



**Johann Böhm.** *Die Gleichschaltung der Deutschen Volksgruppe in Rumänien und das 'Dritte Reich' 1941-1944.* Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2003. (gebunden), ISBN 978-3-631-50647-9.



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## National Socialism and the Ethnic Germans of Romania

The role of ethnic Germans in the National Socialist order and the Second World War, and their fate as expellees after 1945, have acquired new currency since the end of the Cold War and the gradual Western integration of Germany's eastern neighbors. Ongoing controversies involving the expellees and their political allies, such as the current one surrounding the German Vertriebenenbund's plans for a "Center on the Expulsions," have kept the history of the diaspora Germans before and after 1945 in the mainstream media. And a new generation of scholars from throughout Europe and North America has "rediscovered," infused with fresh intellectual energy, and helped internationalize a field that for two generations was the nearly-exclusive domain of German expellee historians. Johann Böhm's third and last book in a trilogy on National Socialism and the German minority in Romania is unlikely to make much of an impact on these energetic intellectual and public debates.[1] Rather than making a conscious effort to contribute to the wider scholarly debate on ethnic Germans and National Socialism, Böhm appears primarily concerned with debunking apologist tendencies within Romanian German expellee circles.

In its rough outlines, the experience of Romania's ethnic Germans with National Socialism resembled that of other German minorities in Southeastern Europe. Initial contacts occurred in the 1920s, but Hitler's ascension to power heralded a new phase in the Reich's relations with the German minorities and portended their thorough "nazification." The *Gleichschaltung* of the various official and semi-official Reich organizations conducting "Germandom" politics abroad was not a linear affair. But by 1938, Heinrich Himmler's SS had gained predominance in the field. Career SS officers headed the Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle or VoMi, the agency charged with coordinating the Reich's relations with the German minorities—and with influencing these in the interest of Hitler's foreign policy.[2] In the states of Southeastern Europe, Berlin installed Ethnic Group (*Volksgruppe*) organizations modelled on the NSDAP and headed by Ethnic Group Leaders (*Volksgruppenführer*) and their administrative staffs, who took orders from VoMi and the German embassies. The Reich negotiated special "state within the state" status for these German minorities.

In practice, even the "satellite" states Croatia and

Slovakia, let alone more independent allies such as Romania and Hungary, often found ways to circumvent these agreements and keep upstart German minorities in check. BĂ¶hm demonstrates how Romanian politicians continued to pursue “romanianization” of the German minority and others, most effectively in the economic realm. As the demands of total war mushroomed, the *Volksgruppen* implemented total mobilization policies to support the Reich’s military and economic war efforts. Tens of thousands of ethnic Germans from Romania and all other states of Southeastern Europe were conscripted into the Waffen-SS. In the war’s final months, the *Volksgruppen* found themselves conducting ad hoc evacuations in the face of the advancing Soviet Army.

The objective of BĂ¶hm’s book is “to offer the historically interested public a readable stock-taking (*Bestandsaufnahme*) and thereby present the most important actions and methods of the Nazi functionaries” who led Romania’s German minority (p. 2). BĂ¶hm describes his focus as “the attempt to investigate the inner organization of the NSDAP of the German *Volksgruppe* in Romania, as well as its penetration of and integration into other social sub-systems.” He intends to direct his focus onto the circle that made up the strategic leadership of the National Socialist *VolksgruppenfĂ¼hrung*. And he poses the question of how these functionaries succeeded in subjugating the long-standing institutions, organizations, and associations of the Germans in Romania (p. 3).

BĂ¶hm’s introduction provides extensive, though not always easy to follow, background on political developments in Romania and its German minority during 1940-1941. Following major territorial revisions at Romania’s expense in summer 1940, Marschal Ion Antonescu took control over the state in uneasy alliance with the fascistic Iron Guard. The Reich negotiated virtual autonomy for the country’s German minority. Almost concurrently, Andreas Schmidt, a radical young National Socialist, became *VolksgruppenfĂ¼hrer* at Berlin’s behest. Soon afterward, in November 1940, Schmidt united two competing Nazi factions within the “National Socialist Party of the German Ethnic Group in Romania” and set out to complete the organizational *Gleichschaltung* of the minority. BĂ¶hm portrays Schmidt as a fanatical Nazi surrounded by like-minded lieutenants, all committed to implementing the destructive policies of the SS.[3] Contrary to his stated intent, however, BĂ¶hm does not examine the political careers and personalities of Schmidt or other *Volksgruppe* leaders in any depth in these pages.

