Project: 'Collective myths and their transgenerational impacts'

Principal investigator:	Prof. Dr. Gabriele Rosenthal
Researchers:	Dipl.-Sozw. Viola Stephan; Sonja Owusu Boakye, M.A.; Dipl.-Sozw. Niklas Radenbach;
Research assistant:	Marieke Ulrich
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Project Description: Our study deals with the family histories and the life stories of three generations of migrants who came from the (former) Soviet Union to Germany and have an ethnic German family background. Based on biographical interviews, family interviews, the study of historical sources and participant observations we examine possible effects of the collective and the familial past on the present life of members of those families.

We addressed the question how members of this grouping of migrants remember their past before the migration and which versions of collective, familial and individual histories they present today. We examined the factual interdependence between the collective and the family histories and reconstructed their transgenerational impact on past and present lives (see Rosenthal 2006).

In the course of our project we conducted biographical-narrative interviews with members of 53 families who have an ethnic German background and who have migrated from the former Soviet Union to Germany where they currently live. These interviews were conducted in German and Russian. In order to gain further insight into their collective histories prior to their migration — as well as an insight into the process leading to their decision to migrate — we also conducted 37 biographical interviews with Germans and their non-German family members who are still living in Kazakhstan, the Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan.

The results of this study clearly show the necessity to take a long-term perspective on the collective and familial history. Thus, we are able to explain the observed difficulties in the families of this grouping of migrants in Germany and especially of the youngest generation in the present. In particular it illustrates the doubts of the youngest generation concerning the credibility of the family history as it was and is transmitted to them. In this connection the relevance of the family history for the individual's construction of belonging has to be emphasized (see Rosenthal 2005: 53ff.). In fact, people do not construct their ethnic or national belonging individually or on the basis of an independent solitary decision. "Instead, these attributes are acquired as a result of their positions as **members of families"** (Bogner & Rosenthal 2009: 13). Therefore, non-refillable gaps and empty spots in the family memory, as they appeared in interviews with ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union, can render one's sense of belonging brittle and problematic.

Furthermore our empirical analyses make clear that the grouping of ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union developed an extremely homogeneous, stereotyped we-image (see Elias 1987/ 1991: 293ff.), which refers to a homogenized collective memory.[1] This homogenous we-image could be formulated briefly: **„**We **all** were condemned in 1941[2] and we **all** were exiled in **1941** to the Asian part of the Soviet Union". This includes the myth that this is true for almost the whole grouping. However, it covers an extremely heterogeneous past of this grouping. For example, at most fifty percent of the ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union were deported in 1941 — a very generous estimate[3].

First of all this myth ignores the fact that in 1926 more than eleven percent of the ethnic Germans lived east of the Ural Mountains in the Asian regions of the Soviet Union — Kazakhstan, Siberia, Kyrgyzstan, and other Asian republics (Dietz/ Hilkes 1993: 20; Dietz

1 For a conception of collective memory in its interaction with „individual" remembering see Rosenthal (2010). It refers to the concept of family memory by Maurice Halbwachs (1925/ 1985) and his work on the social conditionality of memory and to the memory theory of Jan and Aleida Assmann (1988; Assmann 1992).

2 In 1941, the Soviet Union imposed a collective sentence on all Germans based on their supposed collaboration with Nazi Germany, and the ethnic German population then living in the western part of the Soviet Union was banished to the Ural region, Siberia, Kazakhstan, and other Asian regions. Men and women were drafted into so-called labour battalions where they were used as forced labour, usually under the most horrific conditions.

3 A 1939 census, whose statistics cannot be considered reliable from the outset, counted 1,427,200 Germans in the Soviet Union (Dietz/Hilkes 1993: 23). All told, approximately 900,000 persons were deported (see Brandes 1993), but this number also includes those who were only deported after the Red Army recaptured the western areas of the Soviet Union as well as those people who emigrated to Germany between 1941 and 1944.

1995: 33 et seq.). In 1941 it may have been approximately twenty to thirty percent. Second of all this myth includes the false image of nearly all ethnic Germans living in the Western regions of the Soviet Union being banished to Siberia, Kazakhstan, and other Asian regions already **in 1941** as a result of the collective sentencing of ethnic Germans. This image flatly denies the fact that between 1941 and 1943/1944 approximately 25 percent of ethnic Germans remained in the western areas of the Soviet Union which were occupied by the German army and the SS killing units between 1941 and 1943/1944 (Buchsweiler 1984: 338). This aids covering up the fact that during that time period many ethnic Germans welcomed the German occupation and many of them participated in Nazi crimes against Jews and other parts of the local population. Furthermore, around 275,000 Germans emigrated from this region to Nazi Germany between 1941 and 1945. They became German citizens but were later re-deported by the Red Army to the Asian regions of the Soviet Union after the Third Reich had collapsed in 1945.

The remarkable power of this homogenizing we-image is, on the one hand, due to the immense damage done to collective memories of discriminated groupings in the Soviet Union and the collective silence about the cruel aspects of Soviet history, both of which were (mainly) caused by state repression. On the other hand, it is also due to the increasingly tightened conditions of the laws governing their admission into Germany. This myth is corresponding with the public image of ethnic Germans as it was created by others in Germany and as it is dominating the public discourse in Germany as well as the scientific discourse in general.

Furthermore our interviews show that in the communities of ethnic Germans in Germany the biographical self-presentations and the discourses often also conceal the successful job careers of many of the middle generation in these families. And this success was often connected to a strong identification with the Soviet system (see Fefler/Radenbach 2009; 2010).

On the basis of interviews, participant observations and with the external evidence of historical sources it was not only possible to reconstruct the stocks of powerful collective memories, but also the heterogeneous familial pasts which lie behind them. Even though the aforementioned construction of a homogenized and homogenizing we-image is strongly dominating the collective memory of ethnic Germans from (and partially in)

the former Soviet Union[4], we can identify at least six structurally very different, but characteristic types of family history trajectories in our sample. These types differ particularly with regard to the time of migration or banishment into the Asian part of the Soviet Union (long time before 1941, between 1941 and 1945 or in 1945 during „Repatriation" or later).

Furthermore, our analysis indicates that the *transgenerational* effects differ significantly in terms of generational belonging and the diverse family histories (see Rosenthal/Stephan 2009a and 2009b). Additionally to the investigation of these differences we also explored the following research questions: What kind of functions and which biographical impacts do the established myths have in the families? We have assumed a defensive and a protective function of myth in the sense of systemic family therapy (Stierlin 1975: 150ff.) and tried to apply this concept to larger we-groups. Our particular focus has been devoted to explore the transgenerational impact of diverse family pasts and of different forms of dealing with these pasts on various families, various family members and diverse generations in terms of a denying or an open dialogue. In this context, we are interested in the current dynamics within German families from and living in the former Soviet Union, the relations between genealogical and historical generations[5] and the development of their communities in different geographical regions – and, in particular, the effects of these circumstances on the biographies of members of diverse generations.

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4 Among those currently living in the former Soviet Union, this mostly applies to Germans in the Ukraine while the Germans in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan often have not learnt and established this homogenizing memory and thus have a by comparison fragmentary memory.

5 Based on our empirical findings we reconstructed not only genealogical generations but also historical generations in the sense of Karl Mannheim.

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