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Expelling the Germans: British Public Opinion and Post-1945 Population Transfer in Context

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Author:
Matthew Frank
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Alexander Clarkson

On 8 February 2008, the Polish minister of culture announced that his government would not support the establishment of a centre in Berlin commemorating the expulsion of Germans and other ethnic minorities in the 20th century. Initially proposed in the late 1990s by Erika Steinbach, a CDU member of the Bundestag and head of the association which represents German expellees, this project has been consistently opposed by Polish and other East European governments over the last ten years. Repeatedly, Polish and Czech politicians have stated that any centre or exhibition focusing on the consequences of population transfer could be misused to equate the suffering Germans experienced after 1945 with the suffering that was inflicted by Germans upon others during the Second World War.

The fact that Erika Steinbach?s initiative has managed to elicit such a great amount of both positive and negative attention is no coincidence. Popular concerns in Poland and the Czech Republic that German expellees might be able to take advantage of German reunification to assert territorial or financial demands have been played upon to gain votes by ambitious nationalist politicians such as Vaclav Klaus, Andzrej Lepper or the Kaczynski brothers. Conversely, many expellees saw the potential accession of Poland and the Czech Republic into the European Union as an opportunity to challenge the expropriation of German property in 1945 and demand compensation in German and European courts. Despite the strenuous efforts of

many individual Germans, Poles and Czechs to promote national reconciliation, the heated debates caused by attempts to commemorate the expulsion of ethnic Germans demonstrate the extent to which the historical legacy of this form of population transfer can still have a major impact on European political life.

The resurgence of this debate has been accompanied by a growing number of historical studies and fictional reinterpretations of the causes and consequences of population transfer in the 1940s. While Günther Grass? *Im Krebsgang* is the most prominent of recent novels exploring the mass evacuation of Germans from East Prussia, popular histories written by journalists and scholars such as Tomas Urban have continued to sustain public interest in post-war population transfer.(1) Extensive research on this topic has also been conducted by several English-speaking historians, culminating in two excellent recent studies dealing with the forced movement of ethnic Germans, Pertti Ahonen?s *After the Expulsion: West Germany and Eastern Europe 1945-1990* and Ian Connor?s *Refugees and Expellees in Post-War Germany*.(2)

While most of this research has focused on the experience of the German expellees themselves, Matthew Frank has gone on to examine this controversial topic from a different perspective in a book which is both fascinating and frustrating. In *Expelling the Germans: British Opinion and Post-1945 Population Transfer in Context*, Frank has put together a study which explores the response of the British political class as well as the wider British public towards population transfer in the run-up to and aftermath of the Second World War. In the process, this book demonstrates that the social and political impact of the expulsions was not just limited to Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia. It is to Frank?s credit that this study sheds light on the detailed and often anguished public debates in Britain surrounding the forced removal of German civilians from Eastern Europe. By focusing on an aspect of the expulsions which has been largely ignored by historians, Frank?s research has demonstrated the extent to which the expulsion of ethnic Germans affected policy-making in London throughout this period.

Such a shift in emphasis has been long overdue. While the great number of detailed and often highly partisan studies of the expulsions have provided a wealth of information about Polish, German and Czech responses to the forced relocation of ethnic minorities after 1945, the research work which has been done on British, American or Soviet attitudes has largely focused on high-level diplomatic exchanges in the build-up to the Yalta and Potsdam conferences. Frank?s thorough examination of policy debates in London surrounding the efficacy of population transfer before and during the Second World War gives a strong sense of the wider institutional context in which British government policy towards the expulsion of ethnic Germans was formulated.

Particularly significant is his analysis of how forced population exchanges between Greece and Turkey in the mid-1920s influenced the attitudes of British politicians and officials towards ethnic tensions in Eastern Europe in subsequent decades. While Frank?s research confirms that initial British assessments of the movement of minority populations, whose fate was decided by representatives of the Greek and Turkish governments in Lausanne in 1922, were largely positive, he also demonstrates that many senior figures in the House of Commons and the Foreign Office were aware of the social and economic disruption that this movement of peoples had caused in Anatolia and the Balkans (pp. 20?5). His examination of British policy debates surrounding population transfer during the Second World War itself paint the picture of a political class which may see expulsion as a political inevitability, but is certainly aware that this was unlikely to be a ?quick? or ?clean? process (pp. 78? 85).

Another fascinating aspect of this study is the information Frank has uncovered on the attempts by British diplomats and journalists to monitor the actions of Czechs and Poles in the border regions. His description of the initial stance taken by Foreign Office officials observing the actual process of expulsion in territories under Czechoslovak control indicates the extent to which the British political class had accepted the necessity of population transfer. Yet the growing humanitarian concerns expressed by British diplomats in Czechoslovakia such as the former SOE agent Harold Perkins over the suffering experienced by Germans also show how moral ambivalence about these measures began to creep back in among quite senior British diplomats and journalists in the field as well as in London (pp. 102? 15).

Frank has also managed to find extensive evidence of Czech and Polish exasperation with such British scepticism. At several points this study describes increasingly acrimonious debates between East European officials and British diplomats and campaigners such as Viktor Gollancz, who expressed concerns about the humanitarian consequences of the organized expulsions which took place in late 1945 and early 1946 (pp. 145?7). These tensions demonstrate that even without the growing influence of the Soviets, the differences between the Anglo-American and the Eastern European experience of the Second World War had created a massive gulf of understanding. As a consequence, communication between British officials and their Polish and Czech counterparts, who had to cater to demands for revenge against a minority population which had largely supported the Nazi regime, was bound to be fraught with difficulty (pp. 176?83).

