The Expulsions of Ethnic Germans from East-Central Europe at the End of World War II

Gary B. Cohen

Department of History, University of Minnesota

We think of World War II as a period in world history of enormous destruction and great loss of human life, surely the most destructive episode in the last three centuries. Losses of human life on this scale can only be estimated, and current estimates of the losses of lives, whether military or civilian, due to violent attacks, genocide, disease, or starvation caused directly by the war, ran to between 62 and 78 million people in all theaters of the war. Civilian deaths ran to a number between 40 and 52 million. The Soviet Union, it is estimated, lost perhaps 25 or 26 million people; those numbers are still uncertain. The expanded Germany of the Third Reich had 84 million inhabitants as of 1939; it lost between 6.7 million and 8.5 million.

Yet the human suffering in Europe did not stop with the formal end of hostilities in the war in 1945. Deaths continued for several years after the war because of starvation and disease in bombed out cities and among the millions of refugees, and above all because of the forced migration of masses of people after the fighting stopped. The largest number of those forced migrants, expellees, in fact, were ethnic Germans who were forced out of their home communities in many parts of East-Central and Eastern Europe as they fled from the advancing Soviet military forces or were deliberately expelled by the Soviet authorities and the new communist-led governments in East-Central Europe. That movement of ethnic Germans included between 12 and 14 million people, probably the largest single forced migration in modern history. Counting deaths due to starvation and disease as well as mob attacks and massacres, the casualties among the German expellees ran to between 500,000 and 600,000 people, as asserted in recent discussions—although some partisan observers have claimed that more than two million may have died.

This massive expulsion and suffering of ethnic Germans who were forced to leave their home communities of long standing in East-Central Europe is well known in Europe and certainly in Germany, where many of the expellees came to settle and where their

representatives became an important part of the political scene in the Federal Republic of Germany after 1946-47; but it is often overlooked in North America. In the aftermath of the war American discourse simply included the ethnic German expellees among the millions of refugees or "displaced persons."

Where had these ethnic Germans lived in East-Central and Eastern Europe, and how had they gotten there? A look at a map shows many old settlements, widely dispersed from the Baltic coastline and western Poland to the border areas of the Czech lands and Slovakia to Slovenia, Transylvania, southwestern Romania (Banat), northwestern Ukraine (Volhynia), other parts of Ukraine, and even the lower Volga basin. I hasten to add that until the rise of modern political nationalism at the end of the nineteenth century and then of the radical racist nationalism that followed, these populations were best understood as local German-speaking inhabitants with strong local and regional identities that were connected to where they lived. These German-speaking elements typically engaged in much intermarriage with members of other linguistic groups in those same localities over centuries and included many who simply adopted German as their principal language for one or another reason over time. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many of those German-speakers in East-Central Europe, if they were at least semi-educated, had some sense of belonging to a larger German-speaking cultural group in Europe, but they had no real consciousness of belonging to a distinct German nation as such, defined in exclusive terms as a distinct descent group or biological race and by direct ties to a true homeland in Germany. These German-speakers of East-Central and Eastern Europe were more attached to the places where they and their forbears had lived for centuries as Bohemian Germans, Baltic Germans, so-called Swabian Germans in Hungary and Banat, the Transylvanian Saxon Germans, or the Volga Germans, etc. They were very much part of the local and regional economic, social, legal, and political landscapes in these lands. In the late nineteenth century, most of these Germans of East-Central Europe certainly did not have loyalties to Germany as their homeland—at least not until new kinds of modern nationalism began to reach them in the early twentieth century.

Among the oldest of those settlements were those in the cities and towns of Transylvania, today central and northern Romania. German-speakers had come as settlers there from various parts of what is now Germany at the invitation of the ruler, a king of Hungary, beginning in the twelfth century, to help settle and defend the then southeastern borders of the Kingdom of Hungary. They developed over centuries as traders and craftsmen in the towns or as sturdy independent farmers, protected in law by special

privileges, including after the Reformation the practice of the Protestant religion. The German-speaking population of Banat and little pockets in central Hungary or parts of eastern Croatia, the so-called Danube and Banat Swabians, came later in the eighteenth century, recruited as settlers by the Habsburg authorities; and they were in the majority Catholic. In 1910 Transylvania by itself had some 234,000 German-speakers; in 1930 all of Romania had some 745,000 German-speakers. Thanks to the upheavals and expulsions at the end of World War II, the beginnings of postwar voluntary migrations, and the assimilation of German-speakers to the Romanian population, there were only 385,000 German-speakers in Romania by 1956. From the 1960s through the 1980s Nicolae Ceausescu's government was happy to have those German-speakers emigrate, and most departed to West Germany, leaving only some 60,000 by 2002.

