H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Wlodzimierz Borodziej, Hans Lemberg. *"Unsere Heimat ist uns ein fremdes Land geworden..." Die Deutschen östlich von Oder und Neiße 1945-1950: Dokumente aus polnischen Archiven, Bd. 2: Zentralpolen. Wojewodschaft Schlesien (Oberschlesien).* Marburg: Herder-Institut Verlag, 2003. VIII + 768 S. + 8 s/w Abb. EUR 75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-3-87969-294-1.

Reviewed by James Bjork

Published on H-German (February, 2006)

In the early 1950s, a research group led by Theodor Schieder and including many soon-to-be-leading figures in the German historical profession began a massive effort to record the accounts of Germans who had fled or were expelled from the territories east of Germany's postwar boundaries. The resulting document collection, published both in German and, in abridged form, in English, included hundreds of narratives of suffering and victimization.[1] And yet, to many later readers, the cumulative impact of these personal stories proved to be homogenizing rather than individualizing, off-putting rather than sympathy-provoking. For although the refugees were being asked to relate their first-hand experiences, they had to realize that what made them of interest to a German government research project--indeed, made them the legal and moral responsibility of the German state at all--was their claim to membership in the German *Volksgemeinschaft*. And so the narratives that emerge from these volumes, while not without their interesting quirks and twists, tend to feature an unnerving continuity with the discursive habits of the Nazi regime, particularly in their insistence on the irreducible "Germanness" of the narrators' suffering and on the utterly alien character of their Slavic/Judaeo/Bolshevik persecutors. It is little wonder that a later generation of scholars came to view the compilation not as a rich collection of oral history but as an exercise in national self-exculpation, a ritual invocation of millions of German wartime and postwar victims to ward off examination of Germany's own wartime crimes.

But after several decades in which the topic of the expulsions was largely absent from mainstream historiography, both German and non-German historians have come to the conclusion that a new attempt at analyzing one of the largest migrations in human history is now both necessary and possible. A promising early result of these efforts is a three-volume collection of documents on the expulsions culled from Polish state archives and translated into German by a collaborative team of German and Polish researchers. While the editors' description of the project as marking a "liberation of research from the ballast of politics" (vol. 1, p. 1) might be overdoing it a bit, the new document collection is certainly very different in content and tone from earlier generations of German *Ostforschung* or from the original *Dokumentation* of the 1950s. The first volume, published in 2000, features sources dealing with overall Polish policy toward the German population as well as documentation specific to the region of East Prussia (Masuria). The subsequent two volumes are focused on the regions of central Poland and Silesia (volume 2) and on Great

Poland and Pomerania (volume 3). Strictly speaking, this review is devoted to the second volume, though it also unavoidably comments on the multi-volume project as a whole.

One might imagine that the archival paper trail constructed by Polish state officials would create a kind of mirror image of the West German narrative described above. Just as postwar German historians had to insist on the essential Germanness of migration from East to West, so Polish officials would cling to the mantra that (in the words of the governor of Silesia) "not a single German should be taken into the Polish national community and, in turn, not a single Polish soul can be excluded from Polish society" (pp. 469-470). But the picture that emerges from these documents is not nearly so tidy. Rather than the familiar story of postwar Poland quickly achieving "ethnic homogeneity," we find a chorus of doubts about whether the people being expelled were really Germans and whether the people who stayed behind were really Poles. To be sure, a high degree of linguistic uniformity would soon be ***imposed*** on the new citizenries of Germany and Poland, as monolingual education did its work and, in the case of Poland, strict policing of everything from shop signs to tombstones to beer coasters purged inconvenient reminders of Germandom. But the physical migration of human beings after the war was anything but the neat placement of like with like that our color-coded "ethnographic" maps still tend to suggest.

