The Geopolitics of Repressions

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Abstract

I study how geopolitical concerns influence attitudes of a state toward its minorities. I exploit the Hitler's rise to power in 1933 as an exogenous shock to Soviet-German relations. Using the digitized archival data on 2.3 million individual arrests by the Soviet secret police, I apply difference-in-differences and synthetic control method to estimate how changing geopolitical relations influenced repressions of Germans in the USSR. The estimates of both models imply that that the arrests of Germans relative to other minorities increased by approximately 2% after 1933.

Introduction

What determines the attitude of a state toward ethnic minorities within its borders? Why are some minorities accommodated or assimilated and others are politically excluded and repressed? Furthermore, why does the position of a state toward its minorities change in time? For example Soviet Union largely accommodated its minorities by in 1920s but it heavily repressed them in the campaigns of mass terror 10 years later.

Mylonas (2013) argues that the geopolitical concerns play an important role. Specifically, a state is likely to choose repression and exclusion if the ethnic minority's country of origin is seen as an geopolitical enemy. The minority is then viewed by the state as unreliable and as a potential fifth column of the foreign country.

We test this hypothesis on the case of German minority in Soviet union. In 1933, Hitlers rise to power changed Germany from a neutral actor to ideological and geopolitical enemy in the perspective of the Soviet Union. We can then see how the repression changed before and after 1933 and compare it with other minorities. In particular, we use the individual arrests by the soviet secret police (the NKVD) as a dependent variable and employ the difference in difference strategy and the synthetic control method.

1 Literature review

Existing literature on repressions has focused mostly on their consequences and legacies (Rozenas et al., 2017; Lupu and Peisakhin, 2017; Zhukov and Talibova, 2018). As far as the strategic use of repressions by the state is studied, it is usually in relation to domestic factors such as institutions and economic shocks (Davenport, 2007; Svolik, 2012; Greitens, 2016; Blaydes, 2018) with less attention being given to external forces.

As was mentioned, Mylonas (2013) proposes a theory how of geopolitical relations influence the attitude of a state towards its minorities. He also tests his theory with data on the post-World War I Balkans where the nation-building policies (categorized into 3 groups: accommodation, assimilation and exclusion) toward 90 ethnic groups are a dependent variable and information on their support by external powers is an explanatory variables (together with other control variables). However, the results of the cross-sectional regression, used in the study, might easily be biased due to omitted variables or reverse causality and we believe that our approach offers cleaner identification.

According to Blaydes (2018), a state will resort to collective punishment (based on ethnicity, religion or community membership) if it faces environment with highly asymmetric information in which it cannot identify the likely transgressors. The logic behind this is that the members of the community will police its members to avoid collective

punishment.

McNamee and Zhang (n.d.) is methodologically and thematically closet study to ours. They analyze how the 1958 split in Soviet-China relations affected the demographic composition of the population in the Soviet-Chinese border regions. Using difference-indifference strategy, they find that, after the split, both states supported expulsions of the minority group and sponsored immigration of the majority group but only in border regions without significant natural boundary (e.g. high mountains). They conclude that the states use demographic engineering as a way to protect their vulnerable border against a hostile power.

2 Historical background

2.1 German–Soviet relations in the interwar period

The relations between Weimar Germany and Soviet Union can be characterized as neutral or even cooperative. Both countries were somewhat isolated in the international system dominated by western powers (Great Britain, France, USA) and sought to find allies. The good relations were first established by the Treaty of Rappalo in 1922 in which both countries renounced the territorial and financial claims against the other and agreed to secret military cooperation (Gatzke, 1958) and then reaffirmed by the Treaty of Berlin in 1926. Furthermore, a trade treaty was signed between the two countries in 1925 (Morgan, 1963).

Hitler was named chancellor on 30 January 1933 and effectively become a dictator on 24 March 1933 by the passing of the Enabling Act. The relations with Soviet Union quickly turned hostile for several reasons. First, Hitler called in *Main Kampf* for Germany to obtain *Lebensraum* (living space) in the east, presumably at the expense of the Soviet Union and he often spoke of Judeo-Bolsheviks. Moreover, Hitler soon after his rise to power banned the German Communist Party and started to persecute its members (Haslam, 1984).