The German-speaking populations of Volhynia (in what is today northwestern Ukraine) and the German population in the Volga basin developed much later. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, the Tsarist Russian government deliberately recruited peasant farmers from the German states to settle what was then still thinly populated Tsarist territory and to develop the local agriculture. The German-speaking population in Volhynia grew through the late nineteenth century, numbering around 200,000 in 1900. As economic and political conditions declined in Russia after 1890, significant numbers began to emigrate, so that the Volhynian Germans were already declining well before Hitler and Stalin intervened in their history. By 1900, the Volga Germans also numbered in the hundreds of thousands.

The German-speaking populations that one found on the fringes of the Czech lands of Bohemia and Moravia, in what is now Slovenia, in what is now western Poland, and in the Baltic lands represented the product of a different series of developments, arising out of the natural meeting and mixing of German-speaking, Czech, Slovene, or Polish-speaking, and Baltic populations from the middle ages onward. Here individuals and groups moved back and forth over centuries, intermarried, or simply adopted neighbors' languages, as seemed convenient. Those who eventually embraced modern nationalism in the second half of the nineteenth century or the early twentieth considered the German-speaking inhabitants as simply Germans, and they typically assumed linear descent of these people from some putative original German stock, whether that was true or not. For some of these German nationalists, the concept of linear descent of ethnic Germans meant a notion of racial purity. Those who assumed linear descent from some original German stock, of course, had to ignore centuries of intermarriage, myriad individual choices about what

language(s) one might prefer to speak, and the presence of many obviously non-German last names among contemporary German-speaking populations.

When the old empires of Central and Eastern Europe broke up at the end of World War I and new nation-states or smaller federations like Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia replaced them, borders could not possibly be drawn neatly and cleanly on linguistic or national dividing lines. In many regions, there was simply no clear border between the territories where different languages were predominant, but rather the fading of one dialect into another or much bilingualism or complex patterns of multilingualism. In fact, legislators and census-takers in the new Polish Republic soon found it convenient to accept the designation of "locals" (or people from hereabouts, "tutejszi") for the inhabitants in eastern regions who spoke local dialects and had no well-defined Polish or Belorussian national identity. Counting them as locals in the census was surely preferable for the Polish government to putting them in the Belorussian category.

Woodrow Wilson, as World War I approached its end, promised new governments and new borders in Central and Eastern Europe based on the free national self-determination of peoples, but the actual arrangements after 1918 seldom met that standard. In many cases after 1918, the Paris Peace conference simply approved borders that corresponded to old historic demarcations, such as those for the western half of Czechoslovakia, or simply rewarded those interests who came out of the war on the winning side at the expense of losers in the war, such as Germany and Hungary. Plebiscites were eventually held after 1918 for a few small territories that were subject to the most heated disputes, like the Saarland or Upper Silesia; but otherwise the Paris peace conference generally decided the new borders over the heads of the peoples. The Soviet-Polish border was not settled until the Treaty of Riga of 1921 ended a bloody war. That settlement proved most favorable to Polish interests and made for a Polish state with a large Ukrainian minority, in addition to millions of German-speakers and Jews. As a result, the new Poland was only about 70 percent Polish-speaking Catholics. Throughout East-Central Europe between 1920 and 1938, one in five people found that they belonged to a linguistic group or nationality that was a minority population within the states in which they now lived.

