva

Reviewer's address:

Festivalnaya ul. 15-3-13

Moscow 125 195

Russia

Phone: (095) 458-7234

Fax: (095) 959-0033