Nevertheless, the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany were able to cooperate in areas of common interest under special circumstances in late 1930s. In particular in 1939 they sighed the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact which guaranteed non-belligerence between Germany and the USSR and divided the spheres of influence in the Eastern Europe. This of course ended with German invasion into the USSR in June, 1941. Except the brief period of limited cooperation, the Germany represented an ideological and geopolitical opponent. The Soviet propaganda portrayed Nazi Germany as an existential enemy and rank-and-file NKVD officers would perceive it as such (which is why Molotov-Ribbentrop pact caused

such a surprise).

2.2 Ethnic repressions in the Soviet Union

In the 1920s, the Soviet policy towards its ethnic minorities was largely accommodating (Martin, 2001). The languages and culture of minorities were even often promoted and minorities were encouraged to enter local goverments and party structures (so-called *korenizatsiya* policy). In some cases Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSR) were established (including Volga German ASSR) which had given the regional minorities certain degree of independence.

This attitude changed drastically in the 1930s. First, the *korenizatsiya* policy started to be reversed. The Soviet state then gradually began to target ethnic minorities for repressions which culminated in the mass national operations of the NKVD of 1937-1938 resulting in more than 100 000 people being killed and many more sent to the Gulags (forced labor camps) (Martin, 1998; Snyder, 2011). The persecutions further escalated with the World War II. Following the German invasion into the Soviet Union in 1941, Stalin ordered deportation of about 400 000 Volga Germans into Kazakhstan and Siberia (Polian, 2003).

3 Data

Our data on soviet repressions come from Zhukov and Talibova (2018)[1] who use the Victims of Political Terror archive [2] collected by a Russian NGO Memorial. The main sources of the Memorial lists are declassified Russian Interior Ministry documents, prosecutor's offices and the Commission for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Political Repression. The Memorial archives include 2.3 million individual arrests by the Soviet secret police (NKVD) between the years 1921 and 1959 with names of each person, date of arrest, the place of birth for all observations and in many cases additional information such as ethnicity, occupation and party membership. However the data are not complete and include about 70% of estimated 3.8 million convicted for political reasons.

We created our main dataset by counting number of arrest for each ethnicity by year. A few people who were categorized as having multiple ethnicities were dropped from the dataset and not counted. With 17 minorities (Armenian, Belarussian, Estonian, German, Greek, Chechen, Chinese, Jewish, Kabardin, Kalmyk, Korean, Latvian, Lithuanian, Os-

[1] In particular, we downloaded the data from the replications file archive of the journal available at https://www.prio.org/JPR/Datasets/

[2] The Memorial archive can be accessed at http://base.memo.ru/ (new version) or at http://lists.memo.ru/ (older version)

setian, Polish, Tatar and Ukrainian) and 37 time periods (from 1921 to 1958) this gives us 663 observations in total. Total number of arrests for each ethnicity is provided in the table 3 and the plot of arrest by ethnicity and year (after applying the transformation $\log(1 + y_{it})$) is shown in figure 5, both in the appendix.

In addition to data on repressions, we also obtained some information on a few characteristics of the 17 ethnic groups in the USSR. Specifically, we acquired total population of the ethnic groups and their urbanization rate from 1926 Soviet Census from the Demoscope website.[3] For each ethnic group, we also calculated the cladisitc similarity of its language to Russian based from Glottolog language trees (Hammarström et al., 2018). Cladistic measure of linguistic similarity counts the number of shared branching points between the two nodes on a language tree and it has been used by Fearon (2003) and Dickens (2018) among others. The full data are provided in the table 3 in the appendix.

4 Difference-in-differences

Our main specification is the dynamic difference-in-differences model:

$$\log(1 + y_{it}) = \sum_{k=1928Q1}^{1939Q4} \beta_k \, \text{German}_i \cdot \text{YearQuart}_t^k + \lambda_t + a_i + E_i \cdot t \; + E_i \cdot t^2 \; + u_{it} \quad (1)$$

where y_{it} is number of arrests of people with ethnicity i in year-quarter t, λ is year fixed effect, a is ethnicity fixed effect (both captured by respective dummy variables) and YearQuart_t^k are dummy variables that equals 1 if its year-quarter k equals to t and 0 otherwise (except for 1939Q4 which is equal to 1 after the fourth quarter of 1939 and zero otherwise) . The coefficients of interest are β_k. Prior to second quarter of 1933 they capture the pre-treatment trends the lead (anticipatory) effects used to test if pre-treatment trends are parallel. After second quarter of 1933 they the dynamic lagged effects. The $E_i \cdot t$ and $E_i \cdot t^2$ term capture the ethnicity specific quadratic time trends. The inclusion of this term should not significantly change the coefficients, unless the results are driven by spurious correlation (Angrist and Pischke 2009).

