The 1941 attack by the Third Reich on the German ally of the Soviet Union accelerated the processes of ethnic cleansing and genocide. They were carried out in the midst of the total war waged by these two totalitarian powers, each aiming at the total destruction and subjugation of the other. With no pretenses to uphold, no outside checks on any policies or projects, German and Soviet plans of demographic engineering were implemented in full, and accelerated to full throttle in the context of the perceived needs of the war effort. In 1941 more than ten million inhabitants of the Soviet western borderlands (incorporated just in 1939–1940) were evacuated eastward before the rapidly advancing German armies. This evacuation was similar in scale and in its forced character to the 1915 evacuation in the western provinces of the Russian Empire that had been overrun by the German and Austro-Hungarian armies.

When the frontline had somewhat stabilized, the Kremlin exiled ethnic Germans from Leningrad and its vicinity and from Crimea to Siberia and Kazakhstan. In line with the logic of ethnolinguistic identification, Soviet Germans were seen as potentially more loyal to Germany than to their own country. In most cases this was a baseless suspicion, but to remain on the safe side, in 1941 the Kremlin dissolved the Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. The republic’s 370,000 ethnic Germans were transported to concentration camps and exile settlements in Siberia and Kazakhstan. A similar fate was meted out to smaller numbers of equally untrusted Finns and Ingrians in Leningrad’s vicinity, alongside Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians in their respective countries, which a year earlier had been annexed and made into Soviet republics.

The German armies’ steady advance eastward continued without much disruption until mid-1942. This effort starved the Third Reich of menfolk. In their place millions of “racially inferior” Belarusians, Czechs, Hungarians, Lithuanians, Poles, Russians, and Ukrainians from the occupied territories were hauled to Germany as forced laborers. Beginning in 1940, in its own zone of occupation in Poland, Germany created urban ghettos for Jews and a network of associated forced labor camps. In this manner Jewish assets were stolen, and subsequently unpaid labor extracted from them. The system was extended to the adjacent Soviet areas when German troops launched an attack against the Soviet Union in 1941. But at that time, Berlin had already taken the decision to exterminate all the Jews. In total, over 5,000 ghettos were created, and the associated camps were made into death camps.

For the sake of swift extermination in line with the ideology of national socialism, and in most cases against the actual needs of the war effort, no ghettos or camps were founded for Jews across most of the Soviet territory under German occupation. In their stead, mobile Einsatzgruppen (special task forces) were deployed for hunting down and murdering Jews. What is unduly forgotten is that the same extermination policy was applied to Central Europe’s Roma. As a result, half of the murdered Jews and Roma were liquidated in the death camps, while the Einsatzgruppen exterminated the other half. In literature the fate of the latter group of victims is known as “Holocaust by bullets” (Desbois 2008).

In 1941 the ravages of total population engineering were extended to Yugoslavia, and Greece was attacked, occupied, and partitioned by the Axis powers and their Balkan allies. Germany and Italy allowed for the creation of a new nation-state of Croatia, which proved a staunch ally. Ethnic Serbs (that is, Slavophone Orthodox Christians) left or were expelled from Croatia, Vojvodina (annexed by Hungary), Macedonia (annexed by Bulgaria), Kosovo (incorporated into Albania under Italian control) to rump Serbia under direct German military control. In turn, Montenegro’s domicile in rump Serbia left for Montenegro that had been recreated under Italian control. Wartime Germany, as usual, hauled hundreds of thousands of Croats, Montenegrins, Serbs, Slavophone Muslims (or today’s Bosniaks), and Slovenes as forced laborers to the Third Reich. Sofia expelled Greeks from Greece’s eastern Thrace, incorporated into wartime Bulgaria. In the interwar period, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria periodically expelled or forced Turks from both countries to “emigrate” to Turkey. In many cases, these “Turks” were Albanian-speaking and Slavophone Muslims. The Albanian government protested, but to no avail, that if any Albanian Muslims needed to be expelled from Yugoslavia they should be sent to Albania. During the war Bulgaria continued expelling Turks (Muslims) to Turkey, which remained neutral during the conflict.

In accordance with the program Heim ins Reich (Back Home in the [Third] Reich), devised in 1940 mainly for Central Europe under Soviet occupation, German(ic)-speaking communities from Slovenia and Vojvodina were sent to the Polish territories directly incorporated into Germany. Villages and homesteads emptied of Serbs and Germans in Vojvodina, which had been annexed by Hungary, were partly repopulated with Szeklers, or Hungarians from this part of Transylvania, which remained within wartime Romania’s boundaries. Meanwhile,
inspired by the German example, Romania and Croatia embarked on their own extermination programs of “racially inferior” populations, which from the ethnolinguistic perspective, were deemed as un-Romanian and un-Croatian, respectively. Bucharest created a network of death camps in its wartime semi-colony of Transnistria with its administrative center at Odessa (Odesa), where many Romanian Jews and Roma were exiled and murdered through overwork and starvation. Other Romanian Jews were killed where they lived or sent to German death camps in occupied Poland (including the territories east of the Bug/Buh River, which after 1939/1945 became western Ukraine). Meanwhile, Croatia established death camps for exterminating the country’s Serbs, Jews, and Roma. Some Jews found an unexpected safe haven in wartime Albania. It was the only country under Axis control, and then under German occupation, that successfully opposed Berlin’s demands to send Albania’s Jews to Germany’s death camps. Albania’s other claim to fame is that during the war the number of Jews in this country grew over ten-fold, from fewer than 200 to over 2,000.

