

The Repatriation of Soviet Prisoners of War and Displaced Peoples from the Auvergne after the Second World War

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Among the many displaced foreign nationals liberated during the Allied advance across France in 1944 were some 100,000 or more Soviet prisoners of war of the Germans, pressed into the service of the Wehrmacht. Many fled to the Maquis ahead of the Allied assaults and fought with the Resistance for the liberation of France. Others were captured in German uniform and held as prisoners of war of the Allies. Very soon a network of camps for these Soviet prisoners was dispersed about the French countryside.¹

The French ministry for prisoners, deportees and refugees (Ministère des prisonniers, déportés et réfugiés), assumed responsibility for the repatriations. With the assistance of the ministry for the army, eighty-three repatriation camps were established by April 1945, holding some 58,000 Soviet prisoners of war.² The primary objective of ministry for prisoners, deportees and refugees was the repatriation and rehabilitation of French prisoners of war and deportees from Germany and the east, but it also took on the responsibility of organizing the repatriation of these Soviet prisoners of war and other displaced foreign nationals. This task

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¹ The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs assessed the number of repatriable Soviet nationals in August 1945 at around 120,000. Paris, Archives diplomatiques, Ministère des Affaires étrangères (MAE), Z – Europe, URSS Z 473–73, Rapatriement de français, rapatriement de russes (mai 1945 – septembre 1945), vol. 67. The number is uncertain. The displaced Soviets in France were in constant flux, moving from one place and one camp to another; many evaded the camps and escaped into the countryside or the cities. Also liberated and held in camps until the end of the war were prisoners of war, refugees, and displaced persons from Poland, Czechoslovakia, the Netherlands, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and Romania, whose number was more precisely calculated at 115,846 in early 1945. Paris, Archives nationales (AN) F9 3821.

² Ministère des prisonniers, déportés et réfugiés, *Bilan d'effort*, 81. The Ministry anticipated many more prisoners, however, as the camps were prepared to receive up to 70,000 individuals. At the same time, some 74,000 Soviet prisoners were taken in hand by the British and the United States armies. Coudry, *Les camps soviétiques en France*, 57. Coudry lists a total of seventy camps under French control, and another six under American and British control.

required the provisioning the camps, the welfare and upkeep of the repatriates, the organization of transport, and the maintenance of public order and calm while the transfers proceeded. At the national level, other ministries—the interior, the army, and foreign affairs—made the practical, political and financial agreements with foreign governments for the return of their repatriates. All were major challenges for the provisional government, its ministries and regional officials. Their efforts would contribute towards the establishment of effective and efficient post-war administration.

Such a large undertaking, however, has scarcely left a trace in French post-war memory, preoccupied as the French people were with the traumas of occupation and war, survival and subsistence, and with getting their lives back to normal.³ The return of the “absent” French prisoners and deportees also subsumed memories of the transitory experiences local communities might have had of these foreign prisoners and displaced persons. For the various national communities of Soviet exiles in France, on the other hand, the historical memory of the prisoners of war sustained their own historical memories of oppression; they would commemorate the oppression of their co-nationals long after the war, at the hands of the Soviets, at the hands of their Nazi captors, and at the hands of the French who surrendered them to Stalin when, they believed, they should have rightfully protected them as victims of Stalin’s persecutions.⁴ Historical understanding of these repatriations in fact assumes the surrender of French sovereignty to the Soviet military authorities dispatched to France to oversee the return of the prisoners to the Soviet Union. An analogy is drawn between the examples of forced repatriation and surrender of Soviet prisoners at the hands of the British and Americans and the repatriations from France. It is assumed therefore that France was complicit in the forcible repatriation of Soviet nationals, and indeed it is condemned as the most pliant of western governments to Moscow’s demands.⁵

These conclusions warrant a review of the archival records and the framework and process of the repatriations they reveal. As one of the better documented regions in which the repatriation camps for the Soviet prisoners of war were found, the Auvergne region of central France offers particular insights into the problems of the post-war repatriations. Faced with the problems of receiving, accommodating, caring for, and then overseeing the return of Soviet nationals, there was the real danger of letting matters slip and losing control because of the yet underdeveloped and, more importantly, unprepared levels of local authority, and poorly resourced regional officials. Disorder, a lack of discipline, and a failure to contain the worst behavior of the liberated Soviet prisoners characterized the first difficult months of this period leading to their repatriation. Without effective controls it would have been possible for the Soviets to have had their way, with a breakdown of order and the loss of French authority. The example of the Soviets in the Auvergne demonstrates instead the role the repatriations played in normalizing political authority and even the assertion of French sovereignty in this critical period of post-war transition.⁶

The search for suitable locations for new camps in the Auvergne began in November 1944. As the Allies were preparing for the winter military campaign, the camps for prisoners and the displaced in the north and east had been cleared.⁷ In all, some twelve camps were established in the four departments of the Auvergne to receive the Soviet prisoners of war—

³ Tourtier-Bonazzi, “Les ressortissants soviétiques dans le département de la Somme,” 219–23.

⁴ Coudry, *Les camps soviétiques en France*; Coudry, “Le rapatriement des ressortissants soviétiques,” 119–40; Polian and Colpart, “Le rapatriement des citoyens soviétiques,” 165–89.

