

Tragic Cossack History

Cossack Deportation - Lienz, 1st of June, 1945



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Introduction

With Stalin's Order 227 (July 28, 1942), a crippling chain of destruction was sent through Europe that was to change the lives of millions of people for many generations to come. Genocide of the peoples of Eastern Europe during World War II was now imposed by the Soviet Union, and the western governments were forced to accept this. These same governments had ignored the Holodomor, the Soviet-imposed Ukrainian famine of 1932-33, where seven to ten million died of starvation, and now, acting under a shield of valour, were turning a blind eye to the acts of their barbaric ally, Josef Stalin. Wearing a calculated cloak of nonchalance at the conference in Yalta, "Uncle Joe" (Stalin's nickname) gave the impression that he wanted to have his people back to help rebuild his country, which of course his brother knights willingly agreed to.

After all, this solved their problem of what to do with the huge number of Soviet prisoners and refugees in Europe. The code name for this act of deportation was *Operation Keelhaul*. What they didn't realize was that, in complying with Uncle Joe's wishes, they had created another cause that inevitably prolonged the war.

Human beings who were waiting for the end of war, waiting for peace, wanting only to return home and pick up their lives again, exiled citizens of both sexes, decided to die fighting the Soviet Union rather than return to Uncle Joe's Gulags.

Forging this bond of resistance was their pain: their wives, their children, their men, their brothers, their sisters, and their kin had been tortured, raped, pillaged and murdered by the Soviets.

What Allied soldiers had died for fighting against the Nazis was being repeated right under the noses of Churchill and Eisenhower by their Soviet ally.

Men and women were used as slaves, the young women were used in the Communist breeding kennels, the elderly were discarded or shot.

Their only hope was to be captured by the Americans or the British. However, their hope was to be brutally destroyed by a devastating betrayal. Thousands of victims were turned over to the Soviets after being promised refuge by the British if they would peacefully surrender, which a battle-weary Cossack Army gladly accepted. This episode in history turned into a nightmare which was forgotten in the archives of time, only to be awakened by the memories of a few living survivors who have tried, but are unable to forget the horrific hardship of their earlier lives.

This Tragedy on the Drau, is how Allied treachery made an impact, not only on their lives, but also the lives of their offspring for many generations.

What is a Cossack?



Zaparozhian Cossack

Here is my brief version of what a Cossack is:

Early Medieval Ukraine, which at the time was known as *Rus*, was open to continual raids from the Tartars who had established themselves on the Crimean peninsula. The Tartars destroyed everything in their path, killing the men, and capturing women and children for slaves.

The children were converted to the Muslim faith and became “janissaries,” elite well-trained loyal soldiers.

Most of Ukraine was ruled by Catholic Poland from the latter half of the 14th Century. In order to maintain their Orthodox culture, the Ukrainian people resisted the Polish attempt to force them to adopt the Catholic religion. In response, the King of Poland did little to ease the Ukrainian people’s misery under these brutal enemy invaders.

Consequently, compelled to defend themselves, they established a fighting force, and developed their own customs and traditions.

These freedom-loving men banded together and moved to the steppes beyond the Dnepr River. They settled along the banks of far-off rivers, such as the Don, Kuban, Ural, Ussuri, and Amur; or they settled on the coastal shores of the sea of Azov; or they travelled far into the Northern Caucasus, to guard the lands of the Princes of Kyivan Rus.

They became known as *Kozaky*, or in English “Cossacks,” developed from the Turkish word “qazaq,” meaning guerrilla, or defender.

I prefer “Freedom Fighter.”

For the time being, these settlements became an ally of the Polish King, who had to accept the defiant audacity of these Cossacks as long his farthest outposts were safeguarded from the brutal Tatar and Turk invaders. He paid them to defend his borders.

The Cossacks themselves felt they were no longer bonded as serfs to the Polish king, and felt they were freemen.

They initiated self-rule and organised their own government, known as the Rada, where a Cossack council could meet. The head of this council was an elected supreme leader known as a Hetman. His symbol of power was a mace. The regions ruled by these Cossacks became known as a Host, and a settlement was called a Stanista, or habitat.

The first Cossack Hetman, Ukrainian Prince Dmytro Bayda Vyshnevetsky founded the Zaporozhian Sich in 1550 and built a fortress on the island of Khortytsia, on the Dnepr River.

From there he waged war on the Tartar and Turk invaders. He was captured during the battle of Wallachia, and later executed in Constantinople.

Due to their warring, the Cossacks gained rapidly not only in strength and but also in military experience. In 1621 the Cossacks were able to defeat the Turks at Khotyn, causing the Sultan to warn the Polish King that if these Cossacks were not subdued he would take drastic action. Fearing the Sultan, the Polish King tried to curb the power of the Cossacks. But having tasted autonomy for so long, the Cossacks were not willing to give up their freedom and naturally rebelled, forcing the Polish King into a truce.

In this agreement, the Polish King limited the Cossack army to 6,000 and constrained it to serve under Polish generals. However, many Cossacks revolted against these constrictions.

A large area of Ukraine suffered under feudal Poland, which subjected their underdogs to terror, serfdom, and persecution of the Orthodox religion.

In 1648, Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky mobilized the Cossacks and finally drove the Polish army out of Ukraine. This was the War of Liberation of 1648 – 1654, a war between the Ukrainian people and the Polish barons.



Cossacks of the 17th Century

The Vatican and the Royal families of France, Holland, Germany, Austria, Sweden, and England started to take a keen interest in the development of events in Ukraine and sent mercenaries and assistance to aid Catholic Poland.

To help obtain recognition of Cossack sovereignty, Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky agreed to a pact with the Muscovites in 1654, known as the Treaty of Pereyaslav.

Unfortunately, the Tsar interpreted the treaty as licence to rule Ukraine himself.

In 1658, fearing further Muscovite invasion, the newly-elected Hetman Ivan Vyhovsky, made another pact with the King of Poland, resulting in the Union of Hadiach, which provided a reconstruction of the Polish state into a federation of three autonomous nations: Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine.

The Muscovites protested, and in 1659 at the Battle of Konotop, the Cossacks defeated the Tsar's army. This victory, however, was short- lived.

A group of Cossack officers, unable to accept a union with Catholic Poland, betrayed their Cossack brothers by negotiating a separate agreement with the Orthodox Muscovites. A separate treaty was devised with the Poles agreeing to partition Ukraine along the Dnepr River.

Life for Ukrainians under the Muscovites was just as difficult as it was under the Poles, and in 1686, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church was officially absorbed by the Muscovite Orthodox Church.

In 1709, the Cossacks made one more attempt to free Ukraine from Muscovite control.

In a secret alliance with Sweden's Charles XII, whose aim was to curb Muscovite expansion, Hetman Ivan Mazepa combined forces with the Swedes at Poltava to wage battle against them. Unfortunately, the Swedish-Ukrainian forces were defeated.

After the Battle of Poltava, the Muscovites absorbed the name Rus, calling themselves Russians. To maintain a defined difference of identity, the name Ukraine was then adopted by Ukrainians. The Ukrainian Cossack free spirit was still very much alive.

Cossacks in the Napoleon Wars:



**It is reported that Napoleon said,
"If I had the Cossacks in my army, I could rule the world."**

By 1738, the Atamans, (Russian title for a Cossack Chief) were appointed by the Tsar, and their council was represented by village elders. The Hosts (Astrakhan, Bug, Black See, Don, Orenburg, Serbian, Terek, Ural) had grown in size, and their population divided in three ranks: “vyborni” – landowners, “pidpomichnyky” – landowners’ helpers, and “pidsusidky” – land workers.

Males of each group were divided into two categories: “razryady” - those eligible for military service, from 19 years of age, and “kazaky sluzhilye i nesluzhilye” - non-serving Cossacks.

By the end of the 18th Century a new Cossack nobility was emerging.

This nobility pressured or bribed the vyborni into giving up their land, thus accumulating more wealth and so increasing the number of land workers.

