ABSTRACT

THE KNOWLEDGE FACTOR: Refugees in Central and Eastern Europe, 1912-2001

Returnees or Refugees?
The Reception of Soviet Repatriates in the USSR, 1945-1946

At the end of World War II, almost six million Soviet people were outside the Soviet Union, displaced by the war as prisoners, forced laborers or willing migrants in Germany and allied states. The overwhelming majority of displaced Soviets returned to the USSR, most in a massive population transfer in the summer of 1945. Although scholars have examined the diplomatic process that allowed a minority of these would-be Soviets to remain abroad, what remains unstudied is the experience of return. How did returnees’ time as refugees alter their reception by the Soviet state and society? To what extent were repatriates still considered Soviet citizens and to what extent had they become refugees? How did their former neighbors receive returnees as they transformed into refugees who placed an additional burden on the local postwar economy? The case of Soviet repatriates reveals how the return of a displaced population reflects aspects of a more general refugee experience.

Repatriates received a mixed reception among various Soviet official and social actors in 1945. Bureaucrats in the Soviet government’s Administration for Repatriation attempted to integrate repatriates into Soviet life as part of postwar reconstruction efforts, even providing some skilled repatriates with recognition as qualified laborers. As these Soviets returned to their villages and towns, though, their neighbors viewed them skeptically or with outright hostility. Fearful that Soviet policing administrations like the NKVD and SMERSH would uncover incriminating materials about the returnees, locals branded repatriates as “traitors” and “Germans,” suggesting that their own loyalty had been greater. Although this reception was partially a product of the postwar Stalinist environment, I argue that these labels in part reflected the broader phenomenon of social reception of refugees. As in the recent refugee crises in Europe and the United States, hostile reactions to repatriates revealed an attempt to demonize a marginal outsider population, which in turn justified the withholding of resources to a group that the local population feared would become a burden.

Seth Bernstein