⁵ Elliott, *Pawns of Yalta*, 143fol.; Tolstoy, *Victims of Yalta*, 373fol.

⁶ AN F9 3831, “Puy-de-Dôme”; AN F7 15176. Clermont-Ferrand, Archives départementales de Puy-de-Dôme (AD PDD) 253 W 23 and 253 W 35. The series AN F9 3827-3841, records of the Ministère des Prisonniers, Déportés et Réfugiés, document the camps in their various departments.

⁷ *Bilan d’effort*, 80–81

the Alliers, the Cantal, the Haut-Loire, and the Puy-de-Dôme. Officers of the ministry for prisoners, deportees and refugees were responsible for the establishment, provisioning and maintenance of the camps. They were veterans of the regular army, joined by returned prisoners of war and demobilized resistance fighters of the Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur (FFI) who found a new purpose assisting the return to peace.⁸ French and Allied military authorities, with the assistance of the Red Cross, oversaw the first transfers of the prisoners.

The French provisional government and the Soviet Union made their initial arrangements for the repatriation of Soviet nationals in October 1944. Originally a verbal agreement between the French foreign minister, Georges Bidault, and the Soviet ambassador to Paris, Aleksandr Bogomolov, final arrangements were formalized in November 1944 when General de Gaulle travelled to Moscow to meet with Stalin. Under this accord, France undertook to repatriate Soviet nationals who had been “displaced from their territories of origin by reason of the events of the war.” It also obliged France to hand over to Soviet authorities all Soviet nationals suspected of the “crime of treason or of intelligence with the enemy.” For this reason, France, like the British and the Americans, refused to accept any claims for protection from repatriates who feared retribution after returning to the Soviet Union. Indeed, France insisted that those who refused to return could only have been motivated by their fear of having collaborated with the Germans.⁹

The accord was reciprocal. The Soviet Union agreed to repatriate all French prisoners of war, deportees or forced workers liberated by the Red Army in central and eastern Europe. France awaited their speedy return, so that democratic elections for a new legislature could be held and the return to constitutional government begun. The return of the French prisoners and deportees in Soviet hands was nevertheless dependent on France's compliance with the Soviet demands for the repatriation of Soviet prisoners and deportees.

The reciprocal agreements required both parties to pay for the cost of maintenance and repatriation of their own nationals, and allowed for both to dispatch military missions to each other's countries to assist in locating their respective nationals. A French mission therefore was invited to the Soviet Union to locate and repatriate French nationals, while France welcomed a Soviet military mission to oversee the repatriation of Soviet nationals. This part of the repatriation agreement was the most controversial, as it gave the Soviet officers dispatched from Moscow full authority over Soviet nationals in the repatriation camps and over their return journeys.¹⁰ This has been interpreted as the surrender of French sovereignty to the Soviets and meek compliance with Stalin's orders. The idea of repatriation envoys was in fact first raised in March 1944 when France was eager to secure the return of its prisoners of war liberated by the Red Army in eastern Germany. It was dismissed by the Soviets at the time as premature, however, but later embraced by them when France had been liberated and could start to return Soviet prisoners.¹¹ The reciprocal missions were therefore a key component of the repatriation accord from an early stage, conferring on each side the right to find and return their own nationals. The formal Franco-Soviet Repatriation Accord was signed on June 29, 1945, when the repatriations were already well under way, and when in fact the French believed they were reaching their end.¹²

⁸ On the background and formation of the Ministry for Prisoners, Deportees and Refugees, *Bilan d'effort*, 13–30.

⁹ AN F7 15176, “Accord de Rapatriement Franco-Soviétique, octobre 1944,” *Ministre des Affaires étrangères*, Jan. 25, 1945.

¹⁰ See especially Elliott, *Pawns of Yalta*, 143f.

¹¹ *Bilan d'effort*, 19.

¹² “Accord concernant l'entretien et le rapatriement des citoyens français et soviétiques se trouvant sous le contrôle respectif des autorités soviétiques et françaises,” Jun 29, 1945, reprinted in Coudry, *Les camps soviétiques en France*, Annex.

The French interpretation of the Accord was that the Soviet prisoners of war and displaced persons were “free citizens of an allied power, victims of the events of the war.”¹³ They were classified as “Soviet nationals” (*ressortissants soviétiques*), but the term “refugee” was in common usage, and the word “prisoner” persisted in reports and correspondence even though local officials were instructed not to confuse the status of these Soviets with that of prisoners of war.¹⁴ Soviet nationals and repatriates are the most accurate description, as they were not always soldiers or prisoners of war. Many Soviet civilians were also liberated, having been brought by the Germans from the east as forced laborers. They were consequently classified as displaced persons on their liberation. The Soviet repatriates were therefore a mix of military and civilians, men, women and children, including displaced families, sometimes formed during the years of captivity.