In 1775, the role of the village elders was replaced by a Cossack government formed by their elite, to discuss civil and judicial policies. This government was later disbanded by Tsar Paul I, (1779-1801) substituting it with a military chancellery, headed by an appointed Voishovy Ataman, who held the rank of Lieutenant General, and was simultaneously in charge of civil affairs.

This change in administration deprived the village Atamans of their military authority. Their role was now restricted to providing men for the troops.

For the Tsar, raising a regiment was now a simple task.

The heads of the Hosts’ military office sent out orders via their assistants to the village Atamans, ordering a certain number of men to meet at a given point where they were marched to the scene of battle.

Depending on the Host, the size of these regiments varied between 500 – 1,000 men.

At nineteen, these young men were to serve the Tsar for twenty-five years, mostly under Russian officers appointed by the Crown. Tsar Paul I also commissioned Cossacks for the officers’ ranks,

giving them and their family a noble status. This was a move deplored by most Cossacks as it was seen as introducing an unconstitutional aristocracy.

The introduction of these colonels and captains also had another effect. It diminished the importance of the village Ataman even more.

In 1802, it was estimated that 100,000 Cossacks were on active service, making up nearly 23 percent of the entire Russian army.

Nevertheless, there was an exception to the Cossack conscription policy.

The richer Cossacks were able to purchase an exemption from military service, while the poorer had to serve, unless they were traders or craftsmen needed by their community. Not all Cossacks were brought up as soldiers.

In 1812 when Napoleon declared war on Russia, the size of the Cossack regiments shrank to 80 – 320 men.

Generally, most of these young men had ridden since they were three or four years of age and were skilled horseman who could ride all night if need be. During their march, the Cossacks sang, and were taught the ways of Cossack service.

The lance was the weapon the Cossack understood best. Although a foot and a half longer than European lances, the Cossacks use of it was incredibly dexterous. Then came the sabre, which was managed just as skillfully.

The pistol was the Cossacks' weakest weapon. They would not take aim, but used it rather to create alarm and startle the enemy.

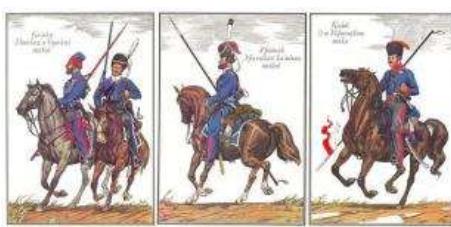
Their small Cossack mounts were swift and agile, enabling the Cossacks to develop a shrewd tactic. When the enemy were in mass, the Cossacks would surround them. If the enemy extended their line, as quick as lightning the Cossacks would gather and attack and penetrate their centre.

These Cossacks had been taught survival, how to live off the land since they could walk, making them ideal couriers. When there was no food and soldiers were dying of starvation the Cossack always found something to put in a soup, and something for his horse.

However, not all officers trusted the Cossacks, especially as scouts.

They preferred to use their own less able regular soldiers for outpost duties. They looked down on the Cossacks and used them as lackeys and baggage carriers. They believed the Cossack was only good at plundering and chasing the enemy.

In June 1812, Napoleon's Grand Army crossed the Russian frontier, and it was the Cossacks who first reported the invasion.



The first blood of the campaign went to the Don Cossacks in September, at the Battle of Mir against a Polish Lancer brigade.

20th Century Cossacks

Fearful that Ukrainian freedom fighters could get themselves organised, the Russian Minister of the Interior denied the existence of a separate Ukrainian people, declaring that Ukrainians were in fact “little Russians” speaking a language that was really a Russian dialect. Tsar Alexander II issued a proclamation prohibiting the publication of all books and materials in the Ukrainian language.

Ukrainian literature fuelled Ukraine’s strive for independence. Works like *Enida*, by Ivan Kotliarevsky, published in 1798 told the tales of wandering Cossack heroes, and later, and most relevant, the works of Taras Schevchenko were important. His call for freedom could not be stopped, causing many other writers to follow his example.

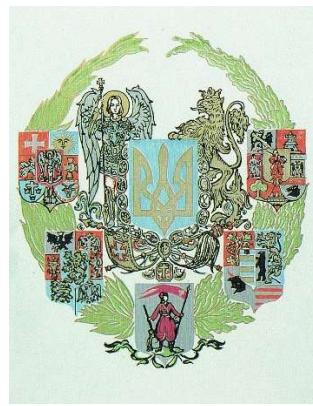


Taras Schevschenko

Thanks to these writers, Russian efforts to obliterate Ukrainian identity failed.

When the Tsarist empire collapsed in 1917, eastern Ukraine formed a council, *the Rada*, and established a Ukrainian National Republic.

On January 22, 1918, the Rada with its new President, Mykhaylo Hrushevsky, declared that the newly-created republic was to be “the independent free and sovereign state of the Ukrainian people.” To commemorate the occasion, a new national emblem, *The Herb*, was created with the Trident, displaying the various provinces.



Tryzub, The Herb

One year later, Western Ukraine, which until its collapse was ruled by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, joined Eastern Ukraine, formally uniting into one Ukrainian National Republic.

With the proclamation of national independence, the Ukrainian people affirmed their will and abolished capital punishment, freed political prisoners, offered peasants land, gave a guarantee of

rights to minorities, and created sub-cabinet level posts for Jewish, Polish and Russian affairs. Ukrainian publications multiplied, Ukrainian language schools were organised, Ukrainian cultural activities thrived, and Ukrainian Orthodoxy was revived with the birth of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church.

Unfortunately, this sweet taste of independence did not last long enough to be savoured.

In 1920, an Allied-backed Russian White Army, whose plan for Ukraine was to make it a part of the new non-socialist Russian Empire, attacked Ukraine from the south while Poland attacked from the west, to re-establish their claim to Galicia.



A Red Cossack

Receiving no support from the outside world, the disease-ridden, out-manned, and poorly equipped Ukrainian army was no match for such formidable opposition. By late 1920, the free and sovereign Ukrainian National Republic no longer existed.

Eastern Ukraine was now under Bolshevik control and became the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic.

The Ukrainian Autocephalic Church and Persecution

The Ukrainian Autocephalic Orthodox Church progressed so rapidly that in 1927 it had 36 Bishops, 3,000 priests, with a congregation of approximately ten million. Stalin arrested and murdered almost all of the bishops and priests, as well as millions of UAOC Ukrainians.

Savage persecution and arrests of Ukraine's intellectuals began in 1929. For the next ten years Stalin instituted a campaign of mass terror and genocide in Ukraine unequalled in world history.

For Stalin's plan of collectivisation he sent 120,000 non-Ukrainian police to Ukraine to shut down food import and distribution centres, to confiscate all the grain and groceries they could find, and transfer private lands to the State. Between 1932 –33, an act of genocide by famine known as the *Holodomor*, seven to ten million people died of starvation.



The Founding of WWII German Cossack Regiments.

Major General Ivan Kononov Nikitch
DOB: February 4, 1900 Novo-Nikolajevskaja



Deceased: September 15, 1967 Australia

Ivan Kononov was a man who felt the terror of Stalin personally. In 1918, the Bolsheviks hanged his father, who was a Cossack Captain, and his eldest brother was killed fighting the Bolsheviks in the civil war. His two other brothers died in the Gulags in 1934 & 1937.

In 1922, Kononov joined the Soviet Army, disguising his place of origin and changing his date of birth to 1906. His service started in the 79th Cavalry Regiment. He later graduated from military college, and he joined the Communist Party in 1927.

As a platoon leader in the regimental school he was able to suppress the civil unrest in Kursk in the spring of 1930. The people were protesting against Stalin's policy of collectivisation.

In September 1939, he participated in the occupation of eastern Poland and then in 1940 the Winter War with Finland, where he was awarded the Order of the Red Star. He was promoted to Major, then Lieutenant Colonel as Commander of the 436th Rifle Regiment, located on the western border of Ukraine.

When Germany invaded Ukraine in Operation Barbarosa, Kononov's regiment formed the rear guard of the Soviet 155th Rifle Division. During the retreat he sent one of his trusted advisors with a message through the front to the Germans, consenting not only to capitulation, but knowing the mood of his men, he suggested the defection of his entire regiment on condition that he be allowed to establish a Russian Liberation Army aimed at overthrowing the Stalinist regime.