BĂ¶hm’s first chapter discusses cut: the “reorgani-

zation” of the German *Volksgruppe*’s organic and affiliated organizations, as well as the Romanian authorities’ relations with both the *Volksgruppe* and the Reich. Schmidt’s organization attempted to regiment all German men, women, youth, and other demographic groups, as well as social, economic, and cultural activities within “totalitarian” institutions based on NSDAP structures in Germany. BĂ¶hm recognizes that extensive social welfare activities, which helped cement Nazism’s popularity in the diaspora, at bottom promoted the goals of “racial” selection, increasing the number of strapping German bodies, and orienting intellectual development strictly along the lines of the National Socialist world view (p. 64).

Chapter 2 describes the *Gleichschaltung* of the Lutheran Church in Romania and the German minority’s school system. Through an agreement with the party in September 1940 and the appointment of a National Socialist bishop in February 1941, the influential Lutheran church “became the handmaiden of the *Volksgruppe* leadership,” though a few pastors attempted to resist “neopagan” encroachments on the Church’s historical prerogatives (p. 122). BĂ¶hm devotes an entire sub-chapter to undermining Bischofsvikar Friedrich MĂ¼ller’s post-war memoir, in which MĂ¼ller presented himself as a leading figure of the ecclesiastical resistance.[4]

BĂ¶hm’s section on schools is one of the book’s most interesting. By examining contemporary pedagogical journals and other sources, BĂ¶hm demonstrates how National Socialist educators reshaped school curricula around the tenets of “race” and the notion of “Germanic” Central Europe as the cradle of Kultur. In the third and fourth chapters, BĂ¶hm covers Romania’s military campaign against the Soviet Union and the recruitment of Romania’s Germans into the Waffen-SS. The fifth and final chapter addresses the political situation in the months preceding Romania’s departure from the Axis camp in August 1944 as well as the “Jewish Question” in Romania.

One of BĂ¶hm’s most valuable contributions is his examination of the German minority’s role in relations between Berlin and Bucharest. Thanks to thorough research in the diplomatic archives of Germany and Romania, he succeeds in reconstructing the “triangular” relationship between the Reich and Romanian governments and the ethnic German leadership.[5] Diplomatic developments, however, were only a part of the context within which the *Gleichschaltung* of Romania’s Germans occurred. I wanted to learn more about the internal dy-

namics of the German minority under National Socialism, not simply the pronouncements and actions of its official leadership. How, for example, did differences in confession, class, or region affect the responses of ethnic German individuals and groups toward National Socialism in ideology and practice?[6] How did National Socialism function on a day-to-day basis in the diaspora? BĂ¶hm describes the totalitarian aims of the *Volksgruppe* leadership but acknowledges that it failed completely “to organize and supervise every sphere of life” (p. 3). Unfortunately, he makes no serious attempt to identify or explore these non-aligned spheres, outside a few examples of individual opposition among Lutheran clergymen.

The organization of the book’s chapters reveals two of this book’s cardinal weaknesses: a lack of organizational clarity and an absent interpretative framework. BĂ¶hm amasses a wealth of background material on Romanian politics, the minutiae of diplomatic relations, and military developments at the expense of a consistent focus on the experiences of the German minority. Chapter 3, for example, opens with a twenty-five-page general recapitulation of events on the Eastern Front that does not even mention the Germans of Romania. The same holds true for an eight-page recapitulation of the Axis invasions of Yugoslavia and Greece. Much of the background text and lengthy documentary appendix (which reflects the book’s overall thematic incoherence) could have been streamlined, or sacrificed outright, for the sake of argumentative and structural clarity. (Such editing also might have resulted in a slimmer volume more affordable for students and other non-library purchasers.)