The camps in the Auvergne were temporary, until the circumstances of the war made repatriation possible. It was not easy to find appropriate sites, however. Many public buildings were already used as reception centers for returning French prisoners of war, and much larger spaces were needed than these provided. Instead, in the department of the Puy-de-Dôme, disused factories and former *Chantiers de Jeunesse* in the townships of Theix, Courpière, Châtel-Guyon, Pont de Lagat and Suchères, and an abandoned convent in the village Moissat, were prepared to receive Soviet repatriates from late 1944. There were problems with providing adequate sources of water and electricity, but their condition was generally considered suitable enough. The camps at Courpière and Moissat, however, were not yet fully functional when they received their first convoys in early 1945. The largest camp, at Bourg-Lastic, some forty kilometers south-west of Clermont-Ferrand, was a former military camp used only in the summer, and it lacked facilities for winter residence. It was nevertheless ready to receive its first convoy of repatriates in December 1944. Altogether, these camps could accommodate at most 3,500 individuals each. Requisitioned hotels and villas in the spa town of La Bourboule, in the mountains on the Dordogne River, could accommodate another 2,500.

In the Alliers, it was believed that former *Chantiers de Jeunesse* in Montmarauet and Tronçais could accommodate up to 8,000 individuals, and Murat (Cantal) another 2,500, but none were ready to receive any repatriates before February 1945. There were few suitable sites in the Cantal, as most of the *Chantiers de Jeunesse* had been destroyed in fighting between the Wehrmacht and the Maquis.¹⁵ Suitable sites were also hard to find in the Haute-Loire, but a disused military barracks in Espaly-Saint-Marcel and a disused factory in the village of Alliról were quickly repurposed to accommodate a battalion of Soviet soldiers who had fled the Wehrmacht on the withdrawal of German troops from Le Puy when it was liberated by the Maquis.¹⁶

The first convey of Soviet repatriates arrived from Verdun on December 18, 1944. A total of 2,150 individuals (1,350 men, 700 women, 100 children) were placed in the camp at Bourg-Lastic. A second convoy arrived on December 30, with about 1,390 Soviet repatriates transferred from Châlons-sur-Marne.¹⁷

These first arrivals were marked by troubles and ill-discipline, problems which would characterize this early phase of the repatriations. Local French officers of the ministry of prisoners, deportees and refugees were expecting no more than 1,000 Soviets in the second convoy, as the camp at Bourg-Lastic could not accommodate more. But poor planning of the

¹³ AD PDD 253 W 35, “Instructions interministérielles no. 1, sur les mesures à prendre à l’égard des ressortissants de l’Union des Républiques socialistes soviétiques,” Feb. 12, 1945.

¹⁴ AN, F7 16117, Circulaire 259, Feb. 6, 1945. Burgess, “Remaking Asylum in Post-War France, 1944-52,” 569.

¹⁵ AD PDD 253 W 35, Barassin, Directeur régional des prisonniers de guerre et déportés, Nov. 20, 1944.

¹⁶ AD PDD 253 W 35, Direction régionale, Ministère des prisonniers, déportés, et réfugiés, Jan. 31, 1945.

¹⁷ AD PDD 253 W 35, “Bourg-Lastic,” Note d’Information, Jan. 5, 1945. AN, F7 15176, Commissaire de la République, Clermont-Ferrand, Jan. 19, 1945.

convoy caused confusion upon the train's arrival at the railway station of the town of Bourg-Lastic. The two officers in charge of the convoy, one American and one Soviet, had conflicting orders. The American's instructions were to take 1,000 Soviets to the camp at La Courtine in the neighboring department of the Creuse. The Soviet officer's instructions, issued by the Red Cross, was to deliver them to Bourg-Lastic, but he could not comply, insisting that the camp could accommodate no more than 450 individuals. The Soviet soldiers under his command refused to alight, protesting that the camp was uninhabitable.

The resolution to this stand-off is indicative of the kinds of intervention of the local authorities necessary for the administration of the camps and the policing of discipline. After many phone calls to senior authorities, including to the Foreign Ministry in Paris and the commander of the Soviet Military Mission, the problem was resolved the next day with the Soviet convoy being taken to the Bourg-Lastic camp.¹⁸

Full jurisdiction over the camp was not yet fully conferred on the local officers of the Soviet mission, and the regional officers of the ministry of prisoners, deportees and refugees escorting the convoy were therefore able to give rare observations of what went on within. Many Soviet soldiers captured in German uniforms had kept their weapons, handguns, rifles and even machine guns, despite orders that they be disarmed. They used them to bully civilian families settled in the camp since the first convoy arrived the previous fortnight, forcing them out of the cabins that had been set-aside for them, and to occupy them themselves. Threats of violence were even used to force Soviet officers supervising the camp out of their cabins, which were then occupied by ruthless and armed subordinates.

The agreement between the Soviet mission and the French foreign ministry had required all soldiers entering the camps to be disarmed, but at Bourg-Lastic they refused to hand over their weapons. They were not allowed to move outside the camps without written authorization, but this order was also ignored. Soviet soldiers roamed well outside the camp, showing scant regard for the neighboring inhabitants. The police and gendarmerie were ill equipped and under resourced to protect the local people and complained about their inability to police the Soviets despite the clear danger they presented. They were scarcely prepared for facing up to armed soldiers roaming around the countryside and villages. Discipline of the Soviet repatriates was the responsibility of the Soviet officers in command of the camps, but they also had little control. They even caused problems of discipline themselves. While insisting the local gendarmerie do more to control the unruly behavior of Soviet soldiers and stop them going to the bars and cafés in the neighboring towns, they themselves went off drinking in breach of the orders of the French police. Nor were the Soviet officers able to disarm their subordinates. For two days over December 31, 1944 and January 1, 1945, four Soviet soldiers armed with machine guns attacked and robbed inhabitants in villages surrounding the camp at Bourg-Lastic. A woman whose husband had been a French prisoner of war was robbed of 23,000 francs, jewelry and linen. Elsewhere, there were thefts of pork, mutton, poultry, rabbits, lard, bicycles and watches. The theft of linen and bicycles was common.¹⁹