Kononov was fortunate that his adversary, General Count Schenckendorf, was a fierce opponent of Hitler's Eastern Policy. The Count, grasping the opportunity, set down his own provisional terms in establishing the Kononov liberation force.

He promised Kononov he would do everything in his power to convince his superiors to approve the scheme and initiate a Russian Liberation Army. In the meantime he implemented his 'absolute power of authority, and took upon himself the establishment of a *Wehrmacht* Cossack regiment.

Kononov, a Don Cossack, eagerly agreed to Schenckendorf's provisional terms to establish such a force. He had no doubt that the German leadership would quickly realize how easily the Stalinist regime, with the help of the Russians themselves, could be overthrown.

Kononov then held a meeting with all his officers and men, where he announced that he was now an enemy of Stalin, and that he had decided to take up the fight against the Soviet regime for the liberation of Russia.

He told them that he was going to defect to the Germans to create a new Russian Liberation Army. All

those who wanted to go with him were welcome, and all those who wanted to stay could do so. Nothing would happen to them.

Apart from a few Political Officers all were ready to follow him.

On the 22nd of August 1941, without any resistance, Kononov led his regiment over to the German side.

After their arrival, General Schenkendorff gave Kononov the authority to act completely independently. He placed a liaison officer, Lieutenant (later Major) Graf Rittenberg with the Cossacks. He quickly acquired the confidence and friendship of Kononov and remained with the regiment until the end of the war.

Eight days after his defection Kononov, visited the POW camp in Mogilev, gave a speech, in which he declared his intentions and asked for volunteers to join his Russian Liberation Army. Of the five thousand POWs, four thousand immediately volunteered. From these four thousand Kononov chose five hundred, of which four hundred were Cossacks. When he left, he assured the men he left behind that he would be back to collect them at a later date.

He recruited more men in the POW camps at Bobruisk, Orsha, Smolensk, Propoisk and Gomel.

On the 19th of September, 1941, four weeks after his defection, his new Cossack Regiment was formed, consisting of seventy-seven officers and one thousand, seven hundred and ninety-nine men. Major Kononov, now of the *Wehrmacht* (German Army), had to release some of his initial riflemen because they were not Cossacks. He assigned them to duties in civil administration, and in police units. They were not returned to the POW camps.

General Schenkendorf in the meantime had organised weapons and equipment for the newly-formed regiment. He personally read to the assembled new Cossack regiment the directive from the German War Office confirming its establishment; it was christened the 120th Don Cossack Regiment. A regimental banner was presented to the Don Cossack Belogradow, who had spent twelve years in a Gulag, and whose two brothers had been killed by the Soviet secret police.

In early 1942 the Cossacks fought partisans in the Smolensk region, and then in Mogilev, and Kononov was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel.

His hopes of a quick organization of larger units were not fulfilled. On the contrary, on 27 January 1943 he was told that Russian forces would only be approved in battalion strength and that his regiment, almost three thousand strong, was to be reformed into the 600th Don Cossack Battalion. A Special Armoured Division was formed, and the 17th Cossack Armoured Battalion was placed under the 3rd German Army Command, which was committed to the Eastern Front several times. A drastic drop in morale led to many desertions to partisan forces, which caused Hitler and his General Staff to distrust the Cossacks, and he sent them off to France.

In the summer of 1943, the 2nd Siberian Cossack Cavalry Regiment and the 3rd Kuban Cossack Cavalry Regiment were formed.

The various Cossack units were reorganized to form the 1st Cossack Division of the *Wehrmacht* (see below for the listing of these units), and were sent to Yugoslavia to fight against Tito's National Liberation Army.

In June 1944 Kononov was promoted to Colonel and awarded the Iron Cross Second, and First Class. Later, he was also awarded the Knight's Cross of Croatia.

In December 1944, the Cossack Division fought successfully against the 3rd Ukrainian Front, and was then transformed into the 15th Cossack Cavalry Corps.

1st Cossack Division consisted of:

1st Cossack Cavalry Brigade (Don): 1st Don Cossack Regiment, 2nd Siberian Cossack Regiment, 4th Kuban Cossack Regiment, 1st Horse-drawn Cossack Artillery Battalion.

2nd Cossack Cavalry Brigade (Caucasus): 3rd Kuban Cossack Regiment, 5th Don Cossack Regiment

(under Lieutenant Colonel, Ivan Kononov), 6th Terek Cossack Regiment, 2nd Horse-drawn Cossack Artillery Battalion.

Detachments: 55th Recon Battalion, 55th Artillery Regiment (horse-drawn), 55th Engineer Battalion, 55th Signal Battalion (composed entirely of Germans), 55th Supply Section (two motorized and three horse-drawn columns), 55th Medical Battalion, and a Veterinary Company.

A Cossack cavalry regiment had a staff of four to five officers and twelve enlisted men. There were also a communications section of seventy men and an anti-tank squadron. Each regiment consisted of two battalions, while each battalion was made up of four squadrons. A Cossack cavalry regiment had two thousand men with a German cadre of one hundred and fifty. In addition, the divisional staff had a cultural and propaganda platoon.

There was also a 1000-strong Reserve and Replacement Regiment that was permanently stationed in France, although it was still formally part of the 1st Cossack Division.

Recognized total numerical strength – 13,000 Cossacks and 4,500 German soldiers.

Commentary

The Cossack Liberation Forces were not only of Russian descent. As early as the autumn of 1941 through to the end of the war, Cossack units from different nationalities were being trained at the Lutensee Army Camp, in Mittenwald, Bavaria, Germany:

East Battalion: Baltics, Ukraine, and Belarus.

East Legionnaires: Turkestan, Georgia, Armenia, Crimean Tartars, Kalmyk Cavalry Corps.

All these ethnic groups had one thing in common: the liberation of their homeland from Soviet oppression. However, Erich Koch, *Reichskommissariat (East)* Ukraine, who called himself a ‘Brutal Dog,’ ruled with an iron fist and started a reign of terror and oppression. Koch often said that the Slavic people were inferior to the Germans, that Ukrainians were half-monkeys, and that Ukrainians “must be handled with the whip like the Negroes.” He once said that “no German soldiers would die for these niggers [Ukrainians]. If I find a Ukrainian who is worthy of sitting at the same table with me, I must have him shot.”

In 1943, all German and foreign troops were put under the jurisdiction of Heinrich Himmler, giving them SS (*Schutzstaffel*) status, which was against their *Wehrmacht* officers’ wishes. One should not forget that according to Adolf Hitler and his thesis, there was never any place for Slavs in his Aryan Master Race. If it weren’t for the loss of so many men, putting Eastern volunteers into the German Army was never any intention of his. Nevertheless the Russian Liberation Forces, with General Vlasov as their leader, despite all his difficulties, did eventually manage to achieve an improvement in work conditions for the battered eastern slave labourers known as *Ostarbeiter*. In January 1945, Himmler gave the order: “Whoever beats a Russian worker in the future, will end up in a concentration camp themselves.” As the war was ending, this too I believe was out of necessity rather than preference.

The men Kononov left behind in the POW camps may have been lucky, as they were rounded up by General Vlasov later, but not all of them, I’m sure. Stalin had not signed the Geneva Convention and the Nazis made their Soviet POWs live under the most extreme conditions, as can be seen in Pavel Polian’s books. To these men Kononov’s Cossacks are no heroes.

For the Cossack people who were left in their homelands to survive the Nazi onslaught, these Cossacks are no heroes.

For the Allied Forces, the Cossacks now wearing the German Uniform had become part of the enemy forces and were no longer part of the Soviet ally.

This sealed their fate in what has come to be known as *The Tragedy of the Drau*.

Afterword

In April 1945 General Vlasov appointed General Kononov Ataman of all Cossack troops. Kononov was captured and released in 1946 by the British from a DP Camp in Klagenfurth, and later moved to Munich.

After failing to establish a political organization with the various foreign associations, he feared extradition to the Soviet Union. In 1948, he travelled to Adelaide, Australia, where he settled and became a target of KGB surveillance.

