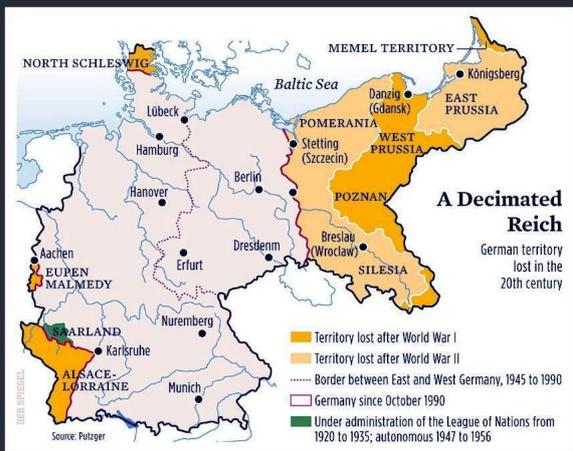# HOW DID MILLIONS OF PEOPLE LOSE THEIR HOMES?

To avoid being involved in historiographical disputes about the exact numbers of victims and the battles of memories, we prefer in the following not to operate with numbers. The value of human life can not be measured in comparison to other nations.

Refugees moving westwards in 1945. Courtesy of the German Federal Archives

the losses of Germany

A Decimated Reich

German territory lost in the 20th century

- Territory lost after World War I
- Territory lost after World War II
- Border between East and West Germany, 1945 to 1990
- Germany since October 1990
- Under administration of the League of Nations from 1920 to 1935; autonomous 1947 to 1956
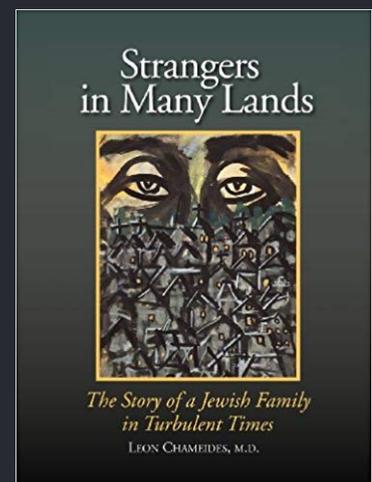
Source: Putzger

During the war, economic objects, lines of communication and even entire cities were destroyed. The civilian population was killed, suffered from hunger, deportations and evacuations. The war had ended, but its logic continued to dominate people. The army still remained a legitimate tool for solving political and social issues and systematic violence against the civilian population continued. One of these problems was the problem of post-war borders.

The issue of new borders was extremely difficult because it was necessary to establish a balance of power in the region and prevent future conflicts. But the negotiators pursued their hidden goals. Many civilians had to leave their home and move to another country, often in incredible rush and under threat of violence.

New borders were set for Germany and a new Eastern border with Poland was established. Many Germans were forced to leave their homes. Sometimes they became victims of aggression by other civilians who blamed all the Germans for the horror of war they experienced. Furthermore, with the help of the army, a violent "population exchange" was conducted between the Ukraine, Poland and Belarus. As a result lots of Ukrainians, Poles, Belarusians, Jews, Roma and Sinti among them lost their homes and most of their property.

"The front was getting closer, we could hear it. On February 8, 1945, the wagons were prepared for the trek [...].
The journey continued in the direction of Sudetenland. [...] It was a misery how man and animal had to torture each other in this cold. The screams of the people, especially the children, when a wagon had slipped or tipped over, made many people nervous. Everyone was overtired. We were always running back and forth from the cold because our limbs became stiff. All we had to do was keep going, keep going, don't stop. [...]
In May the war was over. [...] For weeks we were on our way home, until we finally arrived in our Gäbersdorf, where the Russians and Poles had lived for a long time [...]
So we lived for a year among Poles and Russians. Polish families moved into our houses, a Polish police ruled over us. Pentecost 1946 we were expelled. We were taken away in 50 cattle wagons and then taken to a collection camp near Braunschweig after three days."