Most of the new states of Central and East-Central Europe after 1918 were avowedly nation-states in contrast to the multinational states of the pre-1918 era. Linguistic or national heterogeneity had obviously created growing problems for the old empires of central and eastern Europe during the late nineteenth century, but the Habsburg, Tsarist,

and Ottoman states had generally presented themselves as multinational entities, promising to respect the cultural rights of all their peoples, even if some groups were more equal than others. The new avowedly national states of the interwar period declared themselves openly as the states of one or another people. As part of the Paris peace settlement, the Western Powers demanded adherence to guarantees of minority rights in the so-called minority treaties by the smaller Central and East-Central European states, but many of the governments and nationalist politicians there resented this interference in their internal affairs and pursued nationalist agendas against some of their minorities during the next twenty years. Jews were victims of those policies in several of these states; Hungarian minorities in the states surrounding the new, much smaller Hungary; and Ukrainians in southeastern Poland. Germans who had been the people of state in Imperial Germany and a privileged group in Imperial Austria found themselves to be politically vulnerably minorities in the new Polish Republic, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Romania. Next to none of the significant minority populations in Central and East-Central Europe between the wars, however, were subject to forced mass migration.

There were already precedents, however, for established governments in Europe to use their sovereign authority to move mass populations from their homes summarily and with barbaric force for the claimed interests of state. During World War I, the Tsarist Russian military authorities forced tens of thousands of Jews in the central and southern Polish territories to move, fearing that they might prove disloyal to Russian interests. Imperial Germany developed plans during the latter part of the war to remove Poles and Jews en masse from a projected Polish border strip. If one includes Anatolian Turkey in this discussion, the Turkish government put hundreds of thousands of Armenians on lethal forced marches during the First World War in early 1915. In the meantime, the Turkish government in 1913 had already negotiated with the Greek government for a so-called voluntary "exchange" of Greek and Turkish minorities from their respective territories, but the outbreak of World War I delayed indefinitely any action to carry this out.

After the war Greek forces invaded western Anatolia around Izmir (Smyrna) in 1919. Turkish forces struck back in 1921, and more than 200,000 Greeks were forced to flee from the Izmir area. The Treaty of Lausanne signed in July 1923, which ended the Greek-Turkish hostilities, provided for the mandatory "exchange" of Greek and Turkish minority populations between the two countries. Turkey expelled between 1.2 million and 1.5 million ethnic Greeks from its territory, leaving only a small remnant; and Greece expelled some 356,000 Turks. Thousands died in the process, although later at the end of the World

War II, Allied diplomatic experts told leading policymakers that this was a case of a smooth and successful international solution of long-standing minority problems that could be taken as a model.

World War II was a struggle not only for empire, territory, and international domination but also between competing political and social systems. From an early stage in the war, governments asserted the right to force the removal of populations as a matter of fundamental political and military interest, taking it as axiomatic that certain minority ethnic or national groups by their very existence threatened their states' national security and that greater ethnic or national homogeneity strengthened ipso facto the national security. This was true not only of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy but also of Stalin's Soviet Union. Nazi Germany targeted Jews, Roma, and Poles, but in 1939-40 it also agreed with the Soviets to move the German minority of Volhynia as well as those of the Baltic and Bessarabia (Moldova) into occupied western Poland. The alliance between Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy also led the Nazi government in 1939 to agree to give the German-speaking population of the South Tirol a simple choice, either to emigrate into Austria or Germany proper or to remain in Italy as Italians both in law and ultimately in language and culture. Germany's alliance with Italy also resulted in the Nazi authorities forcing the relocation between December 1941 and January 1942 of 12,000 Gottschee Germans from their home communities from southern to eastern Slovenia.

The Soviet government also took action to relocate whole populations from early in World War II. After German forces invaded the Soviet Union in summer 1941, the Soviet government forced the resettlement of around 400,000 Volga Germans and around 80,000 ethnic Germans from around Leningrad to Siberia, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. Later in 1944, the Soviet government exacted collective punishment on the Crimean Tatars for collaboration with the Nazi forces by expelling all of them to Uzbekistan and other remote areas; nearly half of the several hundred thousand involved eventually died. The Kalmyks had already experienced a similar collective punishment in 1943, when the Soviet government expelled them from their home territory northwest of the Caspian Sea between the Don and Volga Rivers.

After Nazi Germany invaded Poland and then developed its plans to invade the Soviet Union, Nazi policymakers envisioned a radical social, economic, and political transformation in Poland, the Baltic, and the western parts of the Soviet Union. This would be new "living space" for ethnic Germans, and *Generalplan Ost* as it evolved would involve

eventually relocating forcibly more than fifty million of the native inhabitants, reducing many of them to little better than slaves and expecting large portions eventually to die. The Nazis' barbaric treatment not only of Jews and Roma but of Polish Catholics and Russians demonstrated vividly to both friends and foes what the Nazis had in mind for the future in Poland, the Baltic, and western Russia.

