Ethnic Cleansing in Eastern Europe after 1945

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Pertti Ahonen, Gustavo Corni, Jerzy Kochanowski, Rainer Schulze, Tamás Stark and Barbara Stelzl-Marx, *People on the Move: Forced Population Movements in Europe in the Second World War and Its Aftermath* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2008), 272 pp., €28.99 (pb), ISBN 1845208242.

David Curp, *A Clean Sweep? The Politics of Ethnic Cleansing in Western Poland, 1945–1960* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 270 pp., $85.00 (hb), ISBN 1580462383.

Benjamin Frommer, *National Cleansing: Retribution against Nazi Collaborators in Czechoslovakia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 387 pp., £17.99 (pb), ISBN 0521008964.

Benjamin Lieberman, *Terrible Fate: Ethnic Cleansing in the Making of Modern Europe* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 396 pp., $27.50 (hb), ISBN 1566636499.

The horrors of 'ethnic cleansing' witnessed during the Yugoslavian wars of the 1990s found worldwide attention, not only in the public media but also among scholars, who began to consider forced migration – a greatly under-researched anthropological phenomenon. Over the last fifteen years or so, research in this field has come a long way. Despite its euphemistic character and its origin in the language of the perpetrators, 'ethnic cleansing' is now the widely accepted scholarly term used to describe the systematic and violent removal of undesired ethnic groups from a given territory. Our knowledge regarding the long history of ethnic cleansing keeps expanding, thanks to a rapidly developing research field that produces an ever-growing number of publications. Two of the four books to be reviewed here offer overviews of the history of forced migration in Europe, while the other two deal with cases of ethnic cleansing against the backdrop of two national histories.

In terms of temporal and geographical scope, Benjamin Lieberman's book *Terrible Fate: Ethnic Cleansing in the Making of Modern Europe* is the most ambitious work. Unlike Norman Naimark's pioneer study on ethnic cleansing,[1] which aimed at

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[1] Norman M. Naimark, *Fires of the Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

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developing a clearer analytical understanding of a then still vaguely defined concept by comparing five cases of ethnic cleansing in twentieth-century Europe, *Terrible Fate* presents ethnic cleansing as a central element in the history of modern Europe: The creation of the nation-state in the ethnically mixed regions of central Europe was accompanied by the expulsion of 'alien' populations. Lieberman tells the story of a continuous process of ethnic 'unmixing', which spanned the period from the decline of the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century to the recent wars in the collapsing Yugoslavia and on the Caucasian border of the former Soviet Union. By following a mixed chronological–regional approach, the book's individual chapters deal with regions – such as the Balkans, the Caucasus, Transcaucasia, east central Europe, or the Near East – in which the process of ethnic cleansing culminated within a given period. Despite what the title might indicate, the book focuses on the twentieth century. Only one chapter covers the ethnic cleansings caused by the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the expansion of the Russian empire in the nineteenth century, whereas the remaining seven chapters present the history of ethnic conflict, pogroms, deportations, expulsions and genocides in twentieth-century Europe.

According to Lieberman's narrative, the various 'ethnic cleansings' stemmed mainly from the desire of governments of declining empires and rising nation-states to safeguard their territories through the deportation, expulsion or mass murder of ethnic groups whom they suspected of disloyalty. Therefore disputed border regions or border regions adjacent to hostile states were particularly prone to ethnic cleansing. However, as Lieberman emphasises, the policy of ethnic cleansing from above found surprisingly widespread support from below, driven by nationalist zeal or simply the prospect of looting the houses of those to be expelled or killed. It is because of this shameful complicity in acts of the utmost brutality that the history of the individual cases of ethnic cleansing is usually suppressed in the collective memory of the societies responsible for them.

The place given to the Holocaust in the history of ethnic cleansing is a sensitive and still contested issue. It touches on the very question of how unique the destruction of European Jews was in the history of Europe's violent ethnic homogenisation. Lieberman integrates the Holocaust into his narrative of Europe's violent ethnic homogenisation; nevertheless, he declares the murder of European Jews by Nazi Germany to be a distinct case. Unlike victims of other ethnic cleansings, the Jews were neither rivals for power nor did they pose any threat to Germany's border regions. Thus Lieberman explains their deportation – and subsequent mass murder – mainly through racism. Given the ubiquity of racism in the history of ethnic cleansing, this is too vague an answer to the question of whether the Holocaust was just an extreme case of ethnic cleansing or something intrinsically different. But Lieberman is not overly interested in these analytical questions. He apparently wrote his book with a broad readership in mind and not primarily for the student of ethnic cleansing and genocide. Against this backdrop, his well-written book does a fine job in promoting a greater awareness of the horrors of ethnic cleansing, in pointing to the long-term cultural costs of creating nation-states in regions of ethnic and religious diversity, and in reminding its readers of the tendency of all modern nation-states to get rid of

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populations rendered ethnically 'alien'. Concluding his book with suggestions as to what the international community can do to prevent ethnic cleansing, Lieberman promotes a set of policies ranging from economic and political incentives to robust military interventions.