Margarethe Scheede flew on February 8 in 1945 from her hometown Gäbersdorf, came back and was then taken away a second time one year later.

Strangers in Many Lands

The Story of a Jewish Family in Turbulent Times

LEON CHAMEIDES, M.D.

Leon Chameides flew in winter 1946 in a carriage for cattle from Lviv, that became part of the Ukraine, to the new Western border of Poland. Here you can find his story:

watch the interview here:
https://utka.su/6yZCs+

HOW DID MILLIONS OF PEOPLE LOSE THEIR HOMES?

the caricature on the borders divisions

Divisions of Poland

As a result of the Potsdam Conference 1945, East Germany became a part of new Communist Poland. Polish citizens were relocated to these lands and the deportation of the German population begun. The Polish army surrounded villages, gave people several hours to pack and transported them across the border. The Germans worked in camps, some of them died. They could also leave Poland "voluntarily" by trains. By the end of 1947 almost the entire German population left Poland: both refugees and deportees.

On the other hand, the Polish were in a difficult situation too. Although the country was among the winners, it had to give 47% of its pre-war territory to the USSR (see map on the right side). The Soviet government resettled Poles and Jews from the former Eastern Poland, but left there only Belarusians, Ukrainians and Lithuanians.

Moreover, Communist Poland, not without the participation of the USSR in 1947, conducted an operation against the Ukrainians called "Visla". Ukrainians were forced to move from the southern part of the country to the east territories taken from Germany, most of them were resettled to Ukrainian territoriy. Operation "Visla" was supposed to force the Ukrainians in Poland to assimilate with the Polish culture and break up the UPA units in Poland. After the success on the Ukrainian-Polish border, the USSR used similar methods interfering in the Baltic countries.
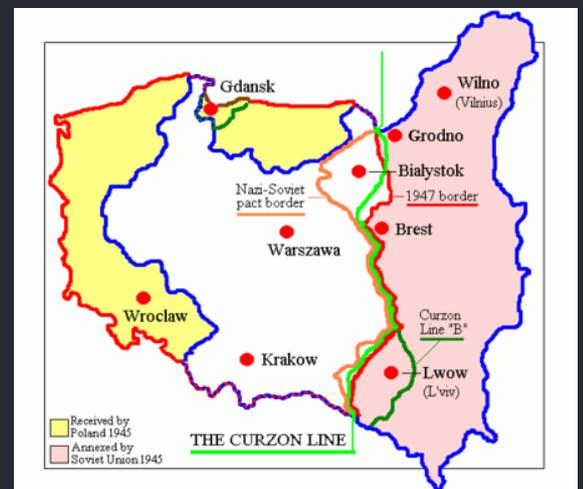
The Soviet regime sent its own citizen to camps, called Gulag, and to special settlements. Most of the new Gulag prisoners were political prisoners and people from the lands that Stalin took back in 1945. Some Ukrainians were deported from the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic to the Gulag because they were blaimed for have been connected to the Ukrainian nationalists. At the same time, the Soviet authorities arrested Red Army veterans and detained them in the GULAG on charges of collaborating with the Nazis.

The Soviet and Polish communist regimes achieved a curious result for 1944–1947: they removed ethnic minorities on both sides of the Soviet-Polish border. The communists adopted their enemies' program of "ethnic cleansing".

GULAG map

You can see more information about what was experienced by people here:

in German language: Living Museum Online: https://www.dhm.de/lemo/
(eyewitness reports in German and English language)
in Russian language: the site about GULAG: http://www.gulag.online
in Ukrainian and other languages:
http://www.pametnaroda.cz/anniversary/detail/id/127?locale=uk_UA

Questions:

- In your opinion, what were the challenges that people faced within the different places: in destroyed Germany? In a Gulag? In different parts of the USSR?
- Try to make a survey among your acquaintance, relatives and friends. Maybe you discover that somebody or somebody's ancestors experienced or was an witness of displacement/deportation/evacuation/ethnic conflict in 1945 and onward?