These thefts could not be explained alone by the lack of provisions for the camp. The camps were in fact well supplied with more than the basics. Each repatriate was given a daily ration of 140 grams of meat, 400 grams of bread, a half-liter of wine, potatoes and vegetables.²⁰ In addition, the Red Cross and the Allied forces provided other supplies that the French could not in sufficient quantities: clothes and boots, blankets, mattresses, plates, pots, knives and forks, soap and detergent.²¹ The welfare of the repatriates was a priority. Each camp had an

¹⁸ AD PDD 253 W 35, "Bourg-Lastic," Rapport de Capitaine Lutz (no date).

¹⁹ AD PDD 253 W 35, "Bourg-Lastic," Dec. 29, 1944. AN F7 15176, Commissaire de la République, Jan. 19, 1945.

²⁰ AN F7 15176, Commissaire de la République, Jan. 19, 1945.

²¹ *Bilan d'Effort*, 81.

infirmery with regular nursing and medical services. The cost of maintenance and the provision of fuel for heating and cooking appear as regular costs on the accounts of the camps. The ordered administration of the camps therefore counterbalances the more public problems of discipline and policing.

The thefts suggest restlessness among the Soviets in this period of idleness between war and repatriation. Whether the thefts were opportunistic or deliberate, the Soviets took whatever change they had to make things a bit easier for themselves. They were also the acts of men attempting to flee the camps and escape into the countryside in order to evade repatriation. Armed soldiers were seen living on abandoned farms, supporting themselves through the theft of food and money.²²

At this stage the camp at Bourg-Lastic held 2,150 individuals. Again, intervention was required to impose order. The gendarmerie in the Puy-de-Dôme was reinforced with a deployment of fifty soldiers of the FFI under the command of a colonel of the 13th military region based in Clermont-Ferrand. The more dangerous of the Soviets, some 246 soldiers, were removed to the military camp in Espaly-Saint-Marcel near Le Puy in the Haute-Loire, where they joined the battalion of Soviet soldiers who had served in the German occupation of the city.²³

Any calm this brought about was short-lived, however. Troubles continued, the murder of a Soviet officer being the gravest offence. It led to the arrest and imprisonment of six Soviet soldiers in a military prison in Clermont-Ferrand. Petty thefts and serious aggravated burglaries in villages near the camp remained a constant source of tension. Even local woodlands were pillaged for firewood. Local police and gendarmes were seriously preoccupied with the interception and arrest of Soviet nationals outside the camps, and constantly worried about their inability to adequately protect the local population. The archives are replete with reports on the arrest of Soviets outside the camps who had committed all sorts of petty crimes.²⁴

By the end of January 1945, the camps of the Auvergne held some 5,042 foreign nationals awaiting repatriation (3,642 men, 1,296 women, and 104 children). The region was already at the limits of what it could cope with. The camps planned for the Alliers and the Cantal were still not yet serviceable, and there were no more suitable sites in the Haute-Loire for other camps.²⁵ There was, however, a steady turnover of repatriates into and out of the camps, and the more troublesome elements among them could be moved once the repatriations had commenced.

The repatriations in fact helped to assert order over the camps and resolved many of the problems caused by the Soviets awaiting departure. While the war continued, the repatriates were transferred by train to Marseille, and then shipped on American vessels to Odessa. Upon return to Marseille, the vessels put ashore French prisoners and deportees repatriated from the Soviet Union.²⁶ The repatriations proceeded with few reported difficulties, and accelerated after the end of the war in May 1945 when overland rail journeys into Germany were more practicable. The trains sent to bring back French prisoners of war offloaded convoys of Soviet repatriates at the German border. At times there were fears that approaching departures might stir outbreaks of disorder within the camps. This was certainly evident at Bourg-Lastic as the departure of one group of Soviet repatriates approached in May. The repatriates became more demanding and over-excited, the prefect of the Puy-de-Dôme reported, as he requested more

²² AD PDD 253 W 35, "Bourg-Lastic," Jan. 8, 1945.

²³ AD PDD 253 W 35, "Bourg-Lastic," Jan. 8, 1945; Direction régionale, Ministère des prisonniers, déportés et réfugiés, Jan. 31, 1945.

²⁴ AD PDD 253 W 35, "Incidents," various.

²⁵ AD PDD 253 W 35, Direction régionale, Ministère des prisonniers, déportés et réfugiés, Jan. 31, 1945.

