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Benjamin Frommer. *National Cleansing: Retribution against Nazi Collaborators in Postwar Czechoslovakia.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. xvii + 347 pp. $75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-81067-8.

Reviewed by Caitlin Murdock

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In 1945, people across Europe demanded retribution against Nazi occupiers and those who had collaborated with them. European societies wanted not only to punish the crimes of fascism and World War II, but to create new societies purged of those likely to repeat such crimes. In this context, Benjamin Frommer argues that Czechoslovakia's retributive legislation and trials, and even the expulsion of German Czechoslovaks from the country, were justified and must be seen as part of a pan-European phenomenon. At the same time, both popular and government efforts made Czechoslovakia's retribution one of the farthest reaching, bloodiest, and most flawed in Europe.

In *National Cleansing*, Frommer sets out to explain the process of retribution in Czechoslovakia, examine its flaws and contradictions, and reevaluate its historical causes and consequences. Frommer's choice of the term "national cleansing" is both historically accurate (the Czechoslovak government used the term *narodní ocista*) and relevant to recent historiographic discussions of ethnic cleansing. But significantly, national cleansing is not simply another term for ethnic cleansing.[1] While the post-World War II story of the expulsion of ethnic Germans from Czechoslovakia and Eastern Europe is widely known, much less is known about the process of retribution. Frommer demonstrates that the expulsions were only one piece of a larger phenomenon of popular and legal retribution undertaken in the name of the Czech nation. The term "national cleansing" is additionally useful in that Czechoslovakia was home to two different systems of postwar retribution: one in the historic Bohemian crownlands of Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia, and the other in Slovakia. This separate administration of postwar retribution was justified by the different wartime experiences of Czechoslovakia's territories.

Although Frommer does not make this point explicitly, the separate policies specifically emphasized the national, rather than the state-defined nature of Czech retribution. The Czech nation was to be purified of national aliens (ethnic Germans and Magyars) as well as of Czech criminals, traitors, and Czechs deemed to have besmirched the national honor. Few segments of society were

free from suspicion. Beyond those condemned for unambiguous crimes (working in concentration camps, for example) many were accused of denouncing neighbors and relatives to occupation authorities, of membership in fascist organizations, or even of harboring fascist or anti-Semitic sympathies.

Eduard Benes's Czechoslovak government in exile began planning Czech retribution and national cleansing as early as 1941. By 1945, Czechoslovak communist leaders, some of whom had spent the war in the Soviet Union, joined the planning, demanding even more radical measures than those drafted by the government in exile. Frommer carefully examines the discussions and legislation that shaped the ways in which retribution was carried out. In doing so, he dismisses two common arguments about retribution. First he argues that retribution was designed by Benes and the non-communist government in exile. He demonstrates that the communists were able to push some aspects of the retribution legislation further than their democratic counterparts had planned, for example introducing more lay judges on the People's Courts. He also argues that retribution helped undermine a domestic sense of legal stability, thereby helping the communists seize power in 1948. But he shows that retribution was not specifically a communist project. Second, he makes it clear that retribution was a domestic effort. Although the Czech leaders who led the retribution had spent the war abroad, Frommer argues that it was they, rather than Stalin or other outside forces, who designed and carried out Czech national cleansing. Popular support for the retribution trials eroded with time, not because retribution was a foreign imposition, but because Czechs who had lived under the occupation found the former exiles too harsh and the wide reach of retributive laws increasingly threatening, since few people were immune to denunciation.

Frommer casts Czech national cleansing as a genuine domestic effort to come to terms with the Nazi occupation, Czech participation in the Protectorate, and the legacy of fascism. In doing so, he lends it both greater legitimacy and greater complexity than more political interpretations. He shows that the Great Decree and the Small Decree (the measures that defined which offenses required legal retribution and how they were to be punished) were imprecise, allowing for great diversity of interpretation and legal action. The ban on appeals and the requirement that death sentences be carried out within two hours undoubtedly led to the deaths of innocent people. The use of denunciation to identify collaborators continued the dynamics of fascist rule (and anticipated those of communist rule), and allowed people to use the retribution courts to settle personal scores.