Kononov was the only general who had defected to survive the war and evade subsequent Soviet persecution against all so-called traitors of the Motherland.

15th September 1967 in Australia, Major General Ivan Kononov Nikitch, Ataman of all German Cossack Troops, was killed in a car crash.

The Cossacks' Last Ride, From Carnia to Lienz



The aim of this story is to provide an answer to the question I was once asked: "Why did the Cossacks, and the XVth Cavalry Corps, not want to surrender to the Italian partisans, but preferred to risk the journey over the Italian Alps via the Ploecken Pass into Austria, to surrender themselves to the British Army located in East Tyrol, Drau Valley?"

copyright, Anthony Schlega.

Tens of thousands arrived in trains. For three weeks hundreds of railroad cars stopped, letting off horses, covered wagons, women, children, and soldiers with their Generals: Krasnov, Shkuro, Naumenko, and Domanov.

Far away in Berlin, sat their Marshall, General Andreij Vlasov.

They came from the Steppes and the mountains beyond, wearing their Kubankas, round black hats, and carrying their sabres and scimitars.

They were the Cossack hosts of the Terek, Kalmuck, Kirghize, Turkestan, Circassian, Azov, Donets, Ural, Don, Kuban, Ussuri and Amur areas.

With the immediate enemy threat of ‘partisans,’ who wanted to free their land of all invaders, the Cossacks knew only too well that there was always a chance of ambush. None of the native young men were anywhere to be seen. Whenever they asked the villagers where the young men were, the answer was always the same: “Soldier. Gone to the Front.”

While travelling to the towns and villages of Gorto, Incaroio, and the valleys of San Canciano and Friuli, the Cossacks were at their most vulnerable.

Upon reaching their destinations they immediately set up guards, while others put up tents and felt yurts, creating their Stanitsa, or Cossack settlement.

Their history had taught them to be constantly alert. Sad emotional Kobzar songs matching the yearnings of the Cossack soul were passed down from generation to generation.

These songs were sung at night, around campfires. They told tales of the Abrek marauders, who came down from the Caucasus Mountains through the valleys to prey on the Cossack Stanitsa.

For them, 1944 was just as dangerous. Time had not been generous to these nomadic warriors. Armistice had created an almost impossible situation for the Cossack to survive. Former enemies had become friends, and former friends, enemies.

The Cossack fight was against Stalin and his Communist Red Army. All the Cossacks desired that. But in Berlin the German General Staff kept denying General Vlasov’s wish for his Cossack Army to be sent to fight on the Soviet front.

The Nazi leaders treated Vlasov with contempt. For them the Cossacks were an inferior nation, barely civilized, and useless in warfare. Many of them had deserted the Cossack force when they had fought in the Crimea.

What the Wehrmacht, the German Army commanders, didn’t realize, was that the German officers could not be understood by the common soldier. This caused a great communication problem in their unit’s chain of command. In addition to this predicament, the Wehrmacht refused to supply the Cossacks with new weaponry. They had to fight with overhauled, obsolete weapons.

These commanders thought the best the Cossacks could do was to serve as guard dogs, to watch out for partisans.

But these so-called deserters had returned home to defend their lands and property not only from the Red Army, but also from the German SS Cleansing Units.

Even though the Germans were retreating on all fronts, their leaders refused to unleash the Cossack forces on the advancing Soviet enemy.

This was incomprehensible for the Cossack soldier camped in Carnia, Northern Italy.

The Germans treated the Cossacks as inferiors, which caused the Cossacks to hate their “masters” even more. This hate was intensified also because the Germans had given the Cossacks this land which was not theirs to give, and had failed to provide them with sufficient provisions, forcing them to plunder for survival.

The Cossack leaders knew that in wartime the temptation to abandon restraint and harass and terrorize the people by raping the women and killing the men was brutally strong. However, they also knew

this would only fuel the partisan cause. They ordered their officers and NCOs to be vigilant and make sure that their men did not relapse into this primitive behaviour while they requisitioned supplies. Any Cossack caught disobeying this order was to be publicly flogged.

The Cossacks took possession of rooms, tools, provisions, grain, corn, and straw for their horses and camels. It was never a request, but always a demand. They went about their business without asking anyone for anything. They needed lodging and they knew it was best to take what they wanted quickly, to avoid any friction with the inhabitants who knew only too well that restraint was pointless, and any hope of reimbursement was pathetic.

With the Stanista completed, a quiet village atmosphere reigned.

Women could sit at the fountain in the market square and chat, while the Cossacks brought their horses and camels to drink. Blouses and icons appeared in shops where the villagers hoped to entice their conquerors out of some money. For the military leaders, boredom was becoming a problem.

Their Generals, Atamans and Hetman had to somehow keep hope alive for their people. Without hope, and with no homeland or future, the Cossack people would not survive.

Allied planes from Italian bases often flew over their Stanistas on their way to their bombing raids in Germany. But one evening, explosions, close to Krasnov's headquarters lit up the sky. The Cossack garrisons had now become their targets, and the tranquillity the Cossacks had felt was all at once extinguished.

Partisans took advantage of the situation and began making their presence known.

They attacked without warning, blowing up bridges, barracks and power lines. They killed Cossacks of both sexes and all ages.

Sometimes a Cossack would disappear, and his body would be found days later with his head stuck in mud or the snow. The body would have been gnawed by rats and wild animals. Every day, from all different areas of Carnia, fresh reports of ambushes and killings were being received.

The Cossack was once again doomed to die on foreign soil. Where they travelled, they left behind a trail of their dead.

Their journey as German soldiers began in 1941 in Mittenwald, southern Germany, where they received their military training. From there they were sent onward to the Crimea, Poland, France, Yugoslavia, and finally, Italy.

The Cossack leaders realized with each passing day that there was no possibility of returning to their homes, ever. They were beginning to think they should never have left their lands. Whatever destiny had in store for them, they should have faced it there. At least they would be buried in their home soil. Yet there had to be something to live for. An entire people could not give in to despair. They must keep their faith in a better future.

An all-out battle with the partisans would raise their moral. However, the partisans were hiding in the high mountains ranges, rich with forests. This was terrain where they had lived for many generations,

making it ideal for their guerrilla warfare. For a foreigner to find them was a most difficult task indeed.

It was said that the partisans were Communists, and they had been reinforced by other Soviet soldiers who had escaped from Austrian Prisoner of War camps. Filled with wrath, the Cossacks sharpened their swords. Their honour was at stake. They would show no mercy for any Communist partisan.

During the winter, food supplies became even more rare. Everyone felt hunger. Even the full-bodied Cossack horses were dwindling in stamina, and getting thinner due to the lack of hay and feed. Their ribs were clearly visible despite their winter coat. Whining with desperation, the poor animals were turned loose, free to wander the valleys to scrape the snow in search of grass or tree bark. Some were stolen secretly by the local townsfolk or hungry partisans to be slaughtered for food. When a horse went missing, a Cossack pined. The sorrow of this loss stoked their anger and hatred for the partisans.

These animals were more than just horses to them. They were their companions in battle. A Cossack would die of hunger before he would eat his treasured hoofed friend.

Many young men were dying on both sides, but with the continual Allied air raids many more Cossacks were dying. In March 1945, with the Red Army in neighbouring Austria advancing extremely close to their garrisons, and even though the Cossack leaders knew the war could no longer be won, their Cossack spirit regained hope. Surely now they would be released to engage the advancing Bolsheviks.

However, even this last wish was denied them.

The retreating German army was fleeing through the north of Italy, plundering what was left of any resources they could find. They burned some of the villages on their way into Austria, causing the roads to overfill with refugees, blocking the path for the advancing British forces.

Reports of Cossacks surrendering to the partisans were rumoured. But that could not be.

The Cossacks knew if they were taken prisoner nothing but a firing squad would await them. Regarded by the Soviets as traitors, if it wasn't a partisan bullet that would kill them, then it would be a Soviet one. For them it was a more honourable death to be killed in battle, a fight to the end. But then what would become of their women?

Impregnated in their soul was the understanding of the Soviet mentality - that is, the victors had the right to possess the enemy's women, to use and abuse them as they wished.

