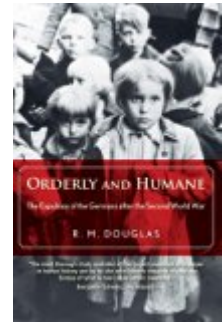


R. M. Douglas. *Orderly and Humane: The Expulsion of the Germans after the Second World War*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013. xii + 486 pp. Illustrations \$25.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-300-19820-1.



Reviewed by John Hess

Published on H-War (May, 2014)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

R. M. Douglas's new book, *Orderly and Humane: The Expulsion of Germans after the Second World War*, examines an episode in twentieth-century European history that the author believes has never received its due attention outside of academia. Building on recent works by a wide variety of European and American scholars, Douglas aims to provide "a study of the expulsions that examines the episode in the round ... and that carries the story forward to the present day" (p. 4). While he recognizes the barbarity of German actions during the war, Douglas argues that "it is a long way from there to conclude that the expulsion of the Germans was inevitable, necessary, or justified" (p. 5). The expulsions he describes were a deliberate effort at ethnic cleansing that was in many ways modeled on German wartime practices and which received the full support of the Western Allies, notably the United States and Great Britain.

Douglas begins his survey with a discussion of Edvard Beneš, the pre- and postwar leader of Czechoslovakia. Beneš, according to Douglas, was

the "planner" behind the postwar expulsions. Exiled to London during the war, the Czechoslovak leader worked to convince Allied leaders that the *Volksdeutsche*--ethnic Germans living outside of Greater Germany--could not be trusted as ethnic minorities in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and other East European nations. By 1943, Douglas argues, Beneš had largely succeeded and the expulsion project had "taken on a momentum" that only a decision by the Big Three could have halted (p. 28). Despite the acceptance of expulsions at the highest policy levels amongst the Allies, little planning was done to carry them out after the war. Within the British government the "Inter-Departmental Committee on the Transfer of German Populations" presented a report to the cabinet that highlighted the expected difficulties, but the report was quickly buried. As a result, the Western Allies, who were fully complicit in the expulsion scheme, were completely unprepared for the humanitarian crisis about the break-up of defeated Germany when the war ended in 1945.

While the Allies had sanctioned the idea of expulsions, they did not create any framework for the deportation of ethnic Germans until the Potsdam Conference in the summer of 1945. By that point, however, a series of “wild expulsions” had already pushed hundreds of thousands of Germans into occupied Germany. Far from being the spontaneous actions of anti-German majorities, these early expulsions, Douglas argues, were carried out by soldiers, police, and militia acting under orders from their governments (chapter 4). At the same time, the camps set up to house the *Volksdeutsche* were, in many instances, government-run and organized (chapter 5). The Allies, in response, declared in the Potsdam Agreement that all deportations should be conducted in an “orderly and humane” manner. Additionally, expulsions of *Volksdeutsche* were officially sanctioned in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Hungary—the so-called Potsdam Countries.

As Douglas makes clear, however, the next round of expulsions was anything but orderly and humane. Once again the Allies were slow to set up any machinery to supervise the transport of Germans from the “recovered territories” in western Poland, the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia, or Hungary. Indeed, humane conditions were sacrificed in the name of practicality. The result was a humanitarian crisis on a massive scale by 1946. Expellees did not have enough food, were kept in German-style concentration camps before deportation, were crammed into cattle cars, and there was nowhere near enough housing for these ethnic Germans in occupied Germany itself. By 1947 each Allied power had the same objective: “to put an end to what was proving an intolerable burden as quickly as possible” (p. 193). As a result, each of the Allies played with the numbers in an effort to show that they had already accepted their quota of expellees and to put an end to the deportations. While the Potsdam-sanctioned expulsions ended by 1948, the process continued on a smaller scale throughout the 1950s; the last camps for incoming

expellees in Germany did not close until the 1960s.

Besides chronicling the expulsions, Douglas also examines several other facets of the episode. He explores the impact of the expulsions on children (chapter 8) and on the expelling states (chapter 9). The expulsions did not just affect the ethnic Germans; they also negatively impacted Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, creating a “wild West” where the rule of the gun prevailed and where the economies took decades to recover. In addition, Douglas delves into the international response (chapter 10) and the relatively successful incorporation of the *Volksdeutsche* into both East and West Germany. Finally, he weighs the impact of the expulsions on international law and their place in historical memory (chapters 11 and 12). Despite the acknowledged horror of the expulsions, Douglas notes that international law does not explicitly prohibit population transfers. The memory of the expulsions also continues to cast a shadow over contemporary European affairs, particularly between Germany and the Czech Republic. Ultimately, Douglas concludes, population transfers are impractical, and he warns against those who may advocate their use in the future.

R. M. Douglas presents a harrowing vision of the post-1945 expulsions of ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe. The foundation of *Orderly and Humane* is an impressive array of primary and secondary source research. Douglas draws on material from Polish, German, Czech, American, Swiss, and British archives, as well as many different published documents and periodicals from the time. The research is truly impressive. Throughout, however, Douglas does not lose sight of the humanity of the *Volksdeutsche* involved in the expulsions. In many ways, the book is their story and Douglas never fails to remember this. While the history of the expulsions forms the backbone of the book, perhaps the most interesting aspect of *Orderly and Humane* is the discussion of the long shadow cast by the expulsions on

contemporary Europe. The discussion is too complex to summarize in a few sentences, but Douglas adeptly explores how Germans, Czechs, Hungarians, and Poles have worked to both repress and remember the expulsions.

Despite the strengths of Douglas's work, in some places it leaves the reader wanting more. Most notably, *Orderly and Humane*, while focusing on the German expulsions, only briefly discusses the large number of forced population transfers occurring at the same time elsewhere in Europe. Ethnic Poles and Ukrainians, for example, were shipped across the border to create homogeneous national spaces after 1945. More importantly, however, Douglas largely ignores the larger pan-European discourse about the role of nationality and the state. As Kate Brown has eloquently demonstrated in *A Biography of No Place* (2005), the process of ethnic homogenization was underway throughout Europe before the outbreak of war, particularly in Eastern Europe. The expulsions were assuredly a product of the Second World War, but they also occurred within the context of nation-states that sought to annihilate ethnic diversity. Some discussion of this context, however brief, would have strengthened Douglas's work. Regardless, he has written an excellent work; one useful for historians, undergraduates, and the general public alike.

that

and

Yet one must not take these criticisms too far, for in many ways that is not the book Douglas set out to write.

Nevertheless, a

only

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

Citation: John Hess. Review of Douglas, R. M. *Orderly and Humane: The Expulsion of the Germans after the Second World War*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. May, 2014.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=40274>



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