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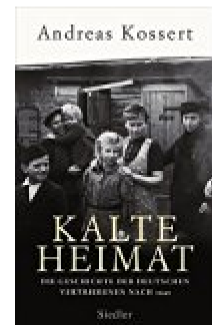
Andreas Kossert. *Kalte Heimat: Die Geschichte der deutschen Vertriebenen nach 1945.* Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 2008. 430 pp. ISBN 978-3-88680-861-8.



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The German Expellee as Victim: The End of a Taboo?

As Germans tried to rebuild in the ruins after World War II, the occupying powers and German leaders prioritized establishing good relations between Germans native to the partition zones and the millions of ethnic Germans who had fled or been expelled from the East (roughly one-fifth of the postwar population). The history of these expellees, the subject of Andreas Kossert's work, is one fraught with competing political claims. As late as December 9, 1953, the popular West German magazine *Der Spiegel* related how the German Recreation Board (Deutsches Erholungswerk) in Stuttgart, concerned about the material gap and chilly interchange between expellees and natives, called on westerners to invite refugee camp residents to lunch or dinner or to spend the day with them as a way to promote friendship and understanding; the city mayor was said to have been the first to apply.[1] Indeed, the newcomers seldom found acceptance from their neighbors in the West, as attested in articles in *Heimat* papers dedicated to expellee communities, contemporary daybooks and scholarship, and government reports. This situation contributed towards expellees' selective memory of the Nazi past, emphasizing their own victim status. This narrative nourished a larger West German culture of victimhood that peaked in the 1950s.[2] Early political representation and steady economic advances amid the "economic miracle" of the mid-1950s led onlookers at the time and since (notably administrators) to herald expellee integration as a success story. But in general, expellees tended to feel slighted and insular in West German society; westerners often deprecated the newcomers as foreign "Polacks" and saw them as ungrateful. Even when the German-Polish rapprochement of the early 1970s made it possible for more ethnic Germans to come "home" to West Germany, *Spiegel* observed that "certainly the citizens of the Federal Republic don't exactly yearn for the return home of the Polish-Germans."[3]

Since the time of the expulsion itself (and in particular by the 1980s), a whole field of literature has demonstrated the myth of the "successful integration" of expellees.[4] In this widely sold book, Andreas Kossert digests over six decades of work on the subject, especially the critical scholarship of the past twenty-five years. Each chapter features the expellee-as-victim, and the troubled story of expellee integration occupies the foreground. This work builds on the author's earlier monograph, which relates how ethnic Germans from Masuria, who settled in West Germany in great numbers after 1956, suffered abuse from westerners and tried to assimilate as completely as possible, leading to what the author terms ethnic "*Selbstnegation*" ("self-negation).[5] When reading the central chapters of *Kalte Heimat*, one is reminded of the format of a decent textbook: the endnotes provide a good sense of important monographic studies, most of which have dealt very capably with the subject, and any beginning scholar on the question of expellee life in postwar Germany would find a good starting place in the bibliography (whose only limitation is the rather cumbersome breakdown into twelve subject areas, rather than a simple alphabetic listing). The book should also be praised for its highly readable prose, which generally avoids technical

language and does not presume prior knowledge of the subject, as well as for its helpful statistical tables and ample illustrations, taken from a wide range of archives and clarified through detailed captions.

Structurally, the book includes a strongly polemical introduction, two brief and problematic context chapters, a core of seven analytical chapters supported by secondary literature, and then two chapters recapitulating the opening points. The chapters are unfortunately unnumbered; I will refer to them here in the order they appear. The seven core chapters offer the most solid material in the book. The initial analytical chapter, "Die Polacken Kommen" (numerically fourth), describes the bleak postwar material circumstances in the West and frames local expellee persecution as "German racism against German expellees" (p. 71). The next chapter explores the various forms of integration in postwar West Germany, such as economic integration measures like the 1952 Equalization of Burdens law, the construction of special housing projects (which served to isolate expellees even more from West German society), and attempts at cultural integration. Here Kossert documents how, surprisingly, "although the arrival of fourteen million expellees fundamentally changed postwar society, this has hardly been reflected in the collective local memory" (p. 138). The chapter "Verzicht ist Verrat" examines the expellee political movement; Kossert lays out the general scholarly finding that expellee political claims were unrealistic in light of the Cold War, and mainstream political parties pandered to expellee interests to gather votes.

Although largely constricted to a single chapter, Kossert's analysis of the roughly four million expellees who found themselves in the Soviet Occupation Zone (SBZ) arguably offers the most useful analysis in the book. In a concise yet thorough distillation of recent theories, Kossert demonstrates both the differences in the SBZ, such as the early communist repression of expellees (officially called *Umsiedler*, re-settlers) as well as similarities, such as the comparable hunger and disease suffered through flight and expulsion, as well as the lack of welcome *Umsiedler* found among natives. Kossert concludes that, for all the state's efforts, *Umsiedler* "assimilation was only limited, and they certainly did not feel themselves to be integrated" (p. 206). The last three analytical chapters examine the importance of church organizations in fostering a sense of community and stability among expellees after the trauma of displacement; the role of film and literature, notably in the 1950s, in spreading the myth of a rapid and successful integration; and the role of expellee regional organizations, which supported the continuance of old traditions such as local industries, costumes, and recipes. Taken alone, the seven core chapters survey an ambitious range of aspects in postwar expellee life. Unfortunately, they are bookended by misleading and mistaken claims that place the overall scholarly value of the book into question.