In perhaps some of the strongest passages of this book, Frank examines how this growing alienation ultimately led to open hostility between Polish and British military officers directly responsible for the transfer of Germans from East Prussia and Silesia to the British zone in Germany in 1946 (pp. 245?61). By showing how the response to the expulsions of British officers and administrators in the field affected debates concerning the future of Europe at home, Frank?s study indicates that population transfer in Eastern Europe had a considerable knock-on effect on a much wider range of states than has previously been recognised. It is to be hoped that in future more detailed investigations of responses to population transfer of other occupying powers in Germany such as France, Canada or the United States will build on this new approach towards the historical legacy of the expulsion of ethnic Germans from Eastern Europe.

Yet while this book is an excellent exploration of the initial response of British officials to population transfer in the 1930s and 1940s, it also contains significant weaknesses. In particular, it does not give the reader a sense of how this process, in which thousands of British journalists, army officers, administrators or diplomats were either directly or indirectly involved, influenced long-term attitudes towards what would now be described as ?ethnic cleansing?. In fact, the book only really looks beyond the 1940s in the conclusion, where Frank simply asserts that in the late 1940s and early 1950s the British government and public quickly abandoned the notion that population transfer was an acceptable solution to ethnic conflict (pp. 276?8). Rather than taking an in-depth look at how and why this shift away from the language of ?community rights or ?collective responsibility? took place in the decades after 1945, only a few sentences are devoted to this process in the final paragraphs. These brief passages simply assert that ?the rhetoric and legal framework of human rights, which henceforth became a salient feature of the post-war settlement, helped militate against the revival of grand schemes for internationally sanctioned population transfers? (p. 278).

Frank is right to contend that the ambivalent response of the British towards population transfer in Eastern Europe led British governments to ultimately reject the idea that this was an acceptable means with which to end ethnic conflict in territories outside of their direct control. Yet the issue is less clear cut when it comes to the use of similar tactics against ideological opponents within the (shrinking) British sphere of influence. As Frank himself admits, throughout the decolonisation process massive shifts of population took place across the British Empire. Though he claims that the population exchanges that took place in India after partition had not been planned for by the Indian Civil Service, there is considerable evidence indicating that at least some British officials believed that the mass flight of Hindus to India and Muslims to Pakistan in the wake of the collapse of British control would ultimately lead to the creation of more ethnically homogeneous and stable states in South Asia.(3)

In stark contrast to Frank?s assertion that population transfer was a ?limited solution but also a strictly Continental European one? (p. 277), there is a considerable body of evidence pointing in the opposite direction. Even in situations in which the British had a much greater degree of control over the process of colonial withdrawal than was the case in India, officers and administrators were prepared to use forms of population transfer in order to achieve their long-term political goals. In the counterinsurgency campaigns against communist guerrillas in Malaya which began in the late 1940s and ended in 1957, British military commanders moved large numbers of Chinese and Malay peasants from their old villages into fortified encampments in order to achieve greater control over the countryside. This use of population transfer to win

?hearts and minds? and limit insurgent access to local populations was a strategy which was subsequently emulated by British as well as French and American officers in similar conflicts across the Third World.(4)

In his conclusion Frank claims that there were few connections between the ethnic conflicts caused by decolonisation and population transfer in Germany (p. 277). Yet many of the British officials and journalists stationed in Germany and Eastern Europe in the late 1940s went on to take a prominent part in the kind of conflicts in Asia and Africa in which the British forcibly relocated local populations in order to defeat their ideological opponents. For example, the Director of Civil Affairs and Military Government in the British zone, Major-General Gerald Templer, who witnessed the humanitarian consequences of the population transfer of ethnic Germans went on to become the commander of British forces in Malaya, where he initiated a ?fortified encampments? programme which led to another form of population transfer.(5)

Matthew Frank has produced a book which manages to provide new perspectives in a field which has largely focused on the impact of population transfer on Germany and Eastern Europe. In the process, this study has demonstrated how the political legacy of the expulsion of ethnic Germans from Poland and Czechoslovakia might be of relevance to countries such as Britain, where fierce debates between expellee lobbyists like Erika Steinbach and Polish or Czech nationalists have elicited little attention from the media. Yet this book does not build on this excellent research to examine how first hand experience of these expulsions may have affected the behaviour of British administrators and military officers when facing ethnic conflict and ideological challenge after the 1940s. As a consequence this book fails to provide the reader with an adequate analysis of the long term impact population transfer in 1940s Europe may have had upon British policy-making and the British public.

Notes

1. G. Grass, Im Krebsgang (Göttingen, 2002) and T. Urban, Der Verlust: die Vertreibung der Deutschen und Polen im 20. Jahrhundert (Munich, 2006).Back to (1)
2. P. Ahonen, *After the Expulsion: West Germany and Eastern Europe 1945?1990* (Oxford, 2003) and I. Connor, *Refugees and Expellees in Post-War Germany* (Manchester, 2007).Back to (2)
3. P. Brass, ?The partition of India and retributive genocide in the Punjab, 1946?47: means, methods, and purposes?, Journal of Genocide Research, 5 (2003), 71?101.Back to (3)
4. See for example J. Nagl, Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam, (Chicago, 2002).Back to (4)
5. For more detail see P. Deery, ?Malaya, 1948: Britain?s Cold War??, *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 9 (2007), 29?54 and S. C. Smith, ?General Templer and counter-insurgency in Malaya: hearts and minds, intelligence, and propaganda?, *Intelligence and National Security*, 16 (2001), 60?78.Back to (5)

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