



Detlef Brandes. *Der Weg zur Vertreibung 1938-1945: Pläne und Entscheidungen zum "Transfer" der Deutschen aus der Tschechoslowakei und aus Polen.* Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2001. Xiv + 503 pp. DEM 94.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-486-56520-1.



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Published on HABSBUrg (September, 2001)

Planning to Cleanse: Wartime Diplomacy Regarding the Expulsion of East European Germans

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For millions of Germans in reconstituted Poland and Czechoslovakia, the Second World War did not end in May 1945. Between 1944 and 1947, over twelve million ethnic Germans surged westward, impelled by fear, guilt, or force to leave their historic homelands. Hundreds of thousands died en route, many in concentration camps or forced labor battalions. While one can understand Czech and Polish anger after the destruction and humiliation of the brutal Nazi German occupation, their subsequent revenge, indiscriminately directed at the guilty and innocent alike, ranks as one of the great humanitarian disasters of our century. This prototype of ethnic cleansing raises a range of historical questions, but perhaps most vexing is that of the Anglo-American role in allowing it to happen. How could the self-proclaimed defenders of democracy and freedom such as Churchill and Roosevelt sanction, even encourage, the forced migration of millions of Germans? For that matter, how could Edvard Benes, the restored President of a once model Czechoslovak democracy, pursue such a morally dubious policy of

collective guilt, and in such a way as to encourage retributive violence?

In a thorough, indeed painstakingly detailed monograph, Detlef Brandes documents the process by which the expulsions became policy. Divided into six chronological units starting with Munich, his book guides us through the twists and turns of Czechoslovak, Polish, British, American, and Soviet policy on the fate of East Central Europe's post-war German minority. This is primarily a diplomatic history with familiar central characters: Benes, Eden, Churchill, Stalin. The supporting characters also receive ample coverage, however. We learn of J.M. Troutbeck, a German specialist in the Foreign Office and chair of the little known "Interdepartmental Committee on the Transfer of German Populations," charged with evaluating the potential impact of a flood of German refugees after the war. We hear from various members of the Czech and Polish undergrounds - including the aristocratic Czech journalist Zdenek Borek-Dohalsky - who press their exile leaders to show no mercy in negotiating the fate of Eastern Germans. Then there is Wenzel Jaksch, the leader of democratic Sudeten Germans in ex-

ile who unsuccessfully tried to temper Benes's expulsion plans. Though Jaksch certainly merits inclusion, his appearance on no fewer than 106 pages is overkill. And there are others who could have been left out altogether; as it is, the book's name index stretches for 30 pages.

The general details of the story are well known. Almost as soon as German troops occupied the Sudetenland in October 1938, Edvard Benes pursued a two-fold policy: the restoration of Czechoslovakia in its pre-Munich boundaries and the removal, through a combination of minor border rectifications and population transfer, of the state's disloyal German minority. Though the details changed along with British public and official opinion and pressure from the Czech underground, Benes's broad goals remained the same throughout the war. Conversely, the Polish government in exile faced a more complex and variable set of circumstances. Before Hitler's unexpected thrust into the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, the Poles sought the restoration of their pre-war borders and the "liquidation" of German East Prussia (p. 50). With Stalin's entry into the Western alliance, Poles faced the distasteful task of negotiating with their very recent enemy. When Stalin and Churchill made it clear in 1943 that the Soviets would keep the portion of Poland east of the Curzon Line, the Poles ratcheted up their claims to Danzig, Lower Silesia, and much of East Prussia. Thus Poland would be compensated for Soviet expansionism at German expense.

Though initially hesitant to support widespread post-war population transfers, the British government began signaling approval in late 1940, after German bombing attacks on British cities had radicalized British public opinion. But, as we learn in a fascinating account by Brandes, British officials were sharply divided on the extent and speed of the transfers. In 1943, the War Office opposed the Foreign Office's intentions to move Polish borders as far as the Oder-Neisse line and deport the millions of Germans who would remain behind. Such a move, the Director of Military Intelligence wrote, would yield an overpopulated and revisionist Germany bordering an underpopulated and weak Poland, and would "sow the seeds of another war" (p. 233). The Foreign Office countered with the argument that German salients in the East were even more dangerous and rendered Poland strategically vulnerable. Just as important, Britain had a moral obligation to Poland, which would have to be compensated for its losses to the Soviet Union.