We apply logarithmic transformation on y_{it} since it better fits the data (more in the results below). We use $\log(1 + y_{it})$ because some observations (although not many) have $y = 0$. As discussed in Wooldridge (2015, p. 193), the percentage change interpretation is usually closely preserved (except for changes beginning at 0 which are not of interest to us).

Our identifying assumption is that the number of arrest of Germans after 1933 would go in parallel to arrests of other minorities in the absence shock to German-Soviet relations

[3] It is available online at http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/ussr_nac_26.php

conditional on our control variables (mainly the ethnicity specific time trends). Although we cannot test this assumption, we can test whether the trends were parallel prior to 1933 (pre-treatment) which could increase our confidence that they were parallel after 1933 too. This can be testing if the coefficients β_k on the lead effects are significantly different from zero.

As Bertrand et al. (2004) show, the usual standard errors are downward-biased for most DiD regressions since they do not account for the serial correlation within the units of interests (states, countries etc.). A common solution to this problem is to estimate standard errors using robust covariance matrix that allows for clustering (i.e. cluster-robust standard errors). However for small number of groups (generally less than 40), the cluster-robust standard errors are downward-biased and not reliable. Angrist and Pischke (2009, chapter 8) suggest taking the maximum of cluster-robust as a simple rule of thumb to avoid gross misjudgements in precision. More rigorous solutions are cluster bootstrapping (Cameron et al., 2008; Cameron and Miller, 2015) and using t-distribution with $G - K$ degrees of freedom (where G is number of clusters and K number of parameters) rather than the standard Normal distribution (McCaffrey and Bell, 2002; Imbens and Kolesár, 2016). Since we have small number of groups we use the generalization of McCaffrey and Bell (2002) correction to models with arbitrary sets of fixed effects by Pustejovsky and Tipton (2018).

4.1 Results

The estimated coefficients β_k from the specification 1 are plotted in the figure 1. The coefficients between the years 1933 and 1939 (when the relations between Germany and Soviet Union were hostile) mostly range between 1 and 3 and all except one are statistically significant at 5% level. The rise of Nazism thus based on these estimated increased the arrests of Germans by the NKVD in the USSR by about 2%.

However, the pre-1933 coefficients give us some reason to doubt the validity of our model. Three of them are significantly different from 0 at 5% level and others are very close to being significant. This provide some evidence that the pre-treatment trends for German minority were not parallel with trends for other minorities. We can thus suspect that the post-treatment trends were not parallel either which would violate the basic identifying assumption of difference-in-differences. To address this concern, we apply the synthetic control method which can be valid even in the absence of parallel trends.