First and foremost, Kossert has little new to say; his work is essentially a tertiary synthesis based upon secondary literature (even quotations are cited from monographs). Only in a few cases does he consult contemporary published primary materials. This would not be a problem, had he not based his entire book on the premise that he is breaking a taboo about discussing expellee victimhood and failed integration, and so shattering a myth. "The time has come to finally comprehend German expellees as victims," he declares in his opening, "who not only suffered from their flight and expulsion, but also from the hardheartedness of their own countrymen" (p. 15). Kossert even goes so far as to claim that "consciousness that not just expellees but all Germans lost much in the East disappeared soon after the war" (p. 9). These and similar assertions are hard to comprehend in light of his own admission that it was only in the 1960s that West German expellees felt compelled to keep silent about their suffering and sense of victimhood. Kossert also acknowledges that, by the 1980s, the "wall of silence" about the expellees' poor reception in the West was already crumbling due to ongoing scholarship. This book's source base thus proves that the very mythos it assaults does not exist.

A second serious problem is the book's attempt to uphold (rather than critically investigate) expellee victim status. Certainly, it is not hard to portray expellee suffering, nor to find that they saw themselves as victims; the evidence in the core chapters does this well enough. Unfortunately, in part because of Kossert's heavy reliance on statements by contemporary expellee political leaders in the League of Expellees (BdV), he claims that all expellees still demand redress from their German neighbors for failing to recognize that they had discriminated against them and contributed to their real status as victims.

This claim is premised on a misreading of history, in which the causes of the expulsion are blurred. In a style reminiscent of the old German nationalist accounts, the two contextual chapters idealize a peaceful, prosperous German East, in which the violent aspects of medieval colonization by the Teutonic Knights and general ethnic

conflict before 1918 have no place. Discussion of the interwar period emphasizes the suffering of the German minority in Poland, thereby establishing them as victims even before the expulsion. Only hinting at Nazi crimes with his statement that "the Poles also suffered terribly under the Nazi politics of occupation and Germanization" (p. 27), as well as with an earlier nod to Jewish suffering, Kossert fails to explain what could have motivated the expulsion, to which he grants extensive detail. While he is right that children who suffered as Holocaust victims or expellees bore "similar long-term psychological burdens", the search to heal such burdens requires additional analysis of the distinct contexts that brought this suffering about (p. 349). And it is problematic to imply that Nazi guilt was equal to, or even less than, the guilt of the Allied powers who expelled Germans. Illustrating German crimes in the East would not have undermined Kossert's argument that many expellees had played no part in these crimes, nor that most suffered consequences out of proportion with their own behavior during the war. Indeed, had he demonstrated that Nazis also persecuted German communists in East Prussia and Upper Silesia during the war, he might have further added to his claims about the utter lack of rationality in the expulsion of Germans from the East.

To be sure, there are gaps in German historical memory. In East Germany, throughout the Cold War, and in West Germany from the late 1960s through the 1980s, it was not easy to openly discuss the real suffering endured by expellees. But Kossert swings the pendulum too hard in the other direction, seeking to encourage a real belief in the expellee as victim. He claims that a "beginning" for coming to terms with expellee victimhood would be "a national commemoration of the flight and expulsion of the Germans and the lost territories in the East" (p. 353). This commemoration would include emphasis of an "orgy of revenge and violence" perpetrated against German victims (p. 353), apparently out of context from earlier German crimes, and so raise expellee victim status to a high ranking that confuses more than it clarifies. Kossert's plea for understanding the plight of expellees would not, ultimately, alter what he rightly sees as a general German ignorance about the former areas of German settlement in the East; as he himself notes at one point, the "protection" of the German "historical inheritance" in the East must "relate to the contemporary [Slavic] residents of the areas of the expulsion" (p. 164).

To conclude, *Kalte Heimat* has made an important subject, often confusing in its complexity, accessible to the broader reading public. It has offered valuable proof that expellees failed to feel welcome in the West. But it has not broken a taboo, nor has it destroyed any myths that were not already defeated. In the end, one may be better served to use the seven core chapters as a concise digest of past scholarship, and then make use of the book's bibliography, for they point toward original research on expellee integration that critically analyzes the question of the expellee as victim.

Notes

[1]. "Hohlspiegel," *Der Spiegel* 7, no. 50 (Dec. 9, 1953): 40.

[2]. For an excellent study of this phenomenon, see Robert Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

[3]. "Oder-Neisse-Grenze: Gott behüte," *Der Spiegel* 24, no. 19 (May 4, 1970): 34.

[4]. For just a few examples, see Frauke Dettmer, "Konflikte zwischen Flüchtlingen und Einheimischen nach dem Ende des Zweiten Weltkriegs," *Jahrbuch für ostdeutsche Volkskunde* 26 (1983): 311-324; Doris von der Brelie, Helga Grebing, and Rainer Schulze, ed., *Flüchtlinge und Vertriebene in der westdeutschen Nachkriegsgeschichte* (Hildesheim: August Lax Verlag, 1987); Marion Frantzioch, "Die Vertriebenen als Fremde. Eine Soziologische Betrachtung der ersten Nachkriegsjahre," *Jahrbuch für ostdeutsche Volkskunde* 32 (1989): 171-184; Sylvia Schraut, *Flüchtlingsaufnahme in Württemberg-Baden, 1945-1949: Amerikanische Besatzungsziele und demokratischer Wiederaufbau im Konflikt* (München: R. Oldenburg Verlag, 1995); and Rainer Schulze, Reinhard Rohde, and Rainer Voss, eds., *Zwischen Heimat und Zuhause: Deutsche Flüchtlinge und Vertriebene in (West-) Deutschland 1945-2000* (Osnabrück: Secolo Verlag, 2001).

[5]. Andreas Kossert, *Preußen, Deutsche oder Polen? Die Masuren im Spannungsfeld des ethnischen Nationalismus, 1870-1956* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2001), 339.

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