Although BĂ¶hm exhaustively reconstructs diplomatic and political meetings and correspondence that impacted on the Germans of Romania, his book does not really deliver what its title promises. *Gleichschaltung* implies a process by which National Socialists, once in power, “aligned” existing institutions to further their own political agenda. In the case of the ethnic German diaspora, *Gleichschaltung* refers both to the “nazification” of the German minorities abroad, as *Deutsche Volksgruppen*, through Berlin’s “Germandom” agencies, as well as the process by which the *Volksgruppen* aligned the minorities’ internal institutions. BĂ¶hm delivers his account of this internal alignment strictly from a top-down perspective. He reveals disappointingly little of how the alignment process transpired at grass-roots and intermediate levels, where it encountered obstacles and where it transpired smoothly. Consequently, his attempt to elucidate National Socialism’s “penetration of and integration into other social sub-systems” remains superficial.

BĂ¶hm does mention “oppositional” communities but does not explicate (pp. 50, 59). Tellingly, he relies heavily on passive constructions in these sections, thereby obscuring who, besides just the top tier of *Volksgruppe* functionaries, actually was doing the “aligning” and how (the schools section is a notable exception).

BĂ¶hm appears driven by a sense of mission toward those fellow Romanian Germans (he was born in Transylvania in 1929) who have a rose-colored view of the *Volksgruppe* experience or who choose to ignore unpleasant truths, as much as by intellectual curiosity or a desire to contribute to an evolving scholarly discussion. Under National Socialism, BĂ¶hm contends, young ethnic Germans had “their souls poisoned, arrogance and brutality instilled in them, they grew up with hopelessly narrow intellectual horizons, from which many have not been able to free themselves to the present day” (p. 61). The book’s writing occasionally contributes to the impression of excessive emotional involvement on the part of the author. Repeatedly, BĂ¶hm employs deprecatory appellations we are unused to seeing in scholarly literature, such as *Nazi-Clique*, *Nazistab*, *NazifunktionÄre*, or *Nazispuk*. (Unlike their colleagues writing in English, German historians generally consider the term “Nazi” a pejorative label from the Weimar era, inappropriate in scholarly usage.)

Even readers with only moderate concern for “politically correct” usage will be irritated by BĂ¶hm’s apparently uncritical employment of terms and concepts tainted by association with Nazism. These include, but are not limited to, *Volksgruppe* (in reference to the minority, not to the National Socialist organization; p. 91 and the title), *Lebensraum* (p. 92), *BlutsrumÄnen* (pp. 95, 99), *Judenfrage* (throughout chapter 5), and *widerdeutscher jÄdischer Literaturgeist* (p. 74). In a similar vein, BĂ¶hm’s claims that National Socialism stood in contrast “to the natural or the divinely ordained order” (p. 50) of the Germans in Romania, to the “true and good spirit that the Transylvania Saxons and Banat Swabians possessed” (p. 125), are more appropriate to a sermon than a work of scholarly history.

BĂ¶hm uses extensive archival sources from Germany and Romania but largely ignores most scholarship, established or current, on National Socialism. He presents a psychological profile of Schmidt and his associates—“many were insecure personalities,” he posits—which, in BĂ¶hm’s view, corresponded most closely to “the stereotype of the Gestapo officer in the Reich,” without discussing that stereotype or citing a sin-

gle relevant source (p. 51). B  hm indulges in more off-the-cuff psychologizing at the end of chapter 4: “One only needs to visualize the facial features of the ‘typical’ representatives of the NS Ethnic Group leadership to understand why they were only acquainted with the lower aspect of the human ego.” Similarly, he claims, National Socialism was, in essence, a single vast conspiracy to prevent the human self from striving to overcome its own “lower aspect” (p. 339). In opening his discussion of Bischofsvikar M  ller, B  hm offers a four-step model of resistance without citing the vast literature on that subject (pp. 138ff.). B  hm’s “intentionalist” view of the Holocaust and his refusal to reference recent literature on the fate of the Jews, in Romania and the rest of Europe, suggests a surprising indifference to the state of scholarship on this most widely and publicly debated of historical subjects.[7]

Not surprisingly, B  hm’s bibliography reflects these weakness. Extensive in scale but not necessarily in scope, it lists overwhelmingly contemporary publications, memoirs, and historiography relevant only to Romania. Few examples are included of scholarship on other German minorities or Nazi Germany’s ethnic politics in general that would have enabled B  hm to draw comparisons and situate the experience of Romania’s Germans within broader contexts.[8] The only map, oddly enough, is of German settlements, not in Romania but in Hungary!