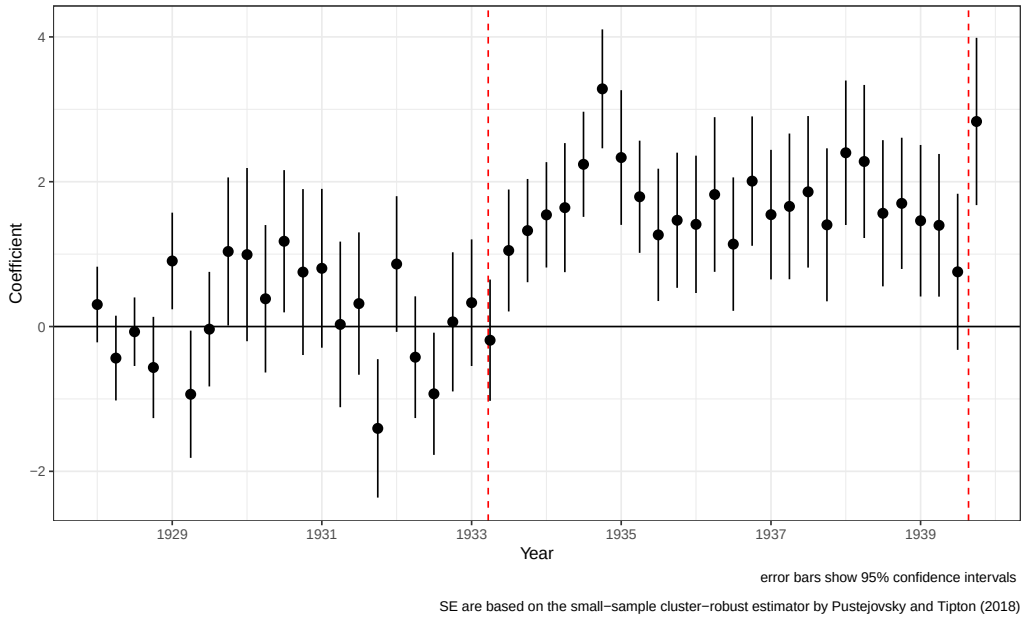


Figure 1: Estimates of coefficients β_k on the interactions of $\text{German}_i \cdot \text{YearQuart}_t^k$

5 Synthetic Control Method

However, the parrarel trends assumption can sometiemes be violated. These issues can be adressed by sythetic control method (Abadie and Gardeazabal, 2003; Abadie et al., 2010)

Let Y_{it} be the outcome of a unit i at time t with $i = 1$ being the treated group. We denote D_{1t} as the treatment dummy, i.e. variable that equals 1 if $i = 1$ and $T > T_0$ and 0 otherwise (with T_0 being the start of the treatment). Let be Y_{1t}^N be a counterfactual outcome for the treated unit in the absence of treatment. The effect of treatment a time t, α_{1t} is assumed to be given as

$$Y_{1t} = Y_{1t}^N + \alpha_{1t} D_{1t} \tag{2}$$

Furthermore, the synthetic control method assumes that Y_{1t}^N can be expressed by the following factor model:

$$Y_{1t}^N = \delta_t + \boldsymbol{\theta}_t \boldsymbol{Z}_i + \boldsymbol{\lambda}_t \boldsymbol{\mu}_i + \epsilon_{it} \tag{3}$$

where is δ_t an unknown common factor with constant factor loadings across units, $\boldsymbol{Z}_i$ is a $(1 \times r)$ vector of observed time-invariant covariates (unaffected by the treatment), $\boldsymbol{\theta}_t$ is a $(1 \times r)$ vector of unknown parameters, $\boldsymbol{\lambda}_t$ is a $(1 \times F)$ vector of unobserved time-varying factors, $\boldsymbol{\mu}_i$ is an $(F \times 1)$ vector of unknown factor loadings and ϵ_{it} is the error term with zero mean.

Notice that for constant $\boldsymbol{\lambda}_t$ for all t we get the traditional difference-in-differences

Table 1: Synthetic German minority weights

Ethnic group	Weight
Ossetian	0.39
Tatar	0.23
Polish	0.14
Greek	0.09
Kabardin	0.07
Chechen	0.03
Lithuanian	0.02
Ukrainian	0.01

model. Unlike difference-in-differences, the synthetic control method allows for unit-specific time trends as long as they can be captured by the factor model.

The synthetic control is constructed as a convex combination of available comparison units (in our case other minorities in the USSR) that most closely resembles the pre-treatment characteristics of the treated group (or more precisely, for which the average of its factor loadings $\boldsymbol{\mu}_i$ match the factor loadings of the treated unit $\boldsymbol{\mu}_1$). More formally we choose weights $W = (w_2, \ldots, w_J, w_{J+1})$ subject to $w_j \geq 0$ for $j = 1, \ldots, J, J+1$ and $w_2 + \cdots + w_J + w_{J+1} = 1$ that minimize $\|X_1 - X_0 W\|$ where $X_1 = (Z_1, Y_1^{K_1}, \ldots, Y_1^{K_L})$ is a $(k \times 1)$ vector of pre-treatment characteristics of the treated unit for which $k = r + L$ and Y^{K_l} are combinations of pre-treatment outcomes (analogously for X_0). The effect of the treatment at time t, α_{1t}, is then estimated as a difference between the outcome for synthetic control and the treated unit, i.e.:

$$\hat{\alpha}_{1t} = Y_{1t} - \sum_{k=2}^{J+1} w_j^* Y_{kt}$$

5.1 Results

We implemented the synthetic control method in R software using the MSCMT package (Becker and Klößner, 2018). The calculated optimal weights W of ethnic groups in the synthetic German minority are provided in the table 1 (ethnic groups with zero weight are not shown). The highest contribution in the synthetic German minority have the Ossetians, Tatars and Pols with weights 0.39, 0.23 and 0.14 respectively. The Greek, Kabaradin, Chechen, Lithuanian and Ukrainian minorities are also represented in the synthetic control although only with very small weights.

Figure 2 shows the trends in arrests for the German minority and its synthetic control. The synthetic German minority tracks the actual values fairly well except for two large

negative shocks to the actual arrests in 1931 and 1932 which the synthetic control does not capture. The trends start to diverge in the second quarter of 1933 with the actual arrests of Germans holding steady but decreasing for synthetic control. The gap between the trends for the actual German minority and its synthetic control (shown in figure 3a) keeps within the range of 1.25 to 2.5 for most of the post-1933 period. This implies that the rise of Hitler led to about 2% increase in the arrests of Germans by the NKVD in the period from 1933 to 1939. This is very similar to the estimates obtained using difference-in-differences.