On the other hand, Frommer argues that despite the government's and the communists' hopes that lay judges would pressure their professional colleagues to hand down stiff sentences, the People's Courts, as well as other judicial bodies, showed growing professionalism and moderation from 1945 to 1947, the period in which the retribution courts held sway. Lay judges typically followed the lead of the professional judges, and Frommer suggests that the courts reinforced democratic government and the rule of law in the face of the communist rise to power. Indeed, he argues that when the communists briefly reinstated the courts in 1948, their efforts to use retribution as a political tool were often frustrated by jurists' and ordinary citizens' insistence on upholding the law.

Although Frommer's discussion focuses primarily on the legal prosecution of retribution cases, rather than the expulsions of German Czechoslovaks between 1945 and 1946, he nevertheless argues that the expulsions were central to the overall story of retribution. Czech public opinion vigorously supported retribution trials in their early phases, in part because Czechs assumed that the trials were directed largely against

ethnic Germans. But the courts quickly bogged down with cases, and Czechs, as well as ethnic Germans, landed in jail in large numbers. Whereas the public had assumed that Germans would be judged more harshly than Czechs, in some cases, especially cases of offenses against the national honor, Czechs were given harsher sentences than Germans. In short, while serving in the Wehrmacht or belonging to a Nazi-sponsored organization made national sense for a German, it constituted national treason for a Czech (here again we see the primacy of national identification over loyalty to the state). Finally, the government, which placed a greater priority on removing the German Czechoslovak population than on prosecuting ethnic German war criminals, began releasing ethnic Germans from jail so they could expel them.

Frommer argues that the government's lenient treatment of ethnic Germans before expulsion and the large-scale prosecution of Czechs undermined Czech public support for the retribution trials and created a sense that the state was not upholding its own laws, a position with which he seems to agree. While public perceptions that the Germans were escaping punishment while Czechs remained in jail were no doubt important, historians need not assume that German Czechoslovaks escaped unscathed. Certainly the expulsions did not differentiate between crimes of association, collaboration, or war crimes (though Frommer makes it clear that the retribution courts' sentences were also uneven in their treatment of different degrees of offenses). Germans expelled for being German were treated the same as those arrested on much more serious charges. Those accused of capital crimes certainly were better off being expelled than hanged. But for the majority of Germans, whose crimes would have earned them jail time or fines, exile and the loss of home, property, and community were not negligible alternatives. Surely this too must be understood as retribution.

If some readers finish this book with a sense of frustration that Frommer remains equivocal in his evaluation of Czech national cleansing, they may have some understanding of how Czechs felt in 1947. Whether democrats or communists, working or middle class, Czechs all seem to have been dissatisfied by the postwar national cleansing. Frommer takes a story that has often been presented in black and white and, by adding complexity, has produced a story cast in many shades of gray. Although sometimes frustrating, this approach may also be the most accurate way to tell any story of postwar retribution and reconstruction. If we accept Frommer's assertion that postwar retribution was not only common, but was a just reaction to fascism and the brutality of the Second World War, we must also recognize that no system of retribution is without victims, perpetrators who escape from justice, and other inequities.

Ultimately this book is an important addition to several fields. It re-evaluates the process of Czechoslovak retribution, and places the expulsions in a broader context. By clarifying that the Benes government played a central role in both the legislation and practice of retribution, Frommer contradicts arguments that national cleansing was just a communist political tool. He also makes clear that the Czechs were aware of the communists' political methods and intentions before 1948.[2] Finally, the book broadens discussions of ethnic cleansing, demonstrating that expulsions and cleansing efforts can have unforeseen consequences for majority as well as the minority populations. Frommer's work is an important example of a new generation of historical research in modern Central European history that has emerged since the fall of communism and the re-opening of archives to western scholars. His use of new sources and his re-evaluation of Czechoslovak history outside the ideological strictures of the Cold War are vital contributions to rethinking Central European history. This book

promises to be of value to scholars for years to come.

Notes

[1]. For discussions of ethnic cleansing and the German expulsions from Czechoslovakia see Eagle Glassheim, "National Mythologies and Ethnic Cleansing: The Expulsion of Czechoslovak Germans in 1945," *Central European History* 33 (2000), pp. 463-486; Radomír Luza, *The Transfer of the Sudeten Germans: A Study of Czech-German Relations, 1933-1962* (New York: New York University Press, 1964); and Norman Naimark, _Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

[2]. For another recent assessment on the communist rise to power in Czechoslovakia see Bradley F. Abrams, *The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation: Czech Culture and the Rise of Communism* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).