
Reviewed by Cathie Carmichael

Published on HABSBURG (May, 2019)

Commissioned by Borislav Chernev

The expulsion of millions of people from east-central and southern Europe after the collapse of the Third Reich and its subsidiaries in 1945 is a highly significant historical problem. It has created a huge historical disjuncture across the region. Many towns such as Wrocław (Breslau), Pula (Pola), Jihlava (Iglau), Kočevje (Gottschee), and Ústí nad Labem (Aussig) have changed almost beyond recognition in terms of language, people, and customs. In the postwar years, Munich, Trieste, Graz, and other cities became temporary shelters for formerly prosperous refugees reduced to traveling with what they could carry. German (and also Italian) minorities were effectively abandoned by the international community, which scarcely cared what happened to them after 1945 and stoically accepted the expulsions as if they were a natural consequence of peace, thus favoring a return to prewar borders and the division of Europe. Although much of the discussion on this issue has been constrained by guilt, shame, and indignation, the work of a generation of courageous historians and the existence of wise politicians and European Union funding grants has eased a lot of the historical trauma. Nowadays relations between Czechs and their neighbors are generally very good. In the ancient brewery town of Žatec (Saaz), there were millennial celebrations of Czech-German friendship in 2014 (p. 286).

David Gerlach’s book on the northern German-Czech/Polish borderlands (historically the northern border of Bohemia, Silesia, and Moravia) shines a fresh light the 1940s and early 1950s. The result is a meticulous and highly readable study of the end of German life in northern Czechoslovakia the 1940s. Its small towns had industry and factories, and its farms were productive while maintaining their old traditions. The borderlands had been home to German-speakers for centuries and were the focus for a German irredentism that eventually broke the first democratic Czechoslovakia. When the Reich was defeated, many Germans fled westward. Others were expelled by a series of notorious decrees, which meant that up to eight hundred thousand Germans had left their homes by the late summer of 1945. By 1948, only pockets of German-speakers remained and they were vulnerable to prejudice. For instance, in March 1948, the Action Committee of Clockmakers in Liberec “fired all of its German workers immediately after its founding” (p. 238). Gerlach has read a vast range of primary sources from Czech and German archives and brought the dry words back to life. Through this monograph, we are able to see the detail concern-
ing the expulsions and to connect with individual experiences. The dynamic of sour Czech-German relations was also complicated by prejudice against Roma, Slovaks, Magyars, and even the Volhynian Czechs who had been resettled themselves the Soviet Union.

Gerlach has focused on the economy of ethnic cleansing and the opportunities for theft on an immense scale. “Military units plundered first,” he writes (p. 113), and, as in Berlin, the favored treasures were portable heirlooms such as watches. One contemporary reported that “thousands came from inner Bohemia by train and on the road with empty bags and suitcases and a greater part of them soon returned with ample booty” (p. 115). One man was detained with two Persian rugs on the train to Prague, and when police searched his home, they found another eleven (p. 104). Once plunder had started, people rapidly joined in so as not to lose out on the bounty. Gerlach also examines cases where the state organized expropriation, such as the case of the “A-level confiscated factory” previously owned by the Kanneberger Brothers that produced textiles for women clothing and hats (p. 231).

Of particular interest is his argument that the practice of ethnic cleansing shaped the Czechoslovak Communist Party and suited their agenda, which was at this time very heavily dominated by Stalinism. Initially, the government wanted to populate the borderlands primarily with Czechs in order to make the fledgling state more ethnically, socially, and economically homogenous. Resettlement in subsidized property and expulsion therefore went hand-in-hand, and the party consciously enabled the targeting of Germans. Eventually, as need dictated, Slovaks were also encouraged to settle in the border areas. Labor shortages even led to pragmatic reversals of anti-German policies and by 1950, all remaining Germans were permitted to take Czechoslovak citizenship. The official party line in Teplice in 1951 was that “our enemies were not Germans, but German fascism” (p. 258). Nevertheless, it proved much harder for these individuals to regain lost property (or “de-conflagration,” as it is called here), such was the shortage of suitable housing.

Like Phillip Ther, whom he cites, Gerlach is careful to look for various motives for the expulsion and expropriation. This is certainly a nuanced, sophisticated approach, where the devil really is in the detail. It is clear from the material presented that individuals who appropriated a rug, furniture, or a farm had a slightly different reason for their action. Nevertheless, it is hard for any historian to capture the righteous indignation of a generation who had suffered at the hands of the Third Reich and its supporters. Furthermore, Czech-German rivalry had existed in discursive and political form for more than a century and had encouraged a sense of essential difference in historic regions that were functionally bilingual and complex, with rich local traditions. While it is true that the Czech lands under German wartime hegemony suffered less badly than Poland or Ukraine, and much of the industrial infrastructure was left intact by 1945, there were undoubtedly still levels of rage that explain some of the violence, especially in cities such as Brno in 1945. Those who were humiliated and frightened during the war years not only took their revenge in a material form, but also justified the plunder in terms of the finality of the act. Of course, most of the thirty thousand victims who died, including very young children, could not be reasonably held responsible for the crimes of the Reich. But by taking the homes and properties of ethnic Germans, the perpetrators were signaling that they never wanted past relations to return.

In this book, Gerlach has argued that the border areas differed from the rest of Czechoslovakia, and Germans remained the majority population until as late as 1946 (p. 32). He also successfully demonstrates that the actions against Germans in the northern borderlands of Czechoslovakia were fueled by a complex set of motives and
that rage and a desire for revenge only played a minor part. This book should be essential reading for all students of the region as well as those studying ethnic cleansing and population transfers.

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


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=53059

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