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'The Night Air is Poison':
The Germans of Kazakhstan

'*Wir sind hier keine Russe und dort sind wir keine Deutsche.*'
('We are neither Russians here nor Germans there.')
Russian German saying

Kazakhstan is big. It isn't just big, it is colossal. It could swallow all the other 'stans and still have room for more. Occupying an area two thirds the size of the United States, Kazakhstan's grasslands stretch from the Ural basin on Ukraine's borders all the way to China in the east, spanning almost the entire Eurasian landmass.

This vast country is many things, but its reputation in the West seems to hinge on one spoof TV journalist, the bête noire of every diplomat, PR department and self-respecting Kazakh.

Borat Sagdiyev, the cheeky invention of British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen, is the world's most infamous pseudo-Central Asian, having brought Kazakhstan unremitting humiliation with its fictional portrayal as a nation of bear-baiting, urine-swilling Gypsy-catchers. Borat is, in the words of the Kazakh Embassy in Washington, 'a one-man diplomatic wrecking ball'.

The Kazakh authorities tried to stop him, threatening legal action after watching Cohen's performance at an MTV Europe awards show. The comedian retaliated with a $250m-grossing mockumentary, *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006). They tried diplomacy, even inviting Borat 'home' to show him that not only could women travel on the *inside* of a bus, but could even drive. They soon realised that rational debate was futile.

Some see Borat as more of a composite 'ex-Soviet Man', created not to attack Kazakhstan specifically, but to show up Westerners' attitude to foreigners. Either way, Kazakhstan is truly on the map, and tourists (not just energy companies) really want to go there, albeit often for the wrong reasons.

For a country so large, with more than a hundred ethnic groups and climatic conditions, the nature of Kazakhstan is impossible to define precisely. To some it means interminable steppeland and tribesmen with falcons perched on their arms. To others it recalls sulphur hexafluoride gas explosions or gaudily painted wooden churches. To a great many it means terrible, wasted years in the gulag archipelago.

The Kazakhs are descendants of a predominantly Turkic people that have inhabited these expanses for hundreds of years. Yet they form only half the country's 15 million-strong population. The rest are a mixture of Russians, Poles, Ukrainians, Koreans, Finns, Chechens and Uighurs, to name a handful.

Few people have heard of the once large and prosperous German community of Kazakhstan. Even the German government was surprised to learn of its existence. They knew that their kinsmen were living somewhere in the Soviet Union, but had little grasp of the numbers, and were concerned by the 1.5 million that 'returned' to Germany after the Soviet collapse.

I say 'return' because to many of these returnees, Germany offered a quite different culture. They hadn't seen the *Mutterland* in 200 years and many Russian Germans were alienated and demoralised by what they saw. Their skills as *kolkhoz* managers or teachers were useless in a modern European country and they had to adapt radically to their new environs.

From the time of Ivan the Terrible in the sixteenth century, Germans had been in the service of the tsars as advisers, engineers and military commanders, but the first full-scale immigration campaign from Germany to Russia took place under Catherine the Great in the second half of the eighteenth century.

The *tsarina*, keen to develop her wild southern lands, invited settlers from the country of her birth. Herself a scion of Anhalt, south of Berlin, she knew Germans to be diligent, dedicated, and above all Christian, unlike the Muslim Tatars who harassed her southern marches.

The initial response to Catherine's 1763 invitation was immediate, almost frantic. Lured by the promise of a peaceful life, no taxes and permanent exemption from the draft (many were pacifist Mennonites), hundreds of thousands of Germans flocked by land and sea to Russia, armed with little more than wagons, ploughshares and wurst, all eager to escape the turmoil of the civil wars that wracked Germany's principalities at that time.

They settled mostly in Ukraine and the Volga region of south Russia, though some took to the Black Sea, the Caucasus and Crimea. There they prospered and kept to themselves in entirely German-speaking communities. They were self-sufficient and they generally worshipped in Protestant, rather than Orthodox churches.

But at the end of the nineteenth century their clannish communities were under threat. In the wake of the Russian Romantic movement, anti-German feeling became too widespread to ignore. Alexander II revoked Germans' exemption from the draft and what goodwill remained was soon diminished by the ruinous First World War.