They couldn't let that happen. Capitulation to the Communist partisans was out of the question. The Cossacks felt trapped.

Then came news of treachery. The Georgian North Caucasus Legion led by Colonel Tsulukidze had deserted the Cossacks. He had changed sides, joining the partisans, and the remaining German garrisons had surrendered.

Deflated by this news, the only alternative left for the Cossack force was to surrender to the British who were still bombarding their garrisons from the air. Their Cossack officers were educated in military history of the Napoleonic and Crimean wars. Their Generals told them that the British, like themselves, were an honourable people, and would treat them with respect. A British Prisoner of

War camp, and resettlement in a British Commonwealth country, or even America sounded to them like the perfect solution to their dilemma.

Funds from their Field Bank would help provide a new start for them.

Preparing for the retreat, the various Cossack garrisons made up their parades of livestock, wagons, horses and vehicles. They knew on their march toward their destination they again would be most vulnerable to attack. Travelling up the precarious narrow winding roads of the Ploecken Pass made them easy prey for the partisans. Adding to this problem was the weather. The summits of the high mountains were still white, covered with snow, and warm spring weather could come quickly, or turn unexpectedly into a hazardous snowstorm. Loss was inevitable of horses pulling wagons with the elderly, the sick, pregnant women and children riding in them.

A giant wagon train consisting of an estimated thirty thousand souls wound their way through the valleys of Carnia. Tired, hungry, anxious, always on the lookout for ambushes, they made their way to Timau, the last Italian village at the foot of the Ploecken Pass.

There they stayed for three weeks, to recuperate and regain their strength while waiting for the thaw so they could start their journey over the mountains and down into the Drau Valley to surrender to the British Army.

May came, and the last snows covering the pass melted, making the trek muddy and slippery. News had come to them that the Soviets were as close as Klagenfurth. They felt they could wait no longer. Taking with them only the essentials, and leaving behind horses which were too young to survive the horrendous journey, the Cossacks set out on what was going to be their 'Last Ride.'

It was as though some of these Cossacks were gifted with a premonition of what was to await them. These people left even their most precious belongings and jewellery behind, giving them to the townsfolk who had helped them over these weeks of needed rest.

As expected, the journey was not without loss. Fighter planes flew over the column, startling the horses. A terrible snowstorm raged.

Some wagons slipped on the ice and fell into the depths of the gorge.

Women died giving birth. The weak and elderly, who fell asleep eternally, were left by the roadside to be buried later. Finally on May 4, 1945, they reached the Drau Valley.

It was a month before the last of the remaining Cossack rear guard and stragglers made their way down into the wide, long stretching valley of the Drau River.

The Cossack camp locations were spread far apart from each other in this immense, picturesque valley:

Lienz – General Domanov's Kuban Cossacks

Oberdrauburg – Caucasian Cossacks

Spittal – General Shkuro's Cossack Reserves, Ammunition Depot, and Prison for the Cossack Officers

Feldkirchen – Colonel Wagner and his Don Cossacks

Klein St. Paul – General Kononov

Althofen, Volkermarkt – General von Pannwitz, and his XVth Cossack Cavalry Corps

Viktring - Colonel Anotoly Rogozhin's White Russian exiles (Russkii Korpus), known as the Schutzkorps (Guards).

The Red Cross International Committee had warned the Allies what would become of the anti-Soviet forces and asylum seekers if they were caught by the Soviets. On Monday, May 7, the first British soldiers reached the foot of the Ploecken Pass.

Cossack General Wassiljew contacted the British soldiers in hope of starting peace talks. He asked that the civilians be put under the King's protection. He made no special request concerning the military.

Days passed. Then, Brigadier Patrick Scott, 38th Irish Brigade, reassured the Cossacks that they would not be handed over to the Soviets. However, they did not realise the British were only trying to buy time while waiting for specific orders on how to deal with the Cossack army. Unknown to the Cossacks, their fate had already been predestined by the Yalta pact under the code name 'Operation Keelhaul.'

The British, charmingly helpful, in the meantime quartered the Generals and Atamans in the Golden Fish Hotel in Lienz. They said, "To honour these distinguished ranks." But what they actually did was cut off the leaders from their unaware Army. The Cossacks without their Atamans were hopelessly lost. There was no one there to make the most minimal decision for them.

On May 10, the XVth Cossack Cavalry Corps, commanded by General Pannwitz encountered some British and Yugoslavian officers who requested their immediate unconditional surrender. This request was immediately denied since they had already received orders to surrender in Griffen, Volkermarkt. There they paraded the streets to the sound of Prince Eugene's March, then surrendered.

Except for the officers, who were allowed to keep their pistols, all firearms were given up, and even the horses were rounded up for requisition.

At the Tehran Conference, Stalin obtained an agreement that the Balkans was to be considered part of the Soviet sphere of influence.

Thus the Allies were in favour of Tito, and there was no need for a Croatian state.

What remained of the bulk of the Croatian Army, approximately 200,000 strong (plus 100,000 civilians), camped at Bleiburg, were marched away under escort of the Yugoslavian partisans only to be slaughtered in Slovenia's forests.

On May 26, official talks began between the British and the Cossacks. The very same day, the British confiscated the Cossack Field Bank, estimated value at the time six million British Pounds. This was an illegitimate act, since the bank was composed mostly of private funds.

On May 28, General Alexander invited about two hundred disarmed Cossack officers to a conference in Spittal. Krassnoff himself encouraged all his officers to participate.

Dressed in their traditional uniforms, the officers in a convoy of trucks with the generals following in their cars, made their way to Spittal. Twenty minutes later in Nikolsdorf, an armoured escort met the convoy. Some officers, at the sight of the armoured vehicles, jumped off the back of the trucks and fled. When the column eventually arrived in Spittal there was no

General Alexander to be met, but a military camp. There the officers' personal documents were confiscated.

General Krassnoff was humiliated and felt utterly responsible for having encouraged this pretence. Moreover, he saw in this immoral act the fulfilment of a plan that aimed to deprive the Cossacks of their leadership. Above all, he was personally disappointed. He was shocked by the behaviour of General Alexander and by the betrayal of the British officers who had given their word of honour that the Cossacks would not be handed over to the Soviets. Krassnoff told his men: "Death is for us, and we must face it with pride."

The following day, the convoy with the officers on board, along with their armoured escort, were driven to Judenburg, where they were handed over to the Soviets on the bridge over the River Mur. Along the way some managed to escape by jumping off the travelling trucks.

Unfortunately some died in the effort.

In three days, a total of one thousand, six hundred and eighty-three officers were evacuated and handed over to the Soviets.

A few days later in a nearby mine, hundreds of them were executed.

The rest of the Cossacks, still camped in the Drau Valley, were joined by other refugees fleeing from the nearby Soviets. These refugees were of various nationalities, including Ukrainian slave labourers from the iron ore quarry and steel works in Leoben.

The civilians and troops were without leadership. Kuzma Polunin, a troop Sergeant, was elected 'Feldataman,' an Ataman in charge only for a particular problem and for a limited time. His first act was to ask the British, in the name of freedom, and in the name of God, to save the Cossacks. A written plea for mercy was even drawn up and addressed to the King of England. This plea never reached its destiny and went unanswered.

On May 30, 1945, the first contingent of Cossacks camped in nearby Lavant were evacuated and handed over to the Soviets in Judenburg.

Alarmed by this outrageous act, the Cossacks who were camped in Peggetz, alongside the river Drau, decided the next day, June 1st, to hold a Liturgy and create a shield of peaceful human defiance.

The British arrived early in the morning at 7:30. Colonel Malcolm, commander of the Lienz garrison, informed Ataman Polunin of his orders, which were to immediately evacuate all Soviet citizens to Judenburg, where they would be handed over to the Soviet military. A congregation of five thousand, three hundred and seventeen individuals had assembled. Men and cadets stood on the outer perimeter, circling themselves around the praying women, children, elderly and teenagers to form a passive, defensive human barrier.

To counter this resistance Major Davis ordered the praying to cease.