In the dominant discourse of the postwar Polish state, the German problem was understood not as one of biology or even of culture but rather of treason: hence the effort to "verify" which of the ***Volksdeutschen*** had voluntarily embraced ***Deutschtum*** and which had accepted the designation under duress. But this attempt to draw a thick line between consent and coercion satisfied no one. ***Volksdeutsche*** from areas of central Poland, where adherence to German nationality was generally assumed to have been voluntary, objected that they were, in fact, subjected to severe pressure by the Nazi occupation authorities. Some Polish officials agreed that "many good Poles" (p. 510) who were only "'ethnic Germans' by accident" (p. 223) were being dragooned into labor camps and onto transports sent to the West, though they also noted sadly that many of these people had made little or no effort to have themselves verified and were often eager to leave Poland. At the same time, however, most officials in the new western territories, as well as the in-migrants coming into these areas from central Poland or the eastern lands that had been lost to the Soviet Union, insisted that the effort to verify as Poles almost all Category III and many Category II ***Volksdeutsche*** was excessively generous, allowing hordes of Wehrmacht veterans and their German-speaking family members, even active members of the Nazi party, to pass as Poles and thus maintain their property and positions. As a petition from a group of re-settlers from central Poland sarcastically asked, "Who will raise an objection to their rehabilitation? The [Category] 'Threes' or 'Fours?' These are their neighbors or friends" (p. 484).

Since individual testimonies were almost always designed to tell an unambiguous tale, whether accusatory or (self-) exculpatory, one of the few ways for people to keep their national options open was silence. In one village in the Opole region, the residents reportedly refused to fill out any information on a nationality census, pleading that "no one knows who is actually in charge here: Poles, Russians, or Germans" (p. 440). But another, more brazen strategy for dealing with changing sovereignties was serial collaboration. According to a Polish Peasant Party activist in the Bielsko region, one local woman, although not herself registered on the ***Volkslisten***, had worked during the war as an informer for the Gestapo and so, after the war, wasted no time in joining the Polish Workers Party and having deported as

"Germans" all inconvenient witnesses to her wartime collaboration (p. 532).

Although, in most cases, both solidarity and denunciation seem to have been driven by personal, face-to-face relationships--between neighbors and, above all, between family members--some more ideological factors, especially religion, played a role in determining who stood up for whom. The editors of the document collection did not make use of the Catholic Church's internal archives--unfortunately, it seems that they were denied access to them--but Polish prelates do make some striking cameo appearances as witnesses for the defense in cases where fellow Roman Catholics were targeted for deportation to Germany. Stanislaw Adamski, the bishop of Katowice, wrote lengthy memoranda vouching for the Polishness of a number of priests (pp. 567-575) and also weighed in to defend the anti-Nazi credentials of leaders of the German Christian People's Party (pp. 415-417). At the same time, he criticized as excessively *lenient* the treatment of the Protestant population of Masuria, who, he claimed, did not speak Polish and had voluntarily fled with the German army in the winter of 1944-45. And Adamski made no mention at all of the plight of local German-speaking Jews or their Christian spouses, who had been subject to repression under the Nazis and now faced deportation as Germans. Only Katowice's residual Jewish community, it seems, registered a brief on their behalf (pp. 411-413).

While the main attraction of a document collection is, of course, reading through the primary sources themselves, the introductory essays to each section generally do a fine job of contextualizing the unique dynamics of the expulsions in the region under examination. The editors also show some concern, probably misplaced, that readers might take the language of Polish officials too much at face value. One introduction, for example, takes pains to emphasize the deplorable conditions in labor and transit camps, even including one expellee's rather overwrought equating of the camp at Sikawa with Auschwitz (p. 56), while the other introduction makes a point of dismissing the sources' "more than questionable" references to German conspiracies and underground activities (p. 383). Nonetheless, these editorial interventions never degenerate into a tedious adversarial balancing of "the German side" against "the Polish side." Indeed, perhaps the greatest compliment that one could give the editors is that in reading their contributions--just as in reading the life stories of many of their historical subjects--one can not immediately tell who is a German and who is a Pole.

Note

[1]. Theodor Schieder, ed., *Dokumentation der Vertreibung der Deutschen aus Ost-Mitteleuropa* (Bonn: Bundesministerium für Vertriebene, 1954-1961). Published in English as *Documents on the Expulsion of the Germans from Eastern-Central-Europe*.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-german

Citation: James Bjork. Review of Borodziej, Wlodzimierz; Lemberg, Hans. *"Unsere Heimat ist uns ein fremdes Land geworden..." Die Deutschen östlich von Oder und Neiße 1945-1950: Dokumente aus polnischen Archiven, Bd. 2: Zentralpolen. Wojewodschaft Schlesien (Oberschlesien).* H-German, H-Net Reviews. February, 2006.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11430