Following the October Revolution, Germans found an unlikely supporter in Lenin, who favoured ethnic self-determination, and gave the Russian Germans their own Volga German Autonomous Republic. Whatever thaw these Russian Germans enjoyed was reversed again under Stalin, who liquidated their republic. He might even have initiated his own pogrom of Russian Germans, had the Nazis not appeared.

Stalin, who had never felt comfortable with having a German population on Soviet territory, was taken completely by surprise by Hitler's invasion of Russia on 22 June 1941. Nevertheless, Uncle Joe had taken his own precautions. In 1936, in preparation for his purges, Stalin had commissioned an inventory of every ethnic German living in his realms, almost as if a mass deportation was already being planned.

When the Red Army was finally mobilised, the Nazi forces had already overtaken 300,000 Soviet Germans between the Dniester and the Dnieper, and 'repatriated' them to Germany as newly discovered citizens of the Reich.

With breakneck speed Stalin ordered the deportation of all remaining 'free' Soviet Germans to Russia's eastern dominions, beyond the reach of Hitler or any other European power. Over a three-month period, 1.2 million Soviet Germans, predominantly in Ukraine and the Russian Volga region, were put into cattle trucks and sent to the bleak steppes of the east. It was the biggest deportation ever to have taken place on Soviet soil. More than a third would die from neglect, punishment and overwork. Amazingly, those that survived went on to underpin the Kazakhstani economy, excelling themselves as managers, farmers and professionals.

Today, a few hundred thousand Germans remain in the former Soviet Union. The overwhelming majority of them – approximately 300,000 – live in Kazakhstan, with others in Siberia, and smaller numbers in the other 'stans. Imprisoned for so long under Stalin and Krushchev, many survivors never left the environs of their former camps. As in the case of Central Asian Jews, the majority emigrated as soon as restrictions were eased in the Seventies and Eighties.

Emigration levels reached their height in the Nineties, but things have slowed down now. Few today speak German, fewer can prove their heritage to the German Embassy, and for the first time since independence, many young Kazakhstanis (as opposed to ethnic Kazakhs) see a good future in booming Kazakhstan.

Meanwhile, the elderly – the German speakers who recall the

long years of race hatred and discrimination – are on the cusp of extinction. That generation, scratching a living on meagre pensions, looks to Wiedergeburt, a German charity and cultural initiative that tries to support Russian Germans, and preserve what Germanness is left in this battered, broken community.

I arrived in Almaty, Kazakhstan's first city, with a hazy idea of where to find Russian Germans. But I had the advantage of some solid German institutions that were easy enough to locate: the Lutheran church, the Wiedergeburt offices, the German Embassy, and the use of a map of Kazakhstan that boggled my sense of scale.

Almaty is the perfect place to build a capital city. It basks in the shadow of the Alatau Mountains with its high meadows and bushy trees, and is vastly more charming than the actual capital, Astana, a characterless shamble of concrete and glass towering out of the northern Kazakh steppe.

The economic meltdown of the Nineties was over and accommodation in Almaty was no longer cheap. By dint of poverty and serendipity I found myself at the dormitory for international students at Almaty State University. I persuaded a woman who called herself the *kommandant* to take me in. She led me to a sinister-looking room called the ISOLATOR, spelt out in forbidding Cyrillic lettering. It was the sickroom. I laid out my mat and sleeping bag to avoid all contact with the bed.

For the few days I stayed I revelled in my surroundings, from the bichrome institutional paintwork to the scaldingly hot radiators. Even the seatless, urine-drenched loos grew on me, along with the perpetual gloom (the *kommandant* never seemed to turn the lights on). The one thing I never got used to was the smell of *gretchka* (buckwheat porridge) that seeped out from under her private kitchen, and even now makes me want to retch.

The poor, mostly Kashmiri, students for whom this dorm was a daily reality endured it all with inspirational good humour. I fell in with them quickly, sharing curries in their rooms and swapping stories about the evil *kommandant*. She was an

exceedingly unfriendly woman, even by Soviet standards. She would stomp around in her too-loose sandals and bark when spoken to. Sometimes, out of spite, she'd lock the front door early so that students with social lives were barred from their beds for a night. She would ignore pleas to fix things such as overflowing loos and generally cast a pall over the already gloomy halls.

The one rule was that if you absolutely had to speak to her, then it must wait until the end of *Pole Chudes* ('The Field of Wonders'), the Mexican-inspired quiz show to which she and millions of Russian housewives were addicted. Interrupting this daily ritual was simply not a risk worth taking.