²⁶ MAE, Europe, URSS Z 473-3, Rapatriement de français, rapatriement de russes, vol. 68 (octobre 1945 – avril 1946), Telegram, Oct. 6, 1945.

guards be sent to the department to help keep order.²⁷ On the other hand, there are no reports of forced repatriations or of massed or individual refusals to leave, problems that marked the repatriations organized by the American and British armies.²⁸ This does not mean that they did not occur within the camps, out of sight of the French. There were nevertheless no instructions in circulation as to how the French authorities should deal with the refusal of Soviet repatriates to leave. Instead, there are notes on how the local inhabitants should conduct themselves. The aim was to prevent pilfering or profiteering, and attempts by the departing Soviets to sell the materials issued to them for use in the camps. These were to be handed back as the camps were cleared.²⁹

The movements out of the camps created space for new arrivals from the eastern regions, and other displaced nationals also awaiting repatriation. On June 13, 1945, only thirty-seven Soviet repatriates remained in the camp of Bourg-Lastic. Convoys of Czechoslovakian repatriates arrived to take their place at Bourg-Lastic, Theix and Courpière.³⁰

During the summer of 1945, the rate of repatriation was such that plans could be made for the closure of the smaller camps of Theix, La Bourboule, Moissat and Châtel-Guyon. Local communities disrupted by the presence of the camps were anxious to return to normalcy. Most acute was the anxiety of hotel proprietors in La Bourboule, who appealed to the regional administration for the return of requisitioned hotels as early as possible so that they could be prepared for the 1946 season.³¹ The Soviet repatriates, it was intended, would be transferred to the larger, central camps, such as the one established in the grounds of the Château de Beauregard at La Celle-Saint-Cloud in the department of the Seine-et-Oise, or at Châlons-sur-Marne, from which massed repatriations were commencing.³² This would free up vehicles, provisions and, importantly, personnel, for the resettlement and rehabilitation of the repatriated French prisoners of war and deportees. Indeed, in July 1945 the office of national security (Direction générale de Sûreté nationale) expressed its belief that the Soviet repatriations were ending and that all the camps would soon be closed.³³ There remained many thousands more displaced foreign nationals, however, and in January 1946, the camps in the Puy-de-Dôme still accommodated as many repatriates as in January 1945.³⁴

The repatriations were therefore still far from complete in the summer of 1945. The formal repatriation accord between the French and Soviet governments had only come into force on June 29, 1945, even though the arrangements it prescribed were already well established. Overland transport since the end of hostilities had accelerated the rate of return. Rail convoys from France could go deep into Soviet occupied Germany, sometimes as far as Leipzig. The faster pace might not have been sustainable, however. The damage to the railway network, bridges, and roads from the allied bombardment, sabotage, and the Allied advance, was extensive, and the rolling stock was severely depleted. What was serviceable was in great demand for the transport of the military, supplies and the return of French repatriates.³⁵

²⁷ AD PDD 253 W 35, Préfet du Puy-de-Dôme, May 31, 1945.

²⁸ Bethel, *The Last Secret*; Elliot, *Pawns of Yalta*.

²⁹ AN F9 3831, "Puy-de-Dôme," Raymond, Direction des réfugiés, Jun. 8, 1945.

³⁰ AD PDD 253 W 35, "Bourg-Lastic," Jun. 13, 1945.

³¹ AN F9 3831, "Puy-de-Dôme," Délibérations du Conseil municipal, Commune de la Bourboule, Aug. 30, 1945.

³² AN F9 3831, "Puy-de-Dôme," various, esp. Gendarmerie nationale 13ème Légion, Rapport du Maréchal des Logis, Jun. 5, 1945. Ministère des prisonniers, déportés et réfugiés, Direction départementale du Puy-de-Dôme, Aug. 19, 1945.

³³ AN F7 15176, Telegram, Direction générale de la sûreté nationale, Direction des étrangers et des passeports, Jul. 5, 1945. AD PDD 253 W 23, Rapport d'activité, Jul. 1945. AN F9 3831, Ministère des prisonniers, déportés et réfugiés, Direction départementale du Puy-de-Dôme, Nov. 26, 1945 & Dec. 13, 1945.

³⁴ AN F9 3831, Puy-de-Dôme, Anciens combattants et victimes de la guerre, Direction départementale de Puy-de-Dôme, Jan. 31, 1946.

³⁵ Rioux, *La France de la quatrième république*, 33–34. Only some 18,000 kilometres of track out of a total of 40,000 kilometres was still serviceable; only one locomotive out of six was functioning, while one in three goods

Moreover, the number of displaced nationals awaiting repatriation, to both the Soviet Union and elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe, had greatly increased in the final months of the war and therefore increased the burden of repatriation.

This was also the time when the Soviet military mission was making greater demands on the repatriation efforts of the French. The mission had received orders from Moscow to do whatever was required to ensure all Soviet nationals in France were returned, and it therefore insisted upon a wide sweep of the countryside to round up any Soviet nationals who had thus far evaded repatriation.³⁶ The Soviet guard was also doubled ahead of the overland convoys to prevent attempted escapes from the camps or evasions en route.

