



**Tomáš Staněk.** *Verfolgung 1945: Die Stellung der Deutschen in Böhmen, Mähren und Schlesien (außerhalb der Lager und Gefängnisse).* Wien u.a.: Böhlau Verlag/Wien, 2002. 261 S. (broschiert), ISBN 978-3-205-99065-9.



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## **Crimes of Retribution: Czech Violence against Germans in 1945**

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In September 1947 a Czechoslovak parliamentary commission investigated reports of mass graves scattered around the north Bohemian town of Postoloprty. In all, the investigation unearthed 763 German bodies, victims of a zealous Czechoslovak army detachment carrying out orders to “cleanse” the region of Germans in late May 1945. Those acquainted with Sudeten German eyewitness accounts of the Czechoslovak expulsions of 1945-46 will not be surprised by this report. Expellees who survived the massacre estimated the number of their murdered neighbors at around 800. The surprise here is that the numbers came from a Czech source, indeed from an inquiry at the highest levels of government only months before the Communists eliminated democratic opposition in February 1948. Postoloprty is one well-documented case among several dozen explored in Tomas Stanek’s eye-opening book on Czech ethnic cleansing of Germans in the summer of 1945.

After six humiliating and deadly years of Nazi occupation, Czechs took vengeance on Czechoslovakia’s

three million ethnic Germans in two waves. In the four months after liberation in early May 1945, Czech paramilitaries, army units, and local vigilantes drove hundreds of thousands of Germans from their homes and across the borders of occupied Germany and Austria, brutalizing and killing many in the process. Euphemistically dubbed the “wild transfer” in subsequent Czech historiography, this stage ended soon after the allied powers approved of an “organized transfer” at the Potsdam conference in August 1945. Part two of the expulsion process began in January 1946, with most of Czechoslovakia’s remaining two million Germans making a forced, but relatively orderly, exit on special trains to occupied Germany.

The expulsions—both wild and organized—of Sudeten Germans have long been a popular topic among German historians, many of them expellees or their descendants, and the subject is finding increasing interest among Czechs. For the most part, however, these histories have had a polemical edge, with each side stressing the crimes and culpability of the other. Stanek’s first book on the subject, published in 1991, broke new ground through its extensive use of Czech (as well as German)

sources to document the Czech expulsion of Germans after the Second World War. [1] Originally published in Czech in 1996, the book under review here focuses on only the most violent period of “wild expulsions” during the summer of 1945. [2] The new German translation of the book will introduce a wider audience to Stanek’s unrivaled mastery of Czech and German sources on the expulsions.

In unsparing detail, Stanek describes “death marches” of Germans across the reestablished Czechoslovak border, deadly work camps, and a general indifference to German life. While some of this violence may have been righteous revenge for crimes of the Nazi occupation, most German victims were innocent of specific crimes, Stanek concludes, their only fault being membership in the collectively defined German nation. Stanek is particularly critical of this extra-judicial retribution-punishment without trial, based on collective guilt—which he blames for a post-war weakening of moral and legal norms.

Not content simply to document atrocities, Stanek seeks to explain how they occurred and who was ultimately responsible. In an introductory overview of the expulsions, he describes the chaotic influx of Czech forces into the German-inhabited borderlands in May 1945. The most vicious and often first to arrive were the so-called Revolutionary Guards, paramilitaries with a mandate to keep order but a propensity for murder, rape, and plunder. Army units and security detachments soon followed, sometimes reining in the RGs, sometimes joining them in roundups and cleansing actions.

A persistent question, then and since, was the degree to which high Czechoslovak officials were complicit in the violence. Stanek documents several cases of military orders to “cleanse” (*vycistit*) towns or regions of Germans, but many more attacks came at the initiative of local actors, seeking revenge, loot, or even sadistic satisfaction. While acknowledging widespread hatred and desire for vengeance, Stanek blames Czech leaders, including President Edvard Benes, for encouraging extra-judicial retribution through inflammatory public speeches and official indifference. The larger context, Stanek points out, must include the brutal Nazi occupation, which accustomed Czechs to violence and fed the hatred underlying their post-war behavior.