The year of 1943 shook the Third Reich to its core, despite the fact that the state’s official name was changed from the German Empire (Deutsches Reich) to the Greater German Empire (Großdeutsches Reich). The Red Army gained an upper hand over the Wehrmacht, and a German retreat from the east began. At the same time, Italy switched sides in the war. As a result, Germany had to occupy Italy’s territorial gains in the Balkans. In addition, to protect the southern rear of the Third Reich, Berlin extended its military control over the northeastern corner of Italy proper. In the wake of these changes the rudderless Italian troops in the Balkans were rounded up, incarcerated, and sometimes massacred. Germany treated them as traitors and refused them the status of POWs, instead labelling these soldiers as “Italian military internees” (Italienische Militärinternierte). And again, as was the case with Jews, Albanians saved numerous Italian troops (about 20,000 to 30,000) and refused to give them up to the German authorities, while others joined the Yugoslav or Albanian resistance. Germany rolled out another punitive measure against Italy by hauling hundreds of thousands of Italians as forced laborers to Germany.

The rapid Soviet advance westward convinced many pro-German and/or anti-Soviet Belarusians, Cossacks, Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Russians, Tatars, and Ukrainians to flee in the same direction rather than to be caught, incarcerated, and murdered by the Soviets. They hoped to reach western Germany, while some Estonians and Latvians, alongside Swedes from Estonia, opted for neutral Sweden. Those heading for western Germany rightly expected that the area would find itself under the occupation of the Western Allies, namely, Britain, France, and the United States. They knew better what to expect of murderous Soviet totalitarianism, especially if the Kremlin decided to treat an ethnolinguistically defined population as traitors. As earlier in the case of the Volga Germans, in 1944 the entire population of Crimean Tatars was rounded up and sent to Uzbekistan. The Crimean Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic was formally dissolved a year later, in 1945. The Crimean Tatars’ only crime was that the Red Army did not manage to stop the Wehrmacht’s advance, so Crimea found itself under German occupation. A similar fate was meted out to the Northern Caucasus’ non-Slavic nations of the Balkars, Chechens, Ingush, Kalmyks, Karachays, and Meskhetian Turks. They were also blamed for not stopping the German occupation of their ethnic areas. But in reality, their deportation brought about a higher degree of ethnolinguistic homogeneity to the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic’s Crimea and northern Caucasus, alongside Soviet Georgia. Given that apart from the Buddhist Kalmyks, all the exiled groups were Muslims, the 1944 deportation seems to have been a direct continuation of the Russian imperial policy of de-Islamizing the Black Sea northern littoral, heralded by the 1864 genocide and expulsion of Cricassians (see Map 11).

The Finns saw their participation in World War Two on the side of Germany as their own separate Continuation War (1941–1944) fought against the Soviet Union for regaining the territorial losses sustained under the Soviet attack during the Winter War (1939–1940). Hence, in 1944 Moscow agreed to a separate peace with Helsinki. In addition to the territories ceded in 1940, Finland lost further areas. The seeming permanence of these losses convinced 400,000 Finns and Karelians to leave the annexed areas for Finland within its new boundaries.

Meanwhile, with the Red Army marching toward Berlin, the Kremlin engaged in another bout of demographic engineering for the sake of fortifying its hold over Central Europe. The 1940 Soviet western frontier, as established in line with the 1939 German-Soviet Pact, was reinstated. Hundreds of thousands of Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians perceived as traitors or somewhat anti-Soviet in their views were exiled to Siberia for suppression and “re-education.” For the sake of deepening the ethnolinguistic homogeneity of Soviet Lithuania, Soviet Belarus, and Soviet Ukraine, and to win the support of at least part of the local nationalists, ethnic Poles (that is, Slavophone Catholics) were expelled to postwar Poland, the territory of which was moved 300 kilometers westward. In return, ethnic Lithuanians (or Baltic-speaking Catholics), Belarusians (Slavophone Orthodox Christians and Uniates) and Ukrainians (Slavic-speaking Greek Catholics) remaining in postwar Poland were expelled to the Soviet Union. The advancing Soviet front was closely followed by pro-Soviet Poles and Polish Jews, who had survived the war and the Holocaust in the Soviet Union. They were instrumental in the creation of a communist Poland after the war. Meanwhile they established a rudimentary Polish administration, especially in the deutsche Ostegebiete (Eastern German territories), located east of the Oder-Neisse line. Earlier, a plurality or majority of these territories’ German populations had fled or had been evacuated westward. In the Balkans, Albanians were expelled from northern Greece to Albania. With the end of the war apparently just round the corner, faits accomplis in the name of ethnolinguistic homogeneity multiplied. Perpetrators rightly expected that any postwar settlement would approve the resultant new etnnopolitical order, as there was little taste left for another war that would right the numerous wrongs generated by World War Two.