One should not be at all surprised then that already during World War II, leadership elements of the East-Central European peoples, both at home and in exile, as well as some policymakers among the Allied powers, began to think about resolving the problems of ethnic German minorities in their lands after the war by expelling at least those German populations who had collaborated with and benefitted from the Nazis, if not all of them. Part of this, both at the political and popular levels, represented a spirit of simple revenge against those German minorities based on notions of collective guilt for Nazi atrocities, but one has to consider as well the notion which one found increasingly among government leaders by this point in the bloody twentieth century that the ultimate solution to long-running ethnic and national conflicts was separation of the groups or, where necessary, forcible relocation of minority populations.

At the Tehran Conference in late November 1943, Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin agreed that some territories which lay inside the eastern border of Poland in 1939 would remain in Soviet hands after the war, while Poland would be compensated by drawing a new border with Germany along the Oder and Neisse rivers, about 100 miles west of the prewar Polish-German border. That agreement presumed some shifting of Polish, Ukrainian, and ethnic German populations to conform to the new Polish borders. By 1944 forced movement of minority populations in Eastern Europe became a more or less established principle among the Allied countries in their thinking about postwar arrangements. This would affect millions of ethnic Germans, Poles, Ukrainians, and perhaps Hungarians as well. In 1944 Winston Churchill explained this to the British House of Commons in the following terms:

> "Expulsion is the method which, insofar as we have been able to see, will be the most satisfactory and lasting. There will be no mixture of populations to cause endless trouble . . . A clean sweep will be made, I am not alarmed by the prospect of disentanglement of populations, not even of these large transferences, which are more possible in modern conditions than they have ever been before."

As the Soviet armies pushed the German forces back on the long eastern front in 1944 and early 1945, ethnic German populations, significant numbers of Lithuanians and other Balts, and several million Poles fled before the Soviet forces – or were driven out by the Soviet military and local communist partisans. All of this was well under way before the Yalta and Potsdam summit meetings. In September 1944, the communist-led Polish Committee of National Liberation in Lublin signed a formal agreement with the Soviets (represented by Nikita Khrushchev) recognizing that population "exchanges" would quickly take place of Poles and Ukrainians who found themselves on the wrong side of the new Polish-Soviet border. This soon affected some 2.1 million Poles who had to be settled in Polish territory. The Polish and Soviet communist authorities who took control in Poland as the Nazi forces retreated began quickly to settle those Polish refugees in what they called "recovered territories" in Pomerania, Silesia, and West Prussia, from which ethnic Germans fled or were forcibly removed. Communists led by Wladyslaw Gomulka in the new Polish government were happy to take credit for settling those "recovered territories." Eventually, the Polish authorities, assisted by the Soviet military, expelled some 7 million Germans from the "Recovered Territories" along Poland's new western borders and another 700,000 from various parts of pre-1939 Poland. To these we should add another 1.4 million Germans whom the Soviets expelled from East Prussia, part of which the USSR annexed and which remains part of the Russian Federation today.

By the time the Potsdam summit conference took place in late July 1945, the flight and expulsions of millions of Germans, as well as Poles, Ukrainians, Balts, and others, were well underway.   Article XII of the Potsdam Agreement gave a formal ratification to the forcible transfer of ethnic Germans from Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary:

"The Three Governments, having considered the question in all its aspects, recognize that the transfer to Germany of German populations, or elements thereof, remaining in Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, will have to be undertaken. They agree that any transfers that take place should be effected in an orderly and humane manner."

This legal cover was important for settling the postwar situation, particularly for the new postwar governments in East-Central Europe that wanted to legitimize what they found politically expedient and were already carrying out in brutal fashion. Instructive, however, is the case of Czechoslovakia, whose government in exile, led by Edvard Beneš, had already decided during the war that the long-running Czech-German conflict in its society should

be settled by expelling most or eventually the entire German minority at the end of the war. Very soon after the Allied forces liberated the country and a coalition Czechoslovak government took control in spring 1945, local civil authorities, revolutionary guards, and newly organized security police began to initiate brutal indiscriminate expulsions of ethnic Germans. The central government put out contradictory statements and orders, alternately encouraging and discouraging the expulsions. It quickly became clear, though, that important segments of the Czechoslovak authorities as well as the Czech and Slovak populations wanted to force out as much of the German population as they could before the Allied military authorities and diplomats could make up their minds and enforce regulations for an "orderly and humane transfer."