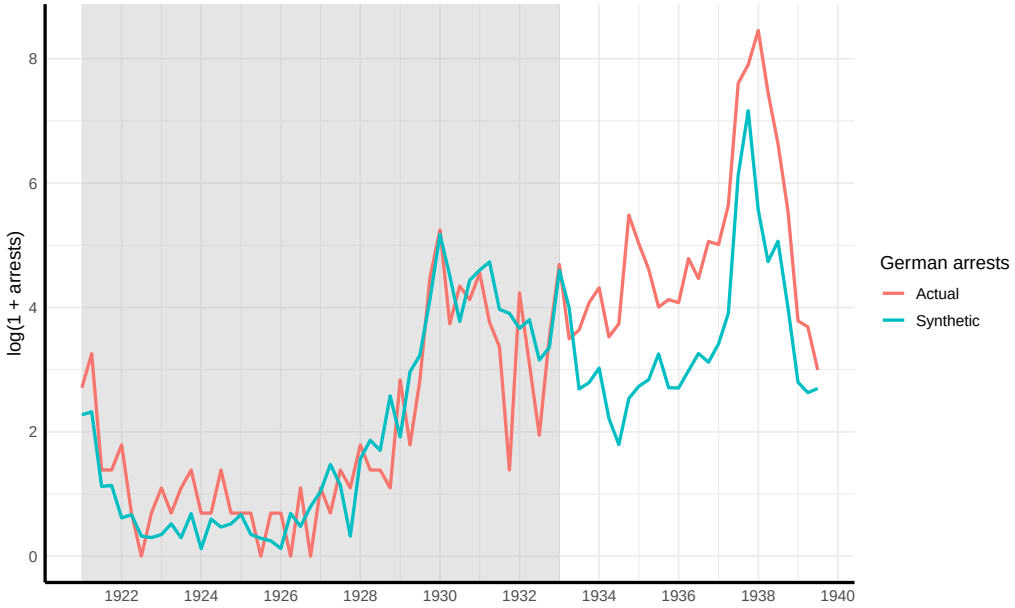


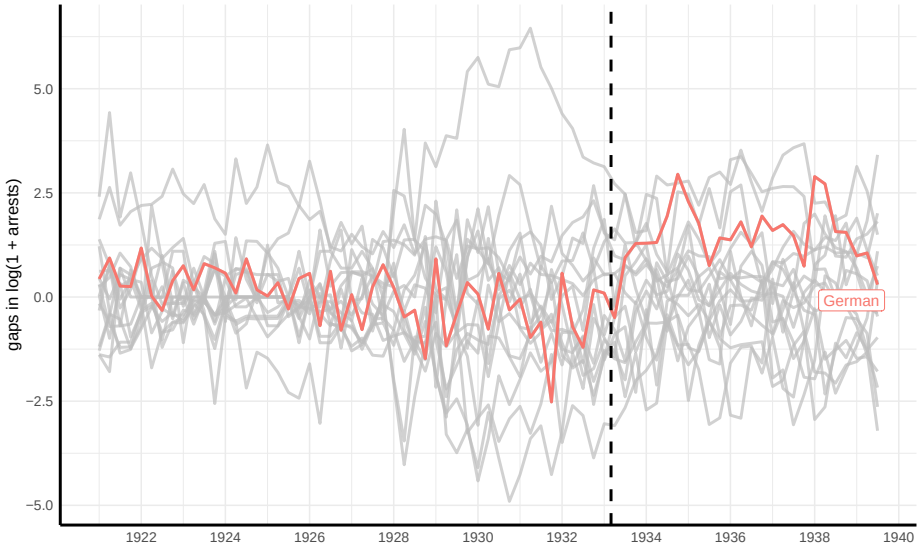
Figure 2: Comparison plot

The synthetic control method, however, by itself does not provide us with any measure of uncertainty of significance. This has been addressed by performing placebo tests (Abadie et al., 2010). Synthetic control method is applied iteratively to every ethnicity in the donor pool as if they were treated. By comparing the gaps from these placebo tests with the gap for the German minority, we can assess the significance of our results. Large gaps for arrests of Germans relative to other ethnic groups would suggest that the results are significant since these results would be less likely if there were no treatment effect .

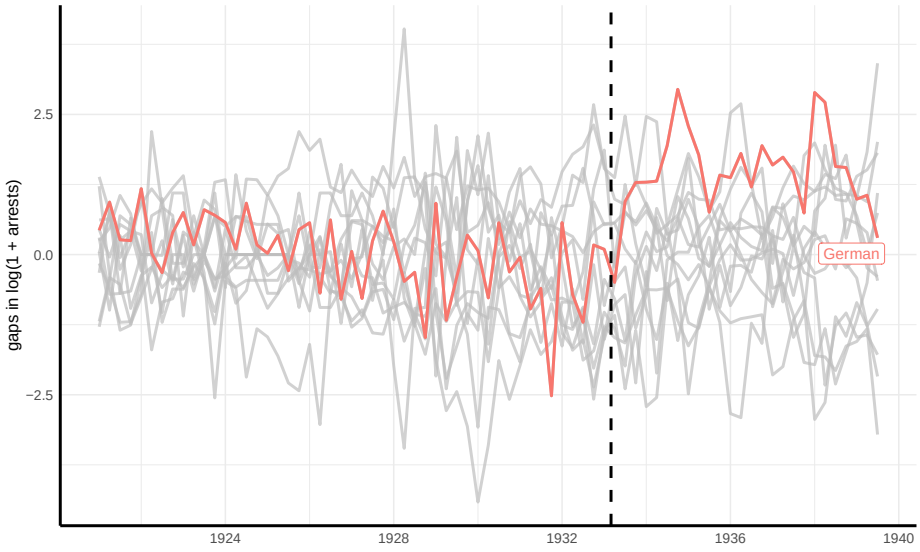
Figure 3a shows gaps between the synthetic control and the actual trends for Germans together with placebo gaps for all 17 other ethnic groups. The post-treatment gap for German minority is relatively large although not the highest. The figure also highlights that for some ethnic groups the pre-treatment gaps are large too. This indicates that synthetic control of these ethnic groups does not capture the actual pre-treatment trends well. As Abadie et al. (2010) note, placebo synthetic controls with poor pre-treatment fit

do not provide good comparison for estimating rareness of large post-treatment gap for a treatment with a good pre-treatment fit. They thus recommend excluding excluding placebo groups with substantially higher pre-treatment mean squared prediction error (MSPE)

Following Abadie et al. (2010) we therefore exclude ethnic groups whose pre-treatment MSPE is 5 times higher then the same measure for German minority. This removes 4 ethnic groups with the worst pre-treatment fit (Tatars, ...). The resulting plot is shown in the figure 3b. The post-1933 gaps in German arrests now stand out more clearly.



