

Rüdiger Wenzel. *Die große Verschiebung?: Das Ringen um den Lastenausgleich im Nachkriegsdeutschland von den ersten Vorarbeiten bis zur Verabschiedung des Gesetzes 1952.* Historische Mitteilungen. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2008. 262 pp. EUR 54.00, paper, ISBN 978-3-515-09218-0.



Reviewed by Andrew Demshuk

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When it came into effect on September 1, 1952, the West German Equalization of Burdens Law (*Lastenausgleichsgesetz*) brought about a drastic redistribution of wealth which, despite the Cold War context, was in many ways comparable to the economic redistribution simultaneously underway in neighboring East Germany. The timing was crucial: by that year, over seven million German "expellees" from the East had entered the territory of the new Federal Republic of Germany. All across West (as in East) Germany, cities were still in ruins, and refugees without property or hope had spent years in overcrowded camps. Fearing unrest and radicalization, postwar West German leaders worked under the supervision of the Allied authorities to produce a monumental social and economic "equalization of burdens"; those who had lost less during the war were compelled to contribute resources which the government redistributed for the benefit of refugees, as well as thousands who had suffered material destruction or persecution under Nazism. Over one hundred billion German marks were generated in

West Germany during the first thirty years after the legislation, and as a result millions of destitute Germans gained the financial ability to begin forming a new existence in the West. Rüdiger Wenzel's newly published monograph on the political controversies over the *Lastenausgleich* offers the reader heavy citation on every page from an exhaustive collection of archival materials as well as interviews held in the early 1980s with personalities concerned. Time and again, Wenzel demonstrates his authority on every aspect of the debates over the law's conception and passage. For all this, his work also disappoints on many levels.

To frame further discussion of the work, it is most useful to ask whether or not the author has met his stated goals. At the opening of his study, Wenzel states that his goal is "to show the whole legislation proceeding, and so the skirmishes and struggles of all the powers involved," as well as "to document which political powers collaborated materially on the formation of the law" (p. 13). Here Wenzel perhaps succeeds too well. From

start to finish, the reader is amazed and overwhelmed by the intimate detail the author presents on each successive controversy from the law's inception to its passage and immediate aftermath. A look at the ten-page timeline in the appendix is instructive. It proceeds week by week and even day by day. The reader learns such minute information as the fact that a December 5, 1950 cabinet meeting about the *Lastenausgleich* was followed on December 6 by a special meeting of the federal government concerning the administration of the proceeds from the *Lastenausgleich*. Each chronologically arranged chapter carries the reader through another phase: the beginnings of the discussion about compensation, the *Lastenausgleich* in the economic council, the draft in the executive branch, the draft in the legislative branch, and onward through the law's passage. Along the way, one becomes acquainted with the smallest details about the early framing of the law, such as the precise layout and content of each subsection in both the first and second preliminary drafts.

This is not to say that, while sifting through this staggering collection of data, the specialist will not find some details of interest. At the first reading of the draft law before the *Bundestag* on January 31, 1951, for example, expellee leader Linus Kather rejected the idea that expellees should receive quotas of relief and insisted on "proportional reimbursement for what had been lost," as though the replacement of whole villages and livelihoods should be given a material value (p. 106). At the same time attacking the "snail's pace" of *Lastenausgleich* legislation, Kather contributed to the law's slowing momentum through his fiery speeches and threats of political consequences.

Unfortunately, Wenzel never proves able to move outside of minutiae to appreciate the larger, indeed pivotal stakes involved in the law, and in this manner he cannot deliver on his other major goal: to demonstrate "the meaning that the Equalization of Burdens Law presented for the history

of the reconstruction of the Federal Republic of Germany" (p. 13). In part, this lack may be due to the fact that he devotes less than six pages to his opening discussion of the historical, legal, and social background in which the law was framed; it may also be because, after an exhaustive trek through archival data, he never analyzes the law's consequences. Above all, though, the work fails due to the general absence of secondary literature. Though he claims that his work fills a hole in contemporary research, Wenzel's bibliography conspicuously lacks reference to serious literature published in the past two decades, in essence since the monumental changes of 1989. He never examines Michael Hughes's useful book on the same subject, which already offered a detailed history of the *Lastenausgleich* using public opinion surveys of the time, archival resources, and an insightful analysis that frames the *Lastenausgleich* in light of previous social and economic legislation in central Europe.[1] To name just a sampling, the author also fails to discuss the research on the *Lastenausgleich* by Paul Erker, Carl-Jochen Müller, and Reinhold Schillinger; Arne Weick's study on the currency reform; the materials recently released with analysis by the Bundesarchiv Koblenz; and more general historiography on expellee political movements.[2]

As a result, though this book offers an outstanding exegesis of archival texts, illustrating what contemporaries termed the "snail's pace" of the measure's implementation, it never leaves the halls of power to examine how the law affected everyday expellees, much less German society as a whole. It is a useful source for specialist scholars interested in a very important law with drastic social implications, but to understand those implications, the scholar must look elsewhere.

Notes

[1]. Michael Hughes, *Shouldering the Burdens of Defeat: West Germany and the Reconstruction of Social Justice* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

[2]. Paul Erker, *Rechnung für Hitlers Krieg: Aspekte und Probleme des Lastenausgleichs* (Heidelberg: Verlag Regionalkultur, 2004); Carl-Jochen Müller, *Praxis und Probleme des Lastenausgleichs in Mannheim, 1949-1959* (Mannheim: Institut für Landeskunde und Regionalforschung der Universität Mannheim, 1997); Reinhold Schillinger, *Der Entscheidungsprozess beim Lastenausgleich, 1945-1952* (St. Katharinen: Scripta Mercaturae, 1985); Arne Weick, "Homburger Plan und Währungsreform: Kritische Analyse des Währungsreformplans der Sonderstelle Geld und Kredit und seiner Bedeutung für die westdeutsche Währungsreform von 1948." (PhD diss., Univ. Frankfurt am Main, 1998); Kersten Oldenhage, ed., *Lastenausgleich (1948-1990)* (Koblenz: Bundesarchiv, 2002); Wolfgang Benz, ed., *Die Vertreibung der Deutschen aus dem Osten: Ursachen, Ereignisse, Folgen* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1985); Pertti Ahonen, *After the Expulsion: West Germany and Eastern Europe, 1945-1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Matthias Stickler, *"Ostdeutsch heißt Gesamtdeutsch": Organisation, Selbstverständnis und heimatpolitische Zielsetzung der deutschen Vertriebenenverbände, 1949-1972* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 2004).

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