Tensions between the French and the Soviet missions consequently grew as the French authorities charged the Soviets with overreaching their authority under the repatriation accord, condemning their actions as violations of French sovereignty. In June 1945 the head of the Auvergne regional direction of the ministry of prisoners, deportees and refugees, reported that Soviet demands were incompatible with the role assigned to them. Among the complaints were the falsification of the numbers held in the Soviet camps to secure more rations, and a menacing demand by the commandant of the camp at Courpière for an advance of 700,000 francs to meet the camp's costs.³⁷

These were minor matters in comparison with attempts to forcibly detain and repatriate suspected Soviet nationals living freely in the French community. Reports of home invasions and deception started to be received in late May 1945. In the village of Fontaine du Berger outside Clermont-Ferrand, a man dressed in "khaki" and a woman in "Hungarian" clothes forced their way into the apartment of a French family to interrogate a domestic servant of Polish origin. They spoke Russian, and ordered the Polish servant return with them to the camp at Theix. She refused. They returned the next day, accompanied by an interpreter and a "man with a revolver." After a heated discussion, the servant followed without resistance, saying that "they were her compatriots."³⁸ Reports of similar incidents obliged French authorities to step in to safeguard individuals under their protection. In June, the commissioner of police in Thiers complained to the prefect of the Puy-de-Dôme that the Soviet commandant of the camp at Courbière was going to extremes to arrest and repatriate Soviet nationals found in the region. A young Russian woman was interned; she had been deported to Germany during the war and came to France with a returning French prisoner whom she wanted to marry. The commandant did not hesitate to use coercion to get his way. He stole the motorbike of a Frenchman who was cohabiting with another Russian woman near the camp of Suchères, and returned it only when she presented herself to the camp for repatriation. For the prefect, these incidents raised questions of the violations of the law and the breach of the "elementary rule of hospitality," and therefore of France's protection obligations.³⁹

Worse incidents followed as Soviet officers tried to apprehend individuals whom the French insisted were not repatriable as Soviet nationals under the terms of the repatriation accord. Five Soviet officers, armed and out of uniform, forced their way into a reception center for displaced Polish nationals in Yssingeaux (Haute-Loire) to "kidnap" three "Soviet" women. Two were Russian by birth but had become Polish by marriage; another was born of a Polish mother and Russian father, had lived in Poland and was recognized by the Red Cross as a Polish national. The first two women were taken away, the third hid herself away, whereupon

wagons, and one in two passenger cars were available for use. 7,500 bridges had been destroyed. The journey between Paris and Strasbourg at that time took fifteen hours.

³⁶ Tolstoy, *Victims of Yalta*, 373fol.

³⁷ AD PDD 253 W 35, Rapport d'activité, Jul. 7, 1945.

³⁸ AD PDD 253 W 35, À monsieur le Chef de la Sûreté, Clermont-Ferrand, May 30, 1945.

³⁹ AD PDD 253 W 35, Commissaire de Police de Thiers, Jun. 27, 1945.

the Soviet officers demanded the help of the French gendarmes to find her and hand her over.⁴⁰ A fourth woman of Polish nationality, in hospital after giving birth, was also threatened with being taken away.⁴¹

The Soviet mission claimed that all foreign nationals on French territory originally from countries now part of the Soviet Union were Soviet nationals and were therefore obliged to return. The prefect of the Haute-Loire insisted, however, that the Poles in the reception center of Yssingeaux were under French protection and that “foreign police” had no grounds to act as they had. Indeed, their actions were condemned as illegal and a breach of international law. But these acts were now all too common, and, the prefect protested, were a grave infraction of the public order. The local community of Yssingeaux remembered the role of the Soviet soldiers in German uniform during the occupation of Le Puy, and they had since been the cause of many complaints to which the local police had had to respond. As the repatriation of the Soviets in the Haute-Loire approached, officers of the military mission went to extremes to comply with their orders to round up all remaining Soviet nationals. They sought out those born in territories that were annexed to the Soviet Union since the war began. The incident at Yssingeaux, the prefect admitted, was a grave failure to protect individuals under France’s protection and a breach of French sovereignty. It therefore required a firm assertion of France’s protection obligations. A force of one hundred men was consequently deployed to prevent the departure of the Soviets from the camp of Espaly-Saint-Marcel until the kidnapped Polish women were handed back.⁴²

The officers of the Soviet military mission were just as abusive in their attempts to apprehend women of Soviet origin who had married French men in Germany before their return to France. Five Russian women cohabiting with former French prisoners of war and deportees in Montluçon (Alliers) were seized for repatriation to the Soviet Union. One was six months pregnant but was nevertheless taken by force to the camp of Saint-Amand-Montrond (Cher), and was released only after her husband intervened with the Soviet commandant.⁴³ Elsewhere, three Soviet officers arrived at the home of a Russian woman who had married a French prisoner of war in Germany to arrest her and to take her to the camp at Suchères. She fled and went into hiding. A Soviet armed guard was placed at the house and family members were held hostage until she was handed over. The Soviets abused the neighbors, calling them “milice” and “collaborators.”⁴⁴ Only on the intervention of French military did the Soviet commandant of the camp order the guards’ withdrawal.

More reports of the attempted apprehension of Russian women who had returned to France from Germany with former French prisoners of war or deportees followed over the course of June and July 1945.⁴⁵ As the rate of repatriations increased, officers of the Soviet mission set about enforcing their order to round up and return all Soviet nationals in the regions of their deployment. The local authorities intervened when necessary, asserting the terms of the repatriation accord. The interior ministry’s instructions were clear on this point: it was the responsibility of the French police services to find and round up Soviet nationals; it was therefore necessary to “oppose all operations undertaken by officers of the foreign nationalities themselves.”⁴⁶ Furthermore, these women were now considered, by virtue of their marriage, as having lost their Soviet citizenship and acquired French citizenship. The office of national

⁴⁰ AD PDD 253 W 35, Centre d’hébergement d’Yssingeaux, Rapport, Aug. 6, 1945.

