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The View from the Other Side

In recent years, much attention has been devoted to the sufferings that Germans endured during their forced expulsion from Poland after World War II. Just as the Holocaust seemed a smooth-functioning terror machine to Jewish victims, the post-1945 expulsions seemed a well-organized terror campaign to German victims. But how did provincial and local Polish authorities view these expulsions? As this document collection shows, just like the perpetrators of the Holocaust, Polish officials viewed their ethnic cleansing operation as sub-optimal at best; they were enormously frustrated by the operational dysfunctions that accompanied every step of the deportation process. Indeed, what German victims viewed as organized terror, Polish officials saw as a very disorganized campaign. Given the difficulties surrounding these expulsions, it is remarkable that they were so effective. By 1950, however, only a tiny fraction of the pre-1945 German population in what became Poland still lived there.

This volume, part of the Herder Institute's highly regarded series of published documents drawn from Polish archives, covers the expulsion of Germans from the Posen/Poznan and Stettin/Szczecin provinces. The book includes two parts, each with an introduction and several hundred pages of documents. Part 1, on Posen, is introduced and edited by Stanislaw Jankowiak. Part 2, on Stettin, is by Katrin Steffen. Of the two parts, the Stettin section offers the more in-depth and balanced treatment. After World War II, the two regions faced very different situations; this circumstance, however, makes their inclusion in one volume all the more interesting. Except for the Lebus (East Brandenburg) area, the province of Posen had belonged to interwar Poland before 1939. It was thus overwhelmingly Polish; some two million Poles lived there in 1946 (p. 50). At war's end, roughly 170,000 Germans lived in the Lebus area, as well as another 130,000 so-called *Volksdeutsche* (ethnic Germans who had lived in interwar Poland) whose national identity was more contested (pp. 34-35). The Stettin region, by contrast, was overwhelmingly German. The area belonged to the German Reich until 1945. Between 1945 and 1950, it saw a wholesale demographic turnover. Initially, there were very few Poles, but an estimated 500,000 Germans (p. 276). Just 4 years later, in November, 1949, there were only 33,000 Germans in the province (p. 599).

In both Posen and Stettin, Polish officials faced great dilemmas, difficulties, and dangers in expelling Germans. Both areas saw tense conflicts between competing administrative authorities. The worst of these tensions involved Soviet and Polish authorities in and around Stettin. There, the Soviets even occupied the Stettin Harbor until October, 1948. As far as the Poles were concerned, the Soviets protected Germans so as to exploit their labor; in the harbor area, for example, the Soviets sanctioned German schools for the children of German workers. The Poles thus blamed the Soviets for many of the region's ills, including the continued presence of Germans in the province. But conflicts between Soviets and Poles were not the only administrative tensions that arose during the

expulsions. In both Posen and Stettin, civilian authorities were frustrated with the Polish military's inability to guard the German-Polish border. They were also angered that the military undertook a wave of expulsions without informing them in the summer of 1945. At that time, local authorities needed the German work force to maintain a smooth-functioning economy and, most importantly, to ensure a steady stream of cheap agricultural labor. Polish employers were particularly bent on retaining the German work force–to benefit not only from German professional expertise, but also from a labor pool that was forced to work for little or no wages. Central authorities, however, initially wanted to get rid of Germans as quickly as possible. But beginning in 1946, they changed tack. They now often forced local authorities to hold back on deportations (even when these were ready to expel Germans) so that the expulsions could be carried out in the humanitarian manner demanded by the Allies. In fact, however, Polish authorities had little inclination to treat Germans decently during expulsions. But this stance raised yet another dilemma: many officials were concerned with Poland's international image and how the deportation story would fare in the international press.

Provincial authorities were particularly frustrated by their inability to control the actual process of expulsion. To their dismay, local officials not only did not prevent, but actually condoned and even engaged in plunder and corruption at every step of the deportations. Indeed, of all the complaints voiced by regional authorities, none were more persistent than those concerning the ongoing plunder of German valuables. All too often, these officials complained, German property ended up in private and not state hands. Provincial officials also believed that local authorities were hiding Germans so as to benefit from a low-cost labor force. In addition, they were sorely disappointed by the organization of the deportations. Temporary camps that were set up to process the deportees had atrocious hygiene conditions; epidemic and other illnesses were common and, not infrequently, led to death. The sick, old, and pregnant were supposed to be treated with more care; in fact, they were often subject to the same coarse brutality as healthier Germans. Trains that were to bring the deportees to Germany were generally late or never came at all; the deportation process that was supposed to last just a few days sometimes went on for weeks or even months. In one fascinating document (Nr. 268), a report of a meeting between provincial and local authorities in Stettin, local officials simply laid the blame on the Germans: Germans were hiding so as to avoid deportation, they refused to identify their sick (for fear of breaking up their families), and they were trying to take along too many possessions (and hence their valuables had to be taken away from them).

In both areas, Polish authorities faced difficulties in determining just who was Polish. In the Posen region, there were disputes about the "true" national character of individuals who had registered in the so-called German Ethnic Registry (the *Deutsche Volksliste*) during the Nazi occupation. Except for in the Kempen district, joining the Registry had been voluntary. Polish officials thus decided to treat everyone (even the inhabitants of Kempen) on the Registry as German; all of these individuals lost their property, including their farms. But in fact, the matter was not so simple. Many individuals who had claimed German ethnicity could just as well see themselves as Poles. By the middle of 1945, Polish authorities, recognizing this situation, decided to institute a verification process for those who wished to be considered Polish. Officials were also concerned about losing too many people to Germany. As a commission instructed to review this problem noted in late 1946, "The expulsion of such a huge number of people would only strengthen the biological potential of the enemy and bring enormous harm to our nation" (p. 184). Many ordinary Poles, however, continued to view those who had joined the Registry as traitors, and treated them accordingly. This, in turn, led some potential Poles to claim that they were German, and thus to request deportation. In the Stettin region, a similar problem existed with the autochthonous Kashub population. Here, many local Poles viewed the Kashubs as simply Germans; the Kashubs, too, lost their farms and other possessions. Although regional Polish authorities tried to educate their countrymen that this minority should be viewed as Polish, the Kashubs endured sufficient mistreatment so that they, too, often wanted to go to Germany. Polish authorities' attempts to retain potential Poles were thus often frustrated by the actions and prejudices of the local Polish population.

This volume cannot stand alone as a general history of the forced expulsions of Germans from the Posen and Stettin provinces, let alone from Poland. Given that the documents were drawn from regional Polish archives, this was presumably intended. The reader, however, learns little of the overarching global situation in which these expulsions occurred; there are virtually no documents pertaining to the Allies and their role in the expulsions. Similarly, there are few documents concerning Polish central authorities (these were published in Vol-

ume 1 of the series). The reader thus gets little sense of how, for example, the expulsions helped to consolidate the emerging communist regime. Finally, the German perspective is strikingly absent. This is especially true of the Posen section. Although the German side of the story is somewhat better represented in the Stettin section, the reader nonetheless finds only hints of the social history that accompanied these expulsions. How, for example, did Germans live their lives knowing that their days in these areas were numbered? What did it mean for Poles that they now lived in plundered property, surrounded by former German possessions? With its heavy emphasis on the difficulties faced by regional and local Polish officials, the volume displays a certain myopia; not least it fails to explain just how and why the expulsions were ultimately so effective. But precisely because the emphasis on provincial and local Polish views is so pronounced, this document collection makes a significant contribution to the expulsion story. By focusing on a side of this history that is often ignored, the volume highlights a neglected, yet important aspect of the German expulsions from East Central Europe after World War II.