Stanek’s conclusions on the issue of responsibility find support in his unprecedented archival research in Czechoslovak state and regional archives. In meticulous footnotes the author relies whenever possible on Czech

sources, with the goal of checking victims’ eyewitness accounts, which have been the basis for many tendentious Sudeten German histories. Surprisingly, Czech official records confirm the general outline of expellee memory, [3] though Stanek convincingly discounts Sudeten German estimates of 250,000 deaths during the expulsions from 1945 to 1947. While no official death figures exist, Stanek puts the total of German deaths by suicide, murder, and disease at between 24,000 and 40,000. He is quick to point out that this lower estimate of deaths changes neither the moral nor the historical issues involved.

The most speculative argument in the book, which otherwise balances empirical evidence with interpretive acuity, is the connection of expulsion violence with the Communist seizure of power in 1948. Drawing from an *Ä©migrÄ©* debate in the 1970s, [4], Stanek suggests that the expulsions undermined the moral and legal order, rendering a weakened Czechoslovak democracy vulnerable to Communist totalitarianism. Briefly put, willingness to accept persecution of one group (Germans) opened the gates to persecution of others (class enemies, the democratic opposition). This hypothesis raises several further intriguing questions: Did perpetrators of crimes against Germans gravitate towards the Communist Party? Did the Communists manage to use judicial and extra-judicial retribution to undermine their “bourgeois” opponents? Did many Czechs vote for the Communist Party in 1946 because of its hard stance against Germans? Or put another way, did Communists jump on the anti-German bandwagon in 1945 because the vast majority of Czechs wanted the Germans out?

The link between the violence and expulsions of 1945 and the Communist elimination of democratic opposition in 1948 is perhaps more tenuous than Stanek admits. In fact, the emptying borderlands presented members of the Czech lower classes with unprecedented opportunity, acting as a social safety valve for the interior of the country (probably sapping Communist votes there in 1946 elections). Moreover, while Communists may have gained supporters through their uncompromising stance against Germans in 1945 and 1946, most Germans were gone by early 1947, over a year before the Communists ended Czechoslovakia’s post-war democracy. [5] Though Stanek convincingly explains how and why the expulsions took place, their connection to Communist ascendancy in Czechoslovakia requires further research.

Stanek himself calls for new research on several fronts relating to the expulsions, including careful local studies of massacres of Germans in 1945, the relationship

of official and unofficial persecution of Germans, and the fate of German property after the war. With his prodigious research and publication on the expulsions, Stanek has set a high standard for objectivity in a field once dominated by vitriol and denial.

Notes:

[1]. Tomas Stanek, *Odsun Nemcu z Ceskoslovenska 1945-1947* [The transfer of Germans from Czechoslovakia] (Prague: Nase vojsko, 1991).

[2]. Tomas Stanek, *Persekuce* [Persecution] (Prague: Institut pro stredoevropskou kulturu a politiku, 1996).

[3]. Several dozen eyewitness accounts of the expulsions are collected in Theodor Schieder, ed., *Dokumentation der Vertreibung der Deutschen aus Ost-Mitteleuropa* (Bonn: Bundesministerium für Vertriebene, Flüchtlinge und Kriegsgeschädigte, 1954).

[4]. See Bradley Abrams, "Morality, Wisdom and Revision: The Czech Opposition of the 1970s and the Expulsion of the Sudeten Germans," *East European Politics and Societies* 9, no. 2 (1995): 234-255.

[5]. These points come from Benjamin Frommer, "The Consequences of 'Ethnic Cleansing' in Postwar Czechoslovakia," conference paper, Unsettling Europe: Migration and Its Aftermath in the Twentieth Century, Princeton University, 4 May 2002.

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