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Die große Flucht: Umsiedlung, Vertreibung und Integration der deutschen Bevölkerung. Munich: Systhema, 2003. 1 DVD-ROM. EUR 68.95, ISBN 978-3-8032-2660-0.

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Visual Education about Historical Trauma

In 2001, a five-part documentary devoted to the flight and expulsion of Germans from the East at the end of the Second World War was aired on Germany's ZDF television network. Produced by Guido Knopp, a popular, prolific television journalist who had already created a number of documentary series devoted to Hitler and the Second World War, *Die Grosse Flucht* was symptomatic of the general upsurge in public interest in—and the public respectability of discussing—German victimization during and after the war. Video clips from the television series were subsequently reworked into a DVD-ROM, compatible with both PCs and Macs, and issued under the same title.

The DVD-ROM seems to have been designed as a more overtly “educational” counterpart to the television series. Whereas the latter was divided into segments with emotionally resonant thematic titles (“The Time of the Women” [an homage to Christian von Krockow's *Die Stunde der Frauen* (1988)]; “The Lost Homeland”), the menu for the former offers more clinical headings such as “Historical Overview” and “Selection of Literature,” and most material can be found grouped under geographical categories. Clicking on a given region leads one to a series of clips from the documentary, interspersed with text intended to provide background information. Under “Archive,” a user can also find a digitized version of the massive eight-volume *Documentation of the Expulsion of Germans from East-Central Europe* commissioned by the West German government in the 1950s. What is ironic—and troubling—about this show of scholarly documenta-

tion is that it introduces material that tends to be more strident and tendentious than the content of the television series. By far the most cited secondary source for the DVD-ROM's “background” passages is Heinz Nawratil's *Schwarzbuch der Vertreibung 1945 bis 1948*, first published in 1982 and re-issued almost annually ever since. It is an unabashedly partisan catalog of German victimization. An excerpt titled “Prelude to Expulsion,” for example, placed in the midst of video clips about the fall of Breslau, provides an account of German-Polish relations from 1918 through 1939 that consists exclusively of Polish mistreatment of Germans. The bibliography provided by the DVD-ROM is taken directly from the (then) most recent addition of Nawratil's *Schwarzbuch*. It includes quite a few publications by the National Socialist regime but none published in eastern Europe, either before or after 1989. Read as a text document, in other words, *Die Grosse Flucht* is jarringly dated and one-sided, a kind of time capsule of the rhetoric of the Bund der Vertriebenen circa 1955.

The new material put together for the television series is, in comparison, relatively successful in introducing some balance, context, and critical distance. Most imagery is, to be sure, centered on German victims and designed to evoke viewer sympathy for their suffering. Original film footage (both black-and-white and color) shows caravans of refugees fleeing in wagons and on foot across wintry landscapes, as well as German civilians killed or mistreated by Soviet soldiers, Czech or Polish militias, or vigilante groups. Interviews with elderly,

mostly female survivors feature harrowing accounts of hardship, abuse, and rape. But the producers avoid lingering over the most gruesome and provocative imagery of atrocity. Indeed, segments on the killing of civilians in the East Prussian village of Nemmersdorf make a point of highlighting embellishment and exploitation of the incident by Nazi propagandists. The section on the Sudetenland intersperses disturbing images of German suffering at the hands of Czechs with equally disturbing images of German brutality toward Czechs (among the latter: the Lidice massacre; excavations of mass graves of victims of the Nazi occupation). And although most of those providing eyewitness testimony are German, a fair number of Czechs, Poles, and Russians are also interviewed sympathetically. Some—Czechs expelled from the Sudetenland after its annexation by Germany; Poles expelled from territories annexed by the USSR—are clearly portrayed as innocent co-victims. But even those who would seem to figure as perpetrators in these narratives—Soviet soldiers describing the assault on East Prussia or the submariners involved in the sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*—come across as helpless bystanders, their sense of agency erased by the pressures of dictatorship and the force of wartime propaganda.

Such conciliatory treatment of those involved in causing suffering to Germans, a skeptical observer might note, is the flipside of familiar strategies of collective self-exculpation of suffering caused by Germans: who really had any choices in this terrible period? Were we not all victims? Indeed, the DVD-ROM tends to portray the war as a kind of natural disaster, a terrible and inexplicable transformation of the *Heimat*—with its waterfalls and virgin forests—into a hostile onslaught of snow, frigid temperatures, and icy seas, with aerial bombing and even enemy troops blended in as inexorable forces of nature. Individual survivors, in turn, while treated with sympathy and ostensibly given the opportunity to describe their personal experiences, end up figuring as oddly anonymous embodiments of a German (or, alternately, a Slavic/non-German) collective fate (for example, “Martha Denk, Deutsche aus Prag”). When certain interviewees come on screen, the limitations of this binary approach become clear. Eduard Goldstücker, identified as a “participant (*Mitarbeiter*) in the Czech government,” speaks humanely and in impeccable German about the injustices of postwar treatment of Germans in

Czechoslovakia, but unlike most interviewees, he is not invited to relate any personal experiences. Viewers who might know (or find out) a bit more about Goldstücker’s biography are left to wonder why the various elements of his life story—his Jewish background, his wartime exile in England, his Germanophone Czech patriotism—are not explored to bring out the complexities and contradictions of the period, especially the tangled relationship between the wartime murder of east central European Jews (who go almost completely without mention throughout *Die Große Flucht*) and the postwar expulsions of east central European Germans.

Another lost opportunity to add some nuance to the narrative is a brief interview with the current bishop of Opole, Alfons Nossol. As during Goldstücker’s appearances, the speaker is loosely identified as a “witness,” but ends up offering rather abstract, albeit noble, comments on the horrors of expulsion rather than any remarks on his personal experiences or contemporary observations. It would have been helpful to note that most residents of Nossol’s native Opole, Silesia, fit awkwardly into the narrative of postwar expulsions: most were “verified” as ethnic Poles in the immediate postwar era, and many (like Nossol) have continued to self-identify as Poles. Yet all had been *Reichsdeutsche*. They were therefore often viewed by incoming Soviets and (other) Poles, as well as legally defined by the Federal Republic of Germany, as German. Were those who belatedly embraced this definition and migrated west part of the grand story of the *Heimatvertriebene* or just thinly disguised Polish *Gastarbeiter*?

To lament such unaddressed questions is not to deny the value of this DVD-ROM. It provides some compelling material on an enormously important episode in European history and does so in a generally responsible and sensitive manner. Indeed, I sometimes found myself wishing a version with English subtitles were available, since so few undergraduates in Britain or the United States know anything whatsoever about the massive forced migrations of 1944-46. Ideally, though, documentary productions aimed “against forgetting” should shed more light on those stories that have been most likely to be forgotten—those that fail to conform to a plotline of national suffering but that involve human suffering nonetheless.

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