His order was ignored, and the praying continued. Then he ordered his troops to evacuate the camp by force. The soldiers of the Argylls and Sutherland attacked the gatherers with a brutal determination to achieve their task.

The Cossacks, men, women and children of all ages were beaten with riot batons and rifle butts. They were shot at and run over with vehicles. The wounded were slung like a sack of potatoes into the back of the waiting trucks.

In the resulting mass panic, women and children were trampled to death. Some Cossacks chose to commit suicide before they would accept deportation to the Soviet Union; women jumped into the torrential river Drau still holding their children. Some even succeeded in escaping.

When this mass evacuation procedure was complete, four thousand, four hundred and twenty-five victims had been transported to Judenburg. A sorrowful cloud hung over the Peggetz undertaking. Operation Keelhaul had claimed its first victims.

Days later, further downstream, the river began to relinquish the bloated bodies of the drowned martyrs. Soldiers used long poles to fish out the corpses and pile them up on the banks. More discoveries of suicides, either by hanging or bullet, were found in nearby woods and buildings, adding to the number of fatalities.

Between the 31st of May, and the 15th of June 1945, twenty thousand, one hundred and thirty-seven victims were handed over to the Soviet authorities in Judenburg. This includes the seven hundred and thirty-four who were transported in ambulances.

Two thousand eight hundred and six were classified 'unaccounted for.'

The majority of the abandoned Cossack officers, after being found guilty of treason to a country they felt no longer was their country were executed. The rest of the survivors were sent off to a Gulag, a Soviet slave labour camp.

On August 12, 1946, together with all his family, General Andreij Vasslov was executed.

On January 16, 1947 Krassnoff, Shkuro, Klitsch, Domanov and von Pannwitz were hanged.

The Soviet newspaper Pravda headlined the news, one day after their execution. Their bodies were exposed to the Moscow citizens along with forty Cossack officers. The location of their tombs is still unknown.

In 1951 a monument was erected at Pegnetz, by the River Drau, in Lienz, Tyrol, Austria at the nearby Cossack cemetery where the victims of 'the Tragedy of the Drau' are buried.

Some Cossacks who didn't make it to the Drau Valley, and were imprisoned in Italy, were shipped to Russia by train. These trains wore the Red Cross marking to mask the true nature of the convoys.

Trucks and ships were also used for deportation purposes, and a large number of suicides were always associated with these 'evacuations.'

One of the few units to escape this tragic end was the 1st Ukrainian Division. Its General, Pawlo Schandruk, managed to have the Allies think they were Polish from Galicia. With the help of Archbishop Ivan Bucko of the Ukrainian Catholic Union, present at that time in the Vatican, they were sent to Rimini, Italy. From there they were dispersed to the commonwealth countries, USA and various countries around the world as labourers.

A Cossack Homage

In the course of my investigative travel into the history of my father's WW II journey from Ukraine to England, one might think that with all the available information today, it would be a simple task to analyse his past, link all the facts, and then follow the chain of information back to his hometown in Ukraine.

Unfortunately, it's not so simple.

It is amazing how one can be misdirected under the influence of disinformation, or even simply missing a part of the information. In other words, manipulation.

For me this pilgrimage all started when I began tracing the towns in Austria shown in my father's documents, looking for Displaced Persons (DP) camp locations. This is what took me into the Drau Valley, where by chance I happened upon the Cossack Memorial Cemetery in Lienz. Seeing this made me investigate its sad story of a horrific act by Allied forces.



The Tragedy on the Drau, as this incident has become known, and the events leading to the deportation of people at Peggetz, Lienz, over the years has become a confused issue.

A first hint of this type of confusion is the deceptive plaque, written in the German language at the entrance to the memorial cemetery. Translated it says:

“Also, in memory of all the other victims of the XVth Cossack Cavalry Corps.”



I was curious about its wording. Did the victims lying here die by the hands of the Cossack Corps? Doubtful, but then who were these *other victims*? Where did they come from? Was by any chance my Cossack father also here?

My telephone call with Herr Dieter K, (before he passed away Dec 2009) one of the last living survivors of the XVth Cossack Cavalry Corps, made me even more curious when he told me that in fact they (the XVth Corps) had really nothing to do with Lienz. “They were NEVER there,” he said.

My reaction was not of astonishment but rather of confirmation. The nagging feeling I had at the back of my neck, which was telling me that something was terribly wrong here, was at last being established.

Dieter went on to explain to me that he believes no one knows for sure how many bodies lie in the Lienz cemetery, and that it is estimated somewhere between 190 – 300 victims are buried there, and at the most that there may be four or five remains from soldiers of the XVth Cavalry Corps which were found much later in other areas, and brought there to be laid to rest. The Austrian black Cross estimate 450 bodies are lying here.

I have been informed when the graveyard was reconstructed approx. 30 remains could be established.



Another indication that I felt something was wrong with the well-publicised story, is the deception of the Cossack Officers meeting in Spittal. All known reports that I have read state they dressed up in their parade garments displaying their cartridge belts across their chest.

To my knowledge, this was more of a custom of the Kuban Cossacks rather than the Don Cossacks who at the time wore only the German Uniform, and had mostly German Officers in their regiments.

The statement of Dieter K also collaborated the location plan of the Cossack units in Nikolai Tolstoy's book, *The Secret Betrayal*. Christopher Booker's book *A Looking Glass Tragedy* not only defines much more clearly the events leading up to the tragedy, but also shows the movements and whereabouts of the particular Cossack Units.

Another clue to the identity of the victims lying in Peggetz is the photos of the Cossacks shown at the 2007 Cossack International Congress in Lienz, with their captions stating that the troops were Cossacks. Regrettably they failed to reveal which host or regiment. Why was this?



The original pictures hang in the Imperial War Museum, and specifically state that the Cossacks marching and camped in the Drau Valley are the Domanov Cossacks belonging to the Kazachi Stan, or Cossack settlement belonging to the Kuban host. The bulk of these people had retreated with the Germans from Stalingrad and the majority were women and children. Booker says the men were armed, but only as a militia and not as an effective Army. This is another statement confirming my story of a survivor of this tragedy printed in *Surviving Lienz*.

Further investigation led me to believe not only Cossack soldiers lie there but also other refugee civilians of Ukrainian heritage.

Christopher Booker again explains in his book the complexity of the rapidly changing volatile situations happening between Klagenfurth and Lienz, an area more than one hundred miles long and fifty miles wide, in May 1945, with armed military forces.

The whole southern German army was travelling north from Yugoslavia and was aiming to cross the bridge in Klagenfurth (it was the only one that wasn't blown up) to surrender to the British.

Brigadier Pat Scott, 38 Irish Brigade in Southern Austria, May 1945.

"There was one very difficult principle that we were up against which I did not really know about to start with, that in accordance with the general surrender everyone was supposed to surrender to the Allied army against whom they had been fighting. Everyone in this part of the world had obviously been fighting against either the Russians (Soviet) or Yugoslavs, but the devil of it was that they were prepared to do anything rather than surrender to either of these armies."

Christopher Booker explains how all the mixed peoples of the retreating remains of the German Army met with refugees fleeing from the advancing ill-disciplined Yugoslav and Soviet Armies of the 3rd Ukrainian Front, and the 1st Bulgarian Army who had advanced much further in Carinthia than had been planned.* This created an instable pact, aggravating a pending war situation with the Yugoslavs because Tito was insisting on his claims to part of Carinthia and Northern Italy which were under British jurisdiction.

*Under the First Control Agreement and the occupation zones, the Soviet zone encompassed Lower Austria under the borders of 1937, Burgenland and the Muehlviertel region in northern Upper Austria; the United States took the southern part of Upper Austria and Salzburg; the British Styria, Carinthia, and East Tyrol; the French North Tyrol and Vorarlberg. In Vienna, the city centre (the first district) was placed under joint four-power control.

