
Reviewed by Laura J. Hilton
Published on H-German (July, 2008)

As one of several recently published works dealing with Displaced Persons (DPs) in the post-war period in Germany, Stefan Schröder's work exemplifies the regional approach to this topic, with his focus on Münster and the surrounding area. But rather than stand isolated as a microhistory of the region, it is connected to the larger historiographical picture, particularly among the German scholarship on the subject. Schröder also carefully elucidates where his findings and analysis apply to the British Zone in its entirety and, to a lesser extent, the three western zones as a whole. His work expands the typical boundaries of DP-focused works with a careful examination of their experiences in the final years of the war, particularly early in 1945, before they were even labeled as DPs. Thereafter it follows a familiar path: massive repatriation from the summer of 1945 to the spring of 1946; the building of community life within camps by the DPs who remained; the opening of immigration opportunities in 1947; and the final closures of camps and integration of the so-called hard core of DPs into German society. While it does not advance a unique or demonstrably different picture of the DP experience, this book successfully confirms and further bolsters the still emerging, more complete picture of these mainly temporary and involuntary inhabitants of Germany. It should provide stimulus for additional local and regional work on DPs, just as the initial work of Wolfgang Jacobmeyer, Schröder's doctoral adviser, did two decades ago.[1]

Displaced Persons became a catch-all phrase for individuals of non-German nationality who, at war's end, found themselves within Germany, generally against their wishes. The vast majority of DPs had been forced laborers or POWs, and they numbered in the millions across defeated Germany in May 1945. They represented dozens of nations, stretching from western Europe to the USSR and everywhere in between. Given the sheer numbers of those labeled by military authorities as DPs and the myriad of nationalities represented, many historical or sociological studies focus on one group and typically also one region, city, or camp. While concentrating on Münster and its surrounding region, Schröder casts his research net widely in terms of those he studies; he deals with multiple ethnicities in the immedia-
ate postwar period. This approach strengthens and deepens the picture he presents of the DP experience, particularly in the months leading to Germany's defeat and the subsequent summer. For instance, he demonstrates that the process of repatriation began at the initiative of the DPs themselves as early as March 1945, particularly for individuals from western Europe (who were, after all, closer to home).

The major themes of Schröder's second chapter are the establishment of camps and the organization of repatriation by the occupation authorities. Within these themes he provides, in exacting detail, information about the different places where camps were established (including factories, schools, and barracks), how occupation authorities and/or tactical troops organized this rootless population, who the DPs in the region were and from where they came, difficulties in providing basic material care for the DPs, and efforts to meet their non-material needs. As Schröder's work pushes further from the war's end in chapter 3, shifts in the DP population lead him to examine mainly Polish and Baltic DP groups, as they constituted the bulk of DPs in and around Münster who refused repatriation. For those who refused repatriation, subsequent experiences were colored by British policies toward them (for example, the issue of the duty to work, particularly as connected to the rebuilding of Münster and the clearing of rubble), their desires to live as normal lives as possible (especially attendance at the University of Münster), and the processes of resettlement and immigration (particularly the British labor scheme called "Westward Ho"). Chapter 4 considers the issue of what was done with DPs who refused repatriation and either could not immigrate or did not wish to do so.

Three specific strengths of Schröder's work should be highlighted. First, his work is based upon a wide variety of sources beyond the city and Länder archives within Germany. He has delved into sources at the United Nations Archives in New York City, the records of the International Refugee Organization (IRO) in Paris, and British occupation documents at the Public Records Office (PRO) in London, as well as those of the American occupation at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in College Park, Maryland. As other scholars who work on DPs can attest, a rich picture of these individuals exists, but mainly through the observations of others (Germans, occupation authorities, aid workers, and so on). It is much more difficult to obtain explanations of the DPs from their own viewpoint. To remedy this deficiency in standard sources, as well as to move away from seeing the DPs as objects of study rather than as people, Schröder conducted interviews and corresponded with former DPs. A second strength involves how the author tackles several of the notable myths about DPs, particularly from the German viewpoint—most notably the impression of rampant DP criminality and their participation in the black market. Third, Schröder carefully traces the interaction of DPs with numerous other historical actors (Germans, occupation authorities, aid workers) and demonstrates that they were firmly embedded within the development of occupation policies and even larger political developments outside Germany, such as the growing tensions between the western and eastern blocs.

The book's shortcomings are few, but bear mentioning. First, with more than fifty tables, the statistical presentation of information is dense and at times overwhelming; in other instances, numbers are presented with too little explanation or analysis. For example, with population counts of DP camp inhabitants, researchers must rely on information provided by the records available. These often mask the more transient nature of the DP population, oversimplifying the larger picture and providing succinct clarity where it did not actually exist. Second, the author glosses over the murkier picture of how some DPs came to be on German soil—particularly in the case of the Balts—
and the ramifications of receiving Allied aid and immigration assistance. Third, differences in how DPs were handled by the British and American occupation authorities are often not addressed. Such a differentiation would have further enhanced the careful work Schröder has done examining the political tensions that existed between DPs and occupation authorities, as well between occupational authorities and the heads of the inter-governmental organizations such as the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). Lastly, Schröder includes thirty reproductions of photographs at the end of the text, but they are not properly integrated into the narrative.

Note


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


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14729

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.