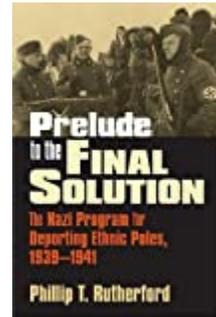




Phillip T. Rutherford. *Prelude to the Final Solution: The Nazi Program for Deporting Ethnic Poles, 1939-1941.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007. xv + 328 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1506-3.



Reviewed by Thomas Kühne (Strassler Family Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Clark University)

Published on H-German (February, 2008)

The Fate of Ethnic Poles in the “Final Solution”

Since Jan T. Gross’s book on the massacre of the Jews in Jedwabne by their Polish neighbors, both scholars and the public have spent much attention on Polish grassroots antisemitism and the collaboration of “ordinary” Poles in the Holocaust. Phillip Rutherford’s detailed account of National Socialist policies of “ethnic cleansing” in Poland from the fall of 1939 to the spring of 1941 rows into the opposite direction. Assuming that the “fate of Polish Jews under German occupation has been well documented,” Rutherford seeks instead to reveal the “wartime ordeal of non-Jewish Poles,” as the jacket blurb says. He does so not by focusing on the victims’ perspectives, on their suffering, or their agency, however. Drawing on both German and Polish sources, he investigates the decision-making, course, and organization of deportation operations. Particular attention is paid to the Staff for the Evacuation of Poles and Jews to the Generalgouvernement, renamed the *Umwandererzentralstelle* (UWZ) in April 1940. The UWZ was established under Reinhard Heydrich’s Sicherheitspolizei and Heinrich Himmler’s Reichskommissariat für die Festigung des deutschen Volkstums in Posen in November 1939 to organize the Germanization of Nazi governor

Arthur Greiser’s model *Gau*, the Wartheland.

Because of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, multitudes of *Volksdeutschen* from eastern and southeastern Europe followed Adolf Hitler’s appeal—“Heim ins Reich!”—and were to be accommodated in the newly conquered Polish territories. To enable the rapid resettlement of hundreds of thousands ethnic Germans, the local population was expelled. Such nationalist politics (*Volkstumspolitik*) was part of the much larger Nazi plan to restructure the ethnogeography of eastern Europe along the lines of *Lebensraum* politics. “As originally framed,” Rutherford writes, “Nazi Germanization schemes demanded the complete elimination of Poles and Jews from the incorporated eastern territories, and ... the Jews certainly emerged in the long run as the primary victims of the operation” (p. 6). However, as Rutherford points out, following earlier assessments by Christopher Browning, Götz Aly, and Ian Kershaw, “this horrific truth should not obscure the conspicuous anti-Polonism of Nazi *Volkstumspolitik* during the initial phase of the occupation” (p. 6). Most of the arriving *Volksdeutschen* were peasants; they would require new agricultural homesteads. Very

few Jews, however, worked in agriculture. As a consequence, Rutherford notes, "Polish farmers, by necessity, would have to make the bulk of those dispossessed and deported to provide the new arrivals with the farms they had promised" (p. 113).

Such a change in priorities was never without its problems. Rutherford confirms this state of affairs by documenting "the day-to-day activity of the UWZ in the Warthegau" (p. 12) in carrying out the four major deportation actions, which led to the evacuation of nearly 300,000 individuals, most of them ethnic Poles, in 1.5 years. In October 1939, Himmler, Heydrich, and Adolf Eichmann's plan to deport the Austrian and Bohemian Jews to Nisko near Lublin had to be suspended in favor of the first *Nahplan*, which served as the basis for expelling more than 80,000 Poles (and Jews) to make room for approximately 40,000 Baltic Germans, and to give priority to resettlement of the first arriving *Volksdeutschen*. Concluded in less than three weeks, "the Nazi's first major experience in systematic mass deportation" nevertheless revealed "absolute organizational deficiency" (p. 86).

Learning from the experience proved difficult, though, not only due to Governor-General Hans Frank's constant resistance, but also because major National Socialist leaders continuously worked to reestablish the anti-Jewish priorities of their racist politics. The initial version of the second *Nahplan*, issued by Heydrich on December 21, 1939, did not call for the expulsion of Poles, but rather for the evacuation of 600,000 Jews, which would take three trains six to seven months, with each train carrying 1,000 deportees per day, as SS-Sturmbannführer Albert Rapp, the leader of the UWZ, calculated. That plan, however, was delayed before it actually started. The exigencies of the resettlement of the *Volksdeutschen* once again claimed priority. Poles, not Jews, had to be expelled. First a *Zwischenplan*, then the revised version of the second *Nahplan*, thus laid the ground for the deportation of 173,636 individuals in all, primarily Polish farmers and their families, from the Warthegau in the months between February 1940 and January 1941. Despite all the logistical difficulties, ideological disputes, and personal feuds, "the deportation system in Wartheland had expanded and evolved far beyond the quagmire of December 1939. 'Absolute organizational deficiency' became largely a thing of the past" (pp. 130f). It must be noted, however, that the priority conflicts of Nazi racial and nationalist politics abated somewhat in 1940 for another reason. The conquest of France and hopes of defeating Britain allowed the Nazis to become fascinated with the idea of deporting all Euro-

pean Jews to Madagascar.