An eyewitness report of a German officer being taken prisoner by the British in Klagenfurth collaborates the situation General Keightley and his men were up against:

"We had to go over the mountains and through the Laubel Pass, which was a big tunnel over a mile long to get to Austria. When we reached the tunnel about fifty to a hundred partisans tried to cut us off there. We attacked them because we had to get through. After the fight we sent some men inside to see if it was safe. None of the partisans survived the battle and the tunnel was full of water, which was about two feet deep. There were many bodies in the water and I stepped on some of them as I walked through. As I retreated with thousands of German soldiers I became aware of their resentment towards me because I was in the Waffen SS. I didn't see many other SS troops around and I felt very uncomfortable. The soldiers didn't say anything, but they looked at me in an angry way. I then rubbed dirt on my uniform so they couldn't see my SS insignia. I wasn't sure if I was safe around them. It took me about a week to get to Austria. After we crossed the Alps there was fighting going on, but it stopped a day or two before we became prisoners. The ones who were further east in Yugoslavia probably had to fight their way out. The partisans got rid of whomever they found in Yugoslavia; cut off German units and things like that. I think there were mass killings. The Russians were near us. They came down from the Drau River. We also saw some Russians going through Klagenfurth and driving in jeeps. One of them had a half-naked woman bound on the hood; they did horrible things to the women they captured. We saw the British there too."

Booker reveals that von Pannwitz and his Cossacks of the XVth Corps had travelled through Jugosavia, via Celje to the Austrian border at Dravograd and were camped at Griffen, by Volkermarkt, and that even though the war was lost, von Pannwitz with his Corps planned to attack the advancing 1st Bulgarian Army.

With only 25,000 men at his disposal to cope with all these problems, General Keightley had to manage the explosive situation in this mountainous valley with an estimated armed 30,000 ill-disciplined Yugoslavs on his doorstep.

His greatest challenge, however, was the ever-increasing three hundred thousand plus Prisoners of War who were now under his control. And here is where I believe my father fits into this story.

In a remote valley north of Spital, 35 miles west of Klagenfurth existed a smaller group of Cossacks, (1,400 men) a Reserve Training Unit part of the 2nd Division of the Vaslov army, under the command of General Shkuro, known as the Wolf of the Kuban because he wore a wolf-skin cap.



General Shkuro

Spital was used as an ammunition depot for the Cossacks fighting in Jugosavia. This reserve force, however, never saw combat. The war ended for them when they were discovered by the 56th Reconnaissance Regiment. This collaborates an eyewitness report I have of the Reverend Michael D who told me the story of the ammunition depot, and who knew of my father serving under Shkuro. Father Michael was himself part of the 10,000-strong 1st Ukrainian Division which the British at that time knew nothing about.

In addition to this Reserve group, there was also the 4,000 strong Russkii Korpus, known as the Schutzkorps. These were mainly made up of White Russian exiles and veterans of the Civil War who had lived in the Balkans between the World Wars and who had recently gained in strength due to Soviet defectors from the Red Army. This Schutzkorps (Defence Corps) had been fighting with the Germans against the partisans since 1941 under the command of Colonel Anatoly Rogozhin, and were now camped at Viktring.

To complicate matters further, another 300,000 German troops of Army Group E, along with 200,000 Croat troops and 100,000 Croat civilians escaping Tito's forces were now heading towards the Villach and Klagenfurth areas.

General Keightley Signal to Eighth Army Command, 13 May 1945:

Further 600,000 reported to be moving north to Austria from Jugosavia, should this number materialise food and guard situation will become critical. I therefore suggest that all possible steps are taken to dispose soonest of all surrendered personnel in this area whether German, Austrian, or Russians by moving them to northern Italy or their homes, whichever may be the policy. Certain SS troops (XVth Corps) already causing trouble, but this is being dealt with.

Upon receiving this signal, General Robertson, Chief Administrative Officer consulted the US Political advisor, Alexander Kirk. The first part of their answer was as follows:

Ref Eighth Army AC1189 of 14 May, 1945:

All Russians should be handed over to Soviet forces at agreed point of contact established by you under local arrangement with Marshal Tolbukhin's HQ. Steps should be taken to ensure that Allied Prisoners of War held in the Russian area are transferred to us in exchange at the same time.

(It was estimated that 1,500 – 2,000 Allied soldiers were in fact making their way to Odessa to be shipped home).

The message reads on to say that all German forces should be disarmed and handed over to the local Yugoslav forces. Alexander Kirk then asked his State Department for concurrence and clarification. The State Department answered:

The Department assumes that the 28,000 Cossacks in question are Soviet Nationals and, if so, no objection is seen to delivering them to the Russian forces in accordance with the terms of the Yalta agreement.

Christopher Booker wrote: *This was probably the most significant order that led to the Tragedy on the Drau, at Pegnetz, Lienz.*

Under this enormous growing pressure, it was difficult for the British to accurately count the exact number of Cossacks in their custody. Booker describes British Officers mentioning 28,000, 46,000, and 75,000 Cossacks.

In fact seven separate groups of 48,100 anti-Soviet souls had established themselves in the areas:

(Upper Drau valley by Lienz)

- 15,000 Domanov Cossacks who had travelled over the Ploeckenpass from Tolmezzo. (approx 60% Ukrainian)
- 7,000 (approx) Caucasian Cossacks who had also travelled over the Ploeckenpass, 2,000 of whom managed to escape to Munich, Germany
- Approx. 5,000 civilian camp followers and family members
- These were joined on the 16th May by General Shkuro's Cossack 1,400 Reserves.
- 2,200 Refugees who had made their way to Peggetz from Leoben to be come under the protection of the Cossacks, and later the Red Cross.

A British Army ration account placed the number in the Peggetz area at 28,600.

(Camped north of Klagenfurth)

- General von Pannwitz and his 5,000 Cavalry (Don & Siberian with German Cadre) at Griffen, by Volkermarkt
- 4,500 members of the White Rusian Schutzenkorps, at Klein St. Veit,
- and the 10,000 men of the Ukrainian 1st Division camped east of Klagenfurt

note: The XVth Cossack Cavalry Corps of van Pannwitz, 25,000 strong were made up of Don, Siberian, Kuban, and Terek Cossack Hosts.

Croats:

When the 200,000 Croat soldiers reached Bleiburg, their reputation was adamant that all of them, both soldiers and civilians, would rather die fighting the Yugoslavs than surrender to any Bolsheviks. Brigadier Scott used his diplomatic skills to lure the Croat Army into surrender, telling them basically they had no choice. Complete annihilation would ensue, either by the Yugoslavian army, or if they advanced further, by the weight of the British, American and Yugoslavian forces. But if they surrendered peacefully he assured them he would use his influence to ensure that they were treated correctly.

A document was quickly drawn up (known as the Klagenfurth Conspiracy) with leaders of the Yugoslavian army and a truce was signed. The terms of surrender were that the Croatian Army was to be treated as prisoners of war with the exceptions of political criminals, who would be tried by Allied courts, while the civilian population was to be fed and returned to Croatia.

All weapons were surrendered and on the evening of 15th May, the Yugoslavian army started to march the 300,000 towards Maribor, some 53 miles away. But before doing so they had relieved all the people, men and women, some pregnant, others carrying siblings, of their personal goods, excess clothes, and their footwear.

One British officer concluded his own account of what he saw that day: *The whole affair was the most brutal and disgusting I have ever witnessed.*

Another officer enquired of the Yugoslav guards if the hungry Croats would be fed during the journey. This Yugoslav seemed taken aback with the question and said they would not be fed.

Thousands of the Croats, however, did manage to escape and penetrate the British lines. This gives me reason to believe why some Croats are buried alongside Don Cossacks in the graveyards of northern England.

From a military point of view, a vast mass of refugees had been turned back, and any imminent battle was avoided. Unfortunately, these Croat soldiers were in fact later executed by the Yugoslavs and I wonder if the outcome of all other acts of deportation would have turned out differently if the 500,000-man army of German and Croat forces had stood their ground and fought a battle, not forgetting the Cossack force of General Helmuth von Pannwitz who's only wish was to attack the 1st Bulgarian Army.

Commentary

I suppose one cannot legally blame the British Army for the Tragedy of the Drau, but ignorance of Soviet ways does not automatically mean innocence, and I understand that the deceitful diplomatic machinations of the Allies averted several battles between hostile groups, saving the lives of many British soldiers. And as Booker also states: the purpose of attempting to deceive the Cossacks was to minimise the chances of having to use force against them.