Writing almost two decades ago, the human rights lawyer Alfred De Zayas told much the same story. [1]

A fitting critique of Allied approval of the transfers, his book was nonetheless marred by a territorial revisionism that struck a tone more reminiscent of the interwar period than the age of European unity and *Ostpolitik*. Brandes takes the opposite track, describing in a clinical tone Churchill and Stalin's cavalier trading of lands and peoples. Ultimately such events cry out for a critical evaluation; one cannot write the history of ethnic cleansing or its planning without coming to some basic moral conclusions. An ideal account would combine some of de Zayas' sense of outrage with Brandes' judicious handling of evidence.

More generally, Brandes' cataloging of minute details, many of which are repetitive, comes at the expense of analysis. The text is littered with long block quotes; one might argue that they speak for themselves, but still some critical evaluation of both context and wider importance would have been helpful. On more than one occasion, for example, Brandes quotes Churchill's references to the Greco-Turkish transfer of 1923-1924 as a successful precedent (pp. 103, 193). Typically, Brandes lets other characters, including various minor officials and the Times of London (p. 274), make the case against Churchill's claim. But nowhere does Brandes himself offer an explanation or evaluation of the Lausanne transfer. Limited either by space (the book is already over 500 pages) or by methodology, Brandes resists breaking with his rigid chronological and source-driven approach.

This leaves too many important questions unanswered. What informed the broader intellectual climate that led so many "democrats" to blithely negotiate the forced movement of millions of people? To what extent were wartime planners able to imagine a post-war order beyond familiar understandings of interwar minority and strategic relationships (i.e. fifth columns, undefendable borders, etc.)? As it turns out, the War Office was wrong that expulsions and the truncation of Germany would cause another European war. But was the Foreign Office right that they were necessary to prevent another European war? On a smaller, but no less important, scale, we need to know more about the background and intellectual proclivities of the important figures in transfer diplomacy. Isn't it relevant, for example, that Benes had in his academic years written on minority problems, or that Arnold Toynbee (Director of the Foreign Research and Press Service, 1939-43) had been an eyewitness to violence that preceded the Greco-Turkish treaty on exchange of populations? Brandes' otherwise valuable account lacks both broad and personal context.

In spite of these analytical weaknesses, this is another finely produced book by *Collegium Carolinum*, the Munich-based institute that specializes in Bohemian history. It contains a wealth of maps documenting the various proposals for post-war Polish and Czechoslovak border changes. The editing is meticulous, and the index generously includes a subject listing, in addition to the standard personal and geographical registers. The book is a fine reference work, and students of wartime diplomacy - in particular that of the Czechs and the British regarding expulsions - will find it useful.

Other readers will be disappointed. In spite of the promising subtitle, this is not an explicit comparison between the Czech and Polish cases. In general, the Czechs (and Sudeten German exile politicians) get the overwhelming majority of Brandes' attention. When the Poles do appear, it is rarely in a comparative context. There is only brief mention of the abortive plan for a post-war Czechoslovak-Polish confederation. Moreover, though billed as a synthesis, the book does not ask the broad historical questions that a synthesis should. Even so, Brandes has laid the groundwork for a broader interpretive work. When someone else is ready to reflect

on the place of expulsion diplomacy in the history of the jagged twentieth century, this is the first place he or she should look for supporting details.

Note:

[1]. Alfred de Zayas, *Nemesis at Potsdam: The Expulsion of the Germans from the East* (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1977; 3rd rev. ed. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989). On the theme of de Zayas' revisionism, see Rainer Ohliger's February, 1997 HABSBURG review of Alfred-Maurice de Zayas, *A Terrible Revenge: The Ethnic Cleansing of the East European Germans, 1944-1950* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994). <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=1720863819285>.

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Citation: Eagle Glassheim. Review of Brandes, Detlef, *Der Weg zur Vertreibung 1938-1945: Pläne und Entscheidungen zum "Transfer" der Deutschen aus der Tschechoslowakei und aus Polen*. HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. September, 2001.

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