Between September 1940 and March 1941 the next wave of *Volksdeutschen*—roughly 275,000 thousand individuals from Lithuania, Bessarabia, and Bukovina—were to be brought "home to the Reich." The first part of the third *Nahplan* was scheduled to run from February to April 1940, but did not keep pace with its predecessors. Instead of hundreds of thousands, only 25,000 Poles, including 9,000 Jews, were resettled through March 1941. At that point another priority—preparation for the attack on the Soviet Union—took over. Three million German soldiers in 157 Wehrmacht divisions eventually needed transport to the East. Such needs compelled Himmler to truncate the goals of the third *Nahplan*; it was called off abruptly on March 15, 1941. "Great plans had come to naught" (p. 190), as Rutherford remarks, but at the same time much larger and much more horrible plans were about to be carried out.

Where, then, does the program for deporting ethnic Poles fit into Nazi racial politics? In an influential assessment on the development of the "Final Solution," Browning has pointed out the frustration of Hitler and the SS's demographic engineers with the "repeated failure of German plans for massive population transfers, especially those for solving the Jewish Question," from late 1939 to spring 1941. At that time, deportation—rather than killing the Jews—was the plan. But from the spring of 1941 on, deportation seemed no longer possible, and the resulting frustration fueled what became known as the "Final Solution" beginning in the summer of 1941 on.[1] Rutherford takes a different view. "Brutal though it was," he writes, "Nazi *Polenpolitik* in the eastern provinces apparently grew more rational and less racially motivated as the regime came to realize the military and economic value of its Polish subjects. In effect, it apparently 'de-radicalized' as time passed, gradually evolving from the initial unrealistic plans to deport approximately 80 percent of the Polish population in the incorporated territories immediately ... to the point that all Poles capable of work were exempted from evacuation in early 1941" (p. 215). Thus, the program of "ethnic cleansing" in Poland did not just fail; on the contrary, it became increasingly successful and proved, from a long-term perspective, a valuable treasure of experiences, as "the perpetrators' apprenticeship at the school of mass transfers, an educational experience that ... ultimately proved instrumental to the expeditious destruction of European Jewry" (p. 12).

The burden of the activities that we call the "Final Solution," however, were not merely the consequence of

logistical issues. The shift in policy from ethnic cleansing to genocide required more elaborate planning than mass deportations. Moreover, the lines of continuity that Rutherford draws between the relocation of the Poles and the prehistory of intensifying German-Polish friction in the German Empire after 1871 are dubious. "Imperial and Nazi authorities," he says, "endeavored to increase the German population of the Area at the expense of the Polish" (p. 34). Even so, neither the expulsion of 32,000 Russian and Austrian subjects between 1885 and 1887, nor the activities of the Colonization Commission from 1886, nor the suppression of the Polish language can be equated with the anti-Polish terror the Nazis initiated. As brutal as it was, Germanization of Polish territories in Imperial Germany still meant assimilation; in Nazi Germany, obsessive racism left few alternatives to exclusion.

Rutherford's book valuably supplements our understanding of the early steps toward the Holocaust. Any overstatement of continuities between these measures and the past of the German-Polish relationship results from Rutherford's laudable concern for the Polish victims

of Nazi politics. Even so, readers should keep in mind the limited perspective of his account. At the same time as the UWZ was organizing the deportation of mostly non-Jewish Poles, hundreds of thousands of Jews were herded into ghettos or had already been murdered, not only by members of the *Einsatzgruppen*, but also and often by Wehrmacht conscripts—ordinary Germans. As recent research into the Wehrmacht's war on Poland has shown, it was the Jews, more than non-Jewish Poles, who were considered its primary targets.[2] Outside the UWZ, the Holocaust had no longer simply been logistically prepared. It had already been launched.

Notes

[1]. Christopher R. Browning, *The Path to Genocide: Essays on Launching the Final Solution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 23.

[2]. Jochen B  hler, *Auftakt zum Vernichtungskrieg. Die Wehrmacht in Polen 1939* (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2006).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Thomas K  hne. Review of Rutherford, Phillip T., *Prelude to the Final Solution: The Nazi Program for Deporting Ethnic Poles, 1939-1941*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. February, 2008.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14224>

Copyright    2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.