(a) All ethnic groups



(b) Ethnic groups with pre-treatment MSPE higher than 5 times the MSPE of Germany excluded

Figure 3: Gaps between synthetic control and actual values for placebo tests

Nevertheless, the choice of any level of the cutoff of pre-treatment MSPE is somewhat arbitrary. Alternative way to asses significance of results may be to compare the ratios of post/pre-treatment MSPE. The values of these ratios for all ethnic groups are displayed in the figure 4. Post/pre-treatment MSPE ratio for the German minority is by far the highest. The probability of German minority having the highest ratio of all under the null hypothesis of zero treatment effect is $1/17$ (≈ 0.06).

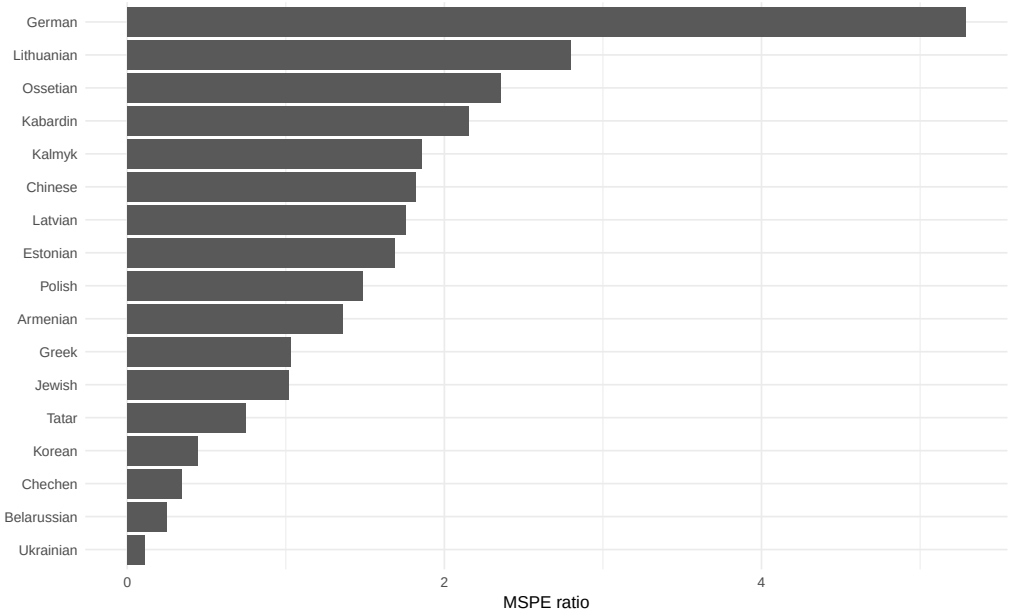


Figure 4: Ratios of post-treatment MSPE to pre-treatment MSPE

Conclusion

We used difference-in-differences to test whether the change in geopolitical relations between Soviet Union and Germany in 1933 caused the NKVD to target Soviet Germans more relative to other minority group. We have seen that evidence for this hypothesis is rather weak. One possible explanation might be that the Germans were well represented in state institutions (including the NKVD) in regions of their heavy settlements and thus would not be prone to target their co-ethnics due to change in geopolitical relations. Polian (2003, p. 126) for example mentions that even on 31 June 1941, the Supreme Court of the Volga German ASSR sentenced a Russian *kolchoz* chief for "delivering chauvinistic abuses against Germans residing in the USSR". The fruitful area for further research might be to compare how the rise in repressions differed for Germans living in areas with local autonomy (e.g. Volga German ASSR) and those living outside to see to what extent autonomy offered protection.