⁴¹ AD PDD 253 W 35, Centre d’hébergement d’Yssingeaux, Préfet de l’Haute-Loire, Aug. 8, 1945.

⁴² AD PDD 253 W 35, Centre d’hébergement d’Yssingeaux, Préfet de l’Haute-Loire, Aug. 11, 1945.

⁴³ AD PDD 253 W 35, Arrestations par les militaires soviétiques, Préfet de l’Alliers, Jun. 1, 1945.

⁴⁴ AD PDD 253 W 35, Arrestations par les militaires soviétiques, Commissaire de Police de Thiers, Jun. 27, 1945.

⁴⁵ AD PDD 253 W 35, Arrestations par les militaires soviétiques, Note de renseignements, Aug. 7, 1945.

⁴⁶ AD PDD 253 W 35, Arrestations par les militaires soviétiques, Ministre de l’Intérieur, Aug. 29, 1945.

security (Direction générale de sûreté nationale) affirmed their protection under Article 170 of the civil code, which recognized their marriages in Germany.⁴⁷

These confrontations between Soviet officers and the regional authorities in the Auvergne reflected new tensions between France and the Soviet Union on the interpretation of the repatriation accord. Just as the Soviet mission was acting on orders from Moscow, the local French authorities were enforcing orders from Paris. The French foreign ministry understood a repatriable Soviet national to be an individual “displaced by the circumstances of the war,” or more precisely “by the actions of the enemy.” This excluded the pre-war refugees from Soviet bolshevism, Polish workers originally from eastern Poland but who were in France before September 1, 1939, and nationals of states annexed to the Soviet Union since the start of the war.⁴⁸ Nationals from these states who had been in France before then were considered to be under French protection. The orders of the Soviet military mission, however, assumed that all nationals of countries that were then part of the Soviet Union were indeed Soviet nationals and repatriable. In direct contradiction of this position, the French foreign ministry declared that individuals under French protection but reclaimed by the Soviet mission would not be forced to return to the Soviet Union and would be assured asylum in France.⁴⁹

The French could assert greater authority over the Soviet missions now, as it was much clearer that the repatriations were winding down. The vast majority of French prisoners of war, some 294,690, had been repatriated by October 1945. At the same time as many as 120,000 Soviet nationals had been repatriated to the Soviet Union.⁵⁰ During the final months of 1945 and into early 1946, the last of the Soviet nationals in outlying camps of the Puy-de-Dôme, at Courpière, Châtel-Guyon, Theix, Moissat, and La Bourboule, had been repatriated or transferred elsewhere, and these camps were closed. The larger camp at Bourg-Lastic continued for a short time afterwards due to delays brought about in part by unspecified problems of personnel, and in part by difficulties in relocating its remaining 1,712 Soviet nationals.⁵¹ The ministry of prisoners, deportees and refugees was itself liquidated on 1 November 1945, its work considered complete.⁵² Responsibility for the repatriations was taken over by the foreign ministry and the ministry for the army on policy matters, and the interior ministry on the practicalities.⁵³

Even then, still more was to be done. In March 1946, a new commander of the Soviet military mission arrived in Paris from Moscow with orders for the return of another 15,000 Soviet nationals. The repatriations were expected to take at least another three years. The military mission had already extended its work to Indochina and Algeria to seek out Soviet soldiers who had joined the Foreign Legion. It now demanded further cooperation from the French to find and return many more than the few refractory prisoners of war whom the foreign ministry believed remained.⁵⁴

⁴⁷ AN F7 15176, Direction générale de sûreté nationale, Aug. 21, 1945.

⁴⁸ AN F7 15176, Ministère des Affaires étrangères, Jan. 25, 1945. MAE, Europe, URSS Z 473–3, vol. 67, Note du juriconsulte du Département, Sept. 20, 1945. Specifically noted for Polish nationals from the region of eastern Poland occupied by the Soviet Union on Sept. 1, 1939, the Romanian provinces of Bessarabia and Bukovina on Jun. 27, 1940, Lithuania on Aug. 3, 1940, and Latvia and Estonia on Aug. 6, 1940.

⁴⁹ MAE, C Administrative, vol 127, Comités et commissions pour la protection des étrangers et réfugiés (janvier 1944-juin 1949), Ressorissants polonaises et baltes, Jan. 1, 1946.

⁵⁰ MAE, Z – Europe, URSS Z 473–3, vol. 68, Telegram, Oct. 6, 1945.

⁵¹ AN F9 3831, “Puy-de-Dôme,” Directeur départemental des prisonniers de guerre, déportées et réfugiés, Nov. 26, 1945; Dec. 13, 1945; Dec 15, 1945; Jan. 2, 1946; Jan. 31, 1946.

⁵² *Bilan d’effort*, 29.

⁵³ AN F7 15176, various.

⁵⁴ AN F7 15176, Ministère de l’intérieur, Direction générale de la sûreté nationale, Direction des étrangers et des passeports, May 25, 1946. Gouverneur général Algérie, à Ministre de l’intérieur. Apr. 18, 1946.