However, before the outcome of the Peggetz incident on the 1st of June, there was definitely an indication on May 15th at Bleiburg, with the Croats, and later at the Vitking camps of what might happen to the Cossack deportees once they were put into Soviet hands. This indication was ignored at the time by all the General Staff.

Before the British handed the Croats back to Tito's forces, a concerned Major John Mennell, Staff Officer of the 6th Armoured Brigade, had drawn up some questions that he thought needed to be clarified. He noted down the answers from Brigadier Verney, Commander of the 1st Guards Brigade, which I believe to be of importance when the actions of the British carrying out their deportation of the Croats are compared to those of the deportation of the Cossacks at Peggetz.

Q: What action is to be taken by British Troops if Croats object to entraining or embussing and Tito's forces use violence?

A: Try and persuade, if no use, do nothing.

Q: Are British troops to stand by and see women and children killed?

A: Obviously not, and very unlikely to arise.

Q: What action is to be taken by British troops if the Croats refuse to embus?

A: Persuasion, but no force.

(Some Croat officers did in fact refuse to be deported. A demonstration of a nearby flame-thrower changed their minds.)

Contrary to Brigadier Venell's wishes, the 36th Infantry Brigade did overreact to the peaceful resistance at Peggetz, implementing the use of lethal force towards men, women, and children by opening fire into the crowd. A living witness to this is Ukrainian-born (Odessa) Michael R, living near Lienz. His father was shot to death by a British bullet while holding his hand as a young boy, and from Iwan's testimony in *Surviving Lienz*, people fell like dominoes, and a killed woman fell on him.



28 Crosses bear silent witness to the tragedy

In my opinion, the author Christopher Booker wishes to quieten down and polish over the disgraceful behaviour of the British actions that day and try to prove that basically they had no choice but to use force when panic broke out, in order to 'make frantic efforts to save the lives of those persons trapped underneath' and states the number of people actually killed by the soldiers that day at NINE. He also indicates that the 28 graves in the Cossack Cemetery are the nearest thing to an accurate picture of just how many deaths took place on 1 June 1945.

The British Army ration account not only states the number in the Peggetz area at 28,600 but also accounts for 'evacuating' 496 medical sitting cases, 238 transported by ambulance, and 2,806 unaccounted for. Of these unaccounted 1,356 were later rounded up by patrols of which 934 were handed over to the Soviets at Graz.

The officer quoted after witnessing what the Yugoslavs did to the Croats: *The whole affair was the most brutal and disgusting I have ever witnessed*, makes me wonder what he would have said whilst witnessing the 'The Tragedy on the Drau.'

Ian Mitchell in *The Cost of a Reputation* writes:

Shortly after, Major Davis himself broke down. Like many of his soldiers he was so revolted at what he was doing that he could issue no further orders to attack these defenceless people.

The Regiments and Companies involved in deportation of the Cossack camps in the Upper Drau valley were:

8th Argyll and Sutherland – Y Company (Major Davis) &

5th Batl. Royal East Kent (known as the 'Buffs', at Peggetz)

6th Royal West Kents – B Company

2nd Inniskillings – A & D Companies

The remaining Upper Drau Cossacks were then shipped by train to Judenberg to be handed over to the awaiting Soviets. The XVth Cossack Cavalry Corps and von Pannwitz were shipped by truck to Judenberg under the responsibility of the New Zealander Major General Wier, Commander, 46th Division.

Finally, I would like to finish with a listing of Military policies:

AFHQ letter to all commands, 7 March 1945:

It is not the policy of the British Government to encourage any of those persons who become a British responsibility to put forward claims that they are NOT Soviet citizens.

Secretary of State for War, Sir James Grigg:

If we hand the Russian prisoners back to their death, it will be the military authorities who do so, on my instructions, and I am entitled to have behind me, in this very unpleasant business, the considered view of the government.

British Units taking part in the repatriation were told:

The return of the Cossacks to Russia is part of an international agreement, and we are disinterested spectators. Any Cossack who escapes will be a menace to British troops stationed in the area.

Instructions were given to capture or shoot any Cossacks trying to escape.

Brigadier Musson, 36th Infantry Brigade: (to his men 27 May, 1945)

...it should be recalled that they had taken up arms for the Germans because they expected to regain power in Russia; the Cossacks will be put to work on the land and be educated to be decent Soviet citizens.

References & Books

English language:

	<u>Author</u>
Army of the Lost Rivers (Novel)	Carlo Sgorlon
A History of Ukraine	Paul Robert Magocsi
A Looking Glass Tragedy	Christopher Booker
Cossacks in the German Army 1941 – 1945	Samuel J. Newland
Harvest of Despair	Karel C. Berkhoff
Holodomor	Lubomyr Y Luciuk
Ivan's War	Catherine Merridale
Kolkoz Childhood and German Slavery (Memoir)	Antonia Khelemendy-Kokot
Memories of an Unknown Soldier	Neil Hogben
Symon Petliura	Volodymyr Serhiychuk
The Cossacks 1799 – 1815	Laurence Spring
The Cost of a Reputation	Ian Mitchell
The Refugee Experience: Ukraine Displaced Persons after WW II	Various Authors
The Secret Betrayal 1944 – 1947	Nikoli Tolstoy
The Visible Part: Photographs and History of Mauthausen Death Camp	Mandelbaum Publishers
Ukraine during World War II	Yury Boshyk
Ukraine it History and its Arts	National Library of Australia

German language:

	<u>Author</u>
Deportiert nach Hause	Pavel Polian
Die Gefangenen	Guido Knopp
Die Kosaken im Ersten und Zweiten Weltkrieg	Harald Stadler/Rolf Steiniger/Karl Berger
Die Tragöde an der Drau	Josef Mackiewicz
Flucht in die Hoffnungslosigkeit; die Kosaken in Osttirol	Harald Stadler/Martin Kofler/Karl Berger
Freiwillige vom Kaukasus	Jeloschek/Richter/Schuette/Semler
Gebirgsjaeger im Kaukasus	Roland Kaltenegger
Gebirgssoldaten unter dem Zeichen des Enzian	Roland Kaltenegger
General Wlassow	Sven Steenberg

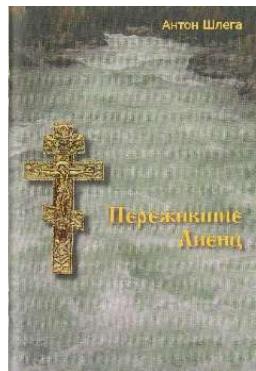
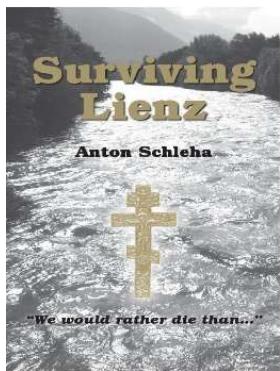
Hitlers Fremde Heere
Judenburg 1945 in Augenzeugenberichten
Stalins Fremde Heere
Ueberlebenskraft im Berchtesgadener Land
Villach 1945 – 1955
and.....

Peter Gosztony
Verlag des Museumsvereins, Judenburg
Peter Gosztony
Karl Welser
Stadtmuseum

Surviving Lienz is the story of a man who did all he could to keep his family together, and prevent them from falling into Soviet hands. It is the story of my father's friend, Ivan, and his journey. It is an eyewitness report that parallels not only my father's life in places, but that of many others like them.

Surviving Lienz tells a little-known story of treachery, deceit and the brutal murder of Ukrainian Cossacks and their families shortly after World War II. These incidents were perpetrated by those who called themselves the friends of the Cossacks: the British Army. Surviving Lienz contains a first-hand account of one man's travels through this deplorable segment of mankind's history, as well as photographs and explanatory notes that clarify this tragedy.

The tale **Surviving Lienz** can now be found exclusively within the collection **The English Kobzar**, available on Kindle.



**Iwan und die
Lienz
Kosaken**