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Appendix

Table 2: Total arrest by ethnicity, 1921-1958

Ethnicity	Number of arrests
Armenian	2228
Belarussian	66226
Estonian	7508
German	37812
Greek	1508
Chechen	723
Chinese	6317
Jewish	28900
Kabardin	2162
Kalmyk	5405
Korean	2482
Latvian	13208
Lithuanian	2666
Ossetian	2812
Polish	54022
Tatar	26294
Ukrainian	49306

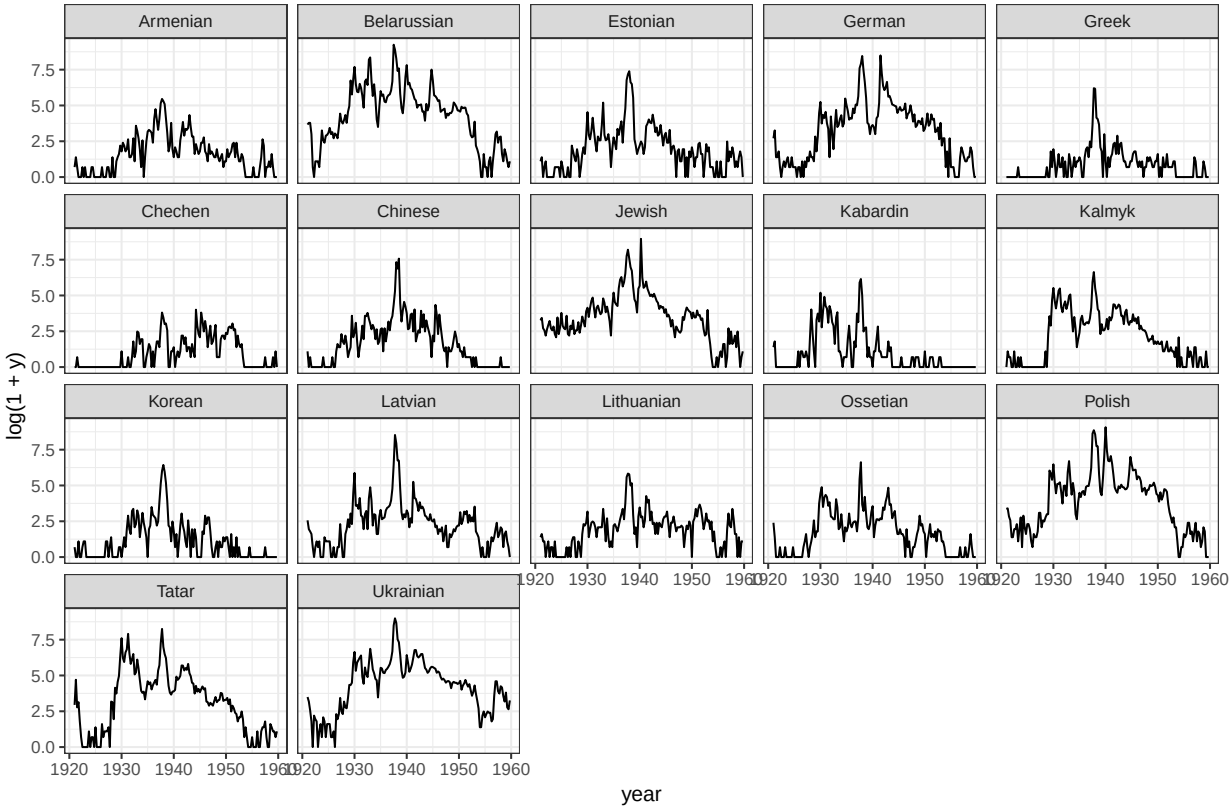

Figure 5: Arrests by ethnicity and year (in $log(1 + \text{arrests}_{it})$)

Table 3: Pre-treatment characteristics of ethnic groups in the USSR for SC

Ethnic group	Total population	Linguistic similarity to Russian	Urbanization rate
Armenian	1 567 568	1	35.45
Belarussian	4 738 923	4	10.32
Estonian	154 666	0	23.00
German	1 238 549	1	14.92
Greek	213 765	1	21.21
Chechen	318 522	0	0.98
Chinese	10 247	0	64.87
Jewish	2 599 973	1	82.43
Kabardin	139 925	0	1.27
Kalmyk	129 321	0	1.29
Korean	86 999	0	10.52
Latvian	141 703	2	42.31
Lithuanian	41 463	2	63.16
Ossetian	272 272	1	7.86
Polish	782 334	3	32.75
Tatar	2 916 536	0	15.48
Ukrainian	31 194 976	4	10.54

Note:

Total population and urbanization rate of the ethnic group in the USSR is taken from 1926 census. The linguistic similarity to Russian is measured by the number of common nodes in the language tree (cladistic similarity).