International developments also influenced the French approach to the repatriations during 1946. The United Nations General Assembly had adopted a resolution against forced repatriation of displaced persons on 29 February 1946, and consequently France asserted the liberty of choice for displaced persons on its territory.⁵⁵ In doing so, it also explicitly recognized the right of asylum for those under its protection who refused to return to the Soviet Union.⁵⁶

The French, however, could not but continue to cooperate with the Soviet Union. One important question had yet to be resolved, the whereabouts of those French citizens of Alsace and the Moselle conscripted into the German army—the *malgré-nous*—taken into Soviet prison camps after the war. The French repatriation mission in the Soviet Union continued to search for them among the German prisoners of war but without success. The French Government still required the cooperation of the Soviet Government to secure their return, and therefore accepted the continued presence of the Soviet military mission and its search for Soviet nationals still unaccounted for in France. The repatriations therefore continued into 1948.⁵⁷ As the Cold War was dividing Europe, the search for the lost *malgré-nous* was a critical issue in Franco-Soviet relations.⁵⁸ On November 27, 1947, the French foreign ministry confirmed the French government's intention to continue to abide by the terms of their repatriation accord of June 1945.⁵⁹

The repatriation of the former Soviet prisoners of war and displaced persons from the Auvergne was one brief episode in the complex and multifaceted return to post-war normalcy. In addition to the estimated 120,000 Soviet nationals repatriated from France, there was a similar number of displaced persons from central and eastern European nations who were also repatriated, but whose repatriation has left a less visible documentary record in the archives. The Soviet repatriations were therefore a major effort of the provisional government and reformed public administration of liberation France. We cannot know fully the number of Auvergnats disturbed by the presence of the Soviet repatriates and the officers of the Soviet military mission sent to take them back. There were certainly many victims of their violence, both actual and threatened, but once the repatriations had commenced in large enough numbers to lessen the impact of their presence, the local French military and police officers, and public officials were able to assert greater authority over the Soviets. From this point, the victims of violence were foreign nationals reclaimed by the Soviets as repatriable Soviet nationals. The assertion of French sovereignty came with the explicit recognition that foreign residents reclaimed as Soviet nationals were rightfully under French protection.

The task of repatriation was one important part of the transition between occupation, war and peace, and between Vichy authoritarian government and the reformation of republican norms. The organizational effort that this entailed, and the coordination of the various officers of the public administration at both the national and the regional level, had a vital role to play in the reassertion of republican legitimacy at a time when the post-war order was yet to be secured.

This article might suggest that the documentary record is heavily weighted to evidence of conflict and tensions between the Auvergnats, the local officials in the region, the Soviet repatriates placed in the camps, and the Soviet officers dispatched from Moscow to take them

⁵⁵ United Nations General Assembly, Nineteenth Plenary Session, Resolution 8(1) Question of Refugees. Jan. 29, 1946.

⁵⁶ MAE, Z – Europe, URSS Z 473–3, vol. 68, L'accord de rapatriement franco-soviétique et le droit d'asile, Mar. 20, 1946. Burgess, "Remaking Asylum in Post-War France, 1944-52," 571.

⁵⁷ MAE, Z – Europe, URSS Z 473–3, vol. 71, Rapatriement de Français et rapatriement de Russes (janvier 1948 – juin 1949).

⁵⁸ On the "malgré-nous" see Vlossak, "Traitors, Heroes, Martyrs, Victims?" 100–118.

⁵⁹ MAE, Z – Europe, URSS Z 473–3, vol. 71, May 18, 1948.

back. This would be misleading. The bulk of the documentary record is much less alluring for historians in search of the dramas of such a critical moment. It is instead the ordinary mundane record of the administration: their establishment and preparations of the camps, their provisioning of resources, expenditures, records of materials received, lists of personnel and transportation arrangements. These all point to the formation of orderly methods of distribution and allocation that made possible the efficient organization of the camps and effective repatriations. The public administration was reformed in the process of fulfilling tasks of great urgency, at a time of shortages and disruption, and the preoccupation with the return and rehabilitation of French prisoners of war and deportees, and the adaptation of the local populace to the post-war order.

Although they may have faded from historical memory, the enduring significance of the repatriations can be found in the reformation and consolidation of the structures of the state that lie behind them. The vertical integration of the state from the center to the periphery unified the public administration and ministerial offices into a common purpose. Similarly, the horizontal integration of both the central ministries, and the networks of the regional administration consolidated this common purpose in effective action, through which republican norms could be reasserted and made common practice. If this is something now rather forgotten in the history of the years immediately after liberation, then that speaks of successful transition to French republican sovereignty.⁶⁰

The examples we have of the challenges faced by the regional administration and police services in the Auvergne show that, far from surrendering sovereignty to the Soviet Military Mission, they were in fact highly interventionist, asserting French authority and indeed French republican ideals, when the Soviets went beyond the limits allowed them under the Franco-Soviet repatriation accord.

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⁶⁰ See Foulon, *Pouvoir en province à la libération*, 115fol. on the roles of the departmental commissioners appointed by de Gaulle on his return to France in establishing post-war social and economic order in their regions. Foulon notes (123-267) particularly their powers in relation to policing and economics, and their position in enforcing central authority of the ministries in Paris in their regions.

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