*Die Gleichschaltung der Deutschen Volksgruppe in Rum  nien* contains a wealth of figures, dates, and descriptions of organizational activity pertaining to the Germans of Romania between 1941 and 1944. Unfortunately, its author does not deploy his extensive material within a recognizable interpretative framework. While he discusses tangential items in unnecessary detail, his treatment of the core subject—National Socialist alignment of the German minority in Romania—is often superficial. Consequently, a cornucopia of empirical information and many implicit questions for further research and interpretation are likely to be this book’s main contributions to the growing literature on the German minorities and National Socialism.

#### Notes

[1]. The others are Johann B  hm, *Die Deutschen in Rum  nien und die Weimarer Republik 1918-1933* (Ippesheim: AGK, 1993) and *Die Deutschen in Rum  nien 1933-1940* (Frankfurt am Main and others: Peter Lang, 1999).

[2]. Valdis Lumans, *Himmler’s Auxiliaries: The Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle and the German National Minorities of Eastern Europe* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

[3]. He declines, however, to explore the significance of Schmidt’s relationship with his father-in-law Gottlob Berger, Himmler’s top SS recruiter and a decisive figure in the Reich’s German politics in Southeastern Europe.

[4]. Friedrich M  ller, *Erinnerungen. Zum Weg der siebenb  rgisch-s  chsischen Kirche 1944-1964* (Cologne: B  hlau, 1995).

[5]. Earlier studies of this phenomenon in the case of the German minority in Hungary include Thomas Spira, *The German-Hungarian-Swabian Traingle: The Road to Discord* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990) and Lor  nt Tilkovszky, *Teufelskreis. Die Minderheitenfrage in den deutsch-ungarischen Beziehungen 1933-1938* (Budapest: Akad  miai Kiad  , 1989).

[6]. B  hm’s statistical material concentrates almost exclusively on the Lutheran (Transylvania Saxons), only occasionally discussing the (mostly Catholic) Swabians of the Banat, who made up nearly half (43%) of Romania’s German population. Other German communities in Bessarabia, Bukovina, and Dobrudja had been residents of Romania until territorial revisions and resettlements in 1940 and their experiences might have rated more than a mention in this book.

[7]. G  tz Aly and Christopher Browning are just two of the most prominent historians whose research since the 1980’s has pioneered a widespread understanding of the Holocaust as a series of events at least partly determined by unfolding contingencies and (especially in Aly’s case) occurring within a broader 20th-century history of ethnic cleansing. Not coincidentally, their path-breaking work has resonated far beyond strictly scholarly boundaries.

[8]. Studies of individual German minorities are too numerous to mention here. An excellent starting point is Gerhard Seewann and Peter Dippold, eds. *Bibliographisches Handbuch der ethnischen Gruppen S  dosteuropas 2* volumes (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1997). For scholarship that examines the German minorities in the context of Reich foreign and population policies or provide comparative ethnic perspectives, see Lumans, cited above, and Aly, *Endl  sung. V  lkerverschiebung und der Mord an den europ  ischen Juden* (Frankfurt am Main: Fis-

cher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1998); Michael Fahlbusch, *Wissenschaft im Dienst der nationalsozialistischen Politik? Die 'Volksdeutschen Forschungsgemeinschaften' von 1931-1945* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1999); Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, *Nationalsozialistische Aussenpolitik 1933-1938* (Frankfurt am Main and Berlin: Alfred Metzner, 1968); and Anthony Komjathy and Rebecca Stockwell, *German Minorities and the Third Reich: Ethnic Germans of East Central Europe between the Wars* (New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1980).

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