The so-called "wild expulsions" from Czechoslovakia between May and August 1945 impacted between 700,000 and 800,000 people. The organized and regulated expulsion that followed between January and October 1946, affected more than 2,000,000 ethnic Germans. Eventually nearly 2 million of Czechoslovakia's Germans went to the American zone of occupied Germany and some one million to the Soviet zone of Germany. It is now estimated that between 15,000 and 30,000 of the so-called Sudeten German died in the process, whether from starvation, disease, suicides, or killings by the Czechoslovak population or security forces. Initially, some quarter million Germans who were needed to revive industry or who had evidence of having resisted the Nazis were allowed to remain, but that number eventually declined. The restored Czechoslovak government also wanted to expel the Hungarian minority which lived mostly in the southern fringes of Slovakia, but it did not initiate such action immediately, and the Allies ultimately refused to allow it.

Between 1945 and 1950, the new communist-led Yugoslav government also forced the great majority of its approximately 500,000 ethnic Germans to emigrate. About half of these refugees ended up in Germany, a nearly equal number in Austria. The Yugoslav authorities seized the German inhabitants' property, sent some off to imprisonment in the Soviet Union, and herded thousands into relocation camps. The mortality rates in some of those Yugoslav camps reached fifty percent, and more than 48,000 died.

Time does not permit to discuss here the numerically smaller, but still often cruel, expulsions of ethnic Germans from Romania, the Netherlands, and Denmark that also took place at the end of World War II. By 1950, West Germany had nearly 8 million of the German expellees (16% of the population); East Germany another 4.4 million (some 24% of the population); and Austria, between 300,000 and 400,000. The German expellees from

Eastern Europe became well integrated in the two German states and Austria. Their large concentration in western Germany, particularly in Bavaria, and their good organization made them a significant political force during the Cold War era; and their representatives became a particularly influential element in the right wing of the Christian Democratic Party. Postwar Austria generally welcomed the East European German expellees, but their numbers were too small there for them to become an important political force.

The whole experience of the expulsion of ethnic Germans from East-Central and Eastern Europe is one of the many tragedies of Europe during the violent and bloody twentieth century. While today we may reject on simple moral grounds the principle of collective guilt for the barbarous Nazi actions, the determination to exact revenge for what the Nazis had done was surely a major motivating factor at the end of World War II. Still, we must also reflect on the conditions that made mass expulsions conceivable, acceptable, and even desirable as a deliberate act of government policy not only by the Nazi and Soviet governments during the war but also by the victorious Allied great powers and the smaller countries of East-Central Europe. Obviously, one fundamental condition was a rampant nationalism and the widespread acceptance of nationalist principles that asserted it was best for popular and governmental interests for culturally homogeneous nations to have their own states and for those nation-states to have culturally united populations with no significant national minorities if that was an effective way to avoid troublesome domestic conflicts. Under these principles, the putative inherent rights of nations and the national interests of the nation-states easily overrode any considerations of individual human rights or minority rights. Another fundamental condition which made mass ethnic expulsions possible in the twentieth century was the assumption by national states, and not merely the Nazi or Soviet states, that they had the right and the authority to carry out such expulsions in the name of national interest or national security, regardless of any cost in lives and fundamental individual and group human rights. The continuing occurrences of ethnic cleansing and genocide in our own time demonstrate that such inhuman, indeed murderous notions are still widely held in the world.

SUGGESTED READINGS:

Alfred M. de Zayas, *A Terrible Revenge: The Ethnic Cleansing of the East European Germans, 1944-1950*, rev. ed. New York: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2006.

David Gerlach, "Working with the Enemy: Labor Politics in the Czech Borderlands, 1945–48." *Austrian History Yearbook* 38 (2007): 179-207.

Eagle Glassheim, "National Mythologies and Ethnic Cleansing: The Expulsion of Czchoslovak Germans in 1945." *Central European History* 33, no. 4 (2000): 463 486

Norman M. Naimark, *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic cleansing in twentieth-century Europe*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002.