The comparative study *People on the Move: Forced Population Movements in Europe in the Second World War and Its Aftermath* is more limited, both in temporal and geographical scope, than Lieberman's survey. But the book, which obviously aims at an academic audience, is also much more analytical in its approach. It is the third publication[2] of the comparative research project 'The Impact of National Socialist and Fascist Occupation in Europe, 1938–1950', funded by the European Science Foundation. Hence it focuses on the effects of the wartime policy of Nazi Germany and its central European allies on the process of forced migration in central Europe. To bring together six authors from six different European countries to write a monograph on the history of central Europe's forced migrations is an impressive collaborative achievement. No less ambitious is the book's approach to dealing not only with the forced migrations themselves but also with their place in the collective memory of the affected societies.

The book's short introduction traces the history of compulsory population transfers back to idea of the modern nation-state and its implementation in central and eastern Europe through the Paris Peace Conference and the Greek–Turkish population exchange after the First World War. The next three chapters deal with the forced migrations imposed by Nazi Germany, by its wartime allies Italy, Hungary and Romania, and by the governments of the Anti-Hitler Coalition in the immediate aftermath of the war. Two chapters cover the experience of forced migrations and their memorialisation. The book ends with a chapter on forced labour in Nazi Germany. Since the destruction of European Jews will be part of another publication within the same project, the authors exclude the Holocaust from their study.

The authors do not promote an overall thesis, and they leave the reader without a concluding chapter. This might testify to a general conceptual problem caused by writing about ethnic cleansing within the confines of the research project. There is no question that the policy of Nazi Germany and its allies in east central Europe played a crucial role in the forced migrations that occurred during the Second World War and its aftermath. However, by focusing on these states it is hard to write a history of ethnic cleansing in central Europe without the risk of a certain decontextualisation. The authors were careful enough to be aware of this, and hence tried to include the role of the Soviet Union and the Allies in their survey. But relegating this part of the story to sections in chapters does not do justice to the actual impact of the victorious powers of the Second World War on compulsory population movements. For instance, when Hitler's concept of *Lebensraum* is discussed in detail – while little is said about the motivations underlying Soviet, British and US policy in east central Europe – the

[2] Robert, Gildea, Anette Warring and Olivier Wieviorka, eds., *Surviving Hitler and Mussolini: Daily Life in Occupied Europe* (New York: Berg, 2007); Martin Cornway and Peter Romijn, eds., *The War for Legitimacy in Politics and Culture 1936–1946* (New York: Berg, 2008).

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complex set of factors behind the region's violent ethnic homogenisation is blurred rather than elucidated.

Even within the limited framework of the book itself, not all conceptual decisions are fully convincing. Why is there a chapter section on the ethnic homogenisation of post-war Poland but not that of Czechoslovakia? Why is there an entire chapter on forced labour in the Third Reich, despite the fact that forced (foreign) labour was, unlike forced migration, just a temporary displacement? And why, then, deal with forced labour in Germany alone, not in post-war Poland, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union? Why does the chapter on post-war memorialisation of forced migration examine only Germany and Poland and not Czechoslovakia, Italy, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Romania, which were part of the study in other chapters?

Despite these conceptual imbalances, the individual chapters of *People on the Move* provide the reader with well-written accounts of the wartime history of forced migrations in central Europe, and offer food for thought regarding their long-term mass psychological effects on the region's societies. Also, given that most overviews of the history of ethnic cleansing lack access to all the relevant primary and secondary sources due to the author's usually limited language capacity, *People on the Move* profits from the multilingualism of its team of authors. The book's individual chapters are based on literature in a wide range of languages; their footnotes direct students of forced migration to literature published in languages other than just the 'usual suspects'. Thus the book provides a very helpful, up-to-date starting point for further research on the history of ethnic cleansing in twentieth-century central and eastern Europe.

In his dissertation, published under the title *A Clean Sweep? The Politics of Ethnic Cleansing in Western Poland, 1945–1960*, David Curp examines the role that the expulsion of the Germans played for the political transformation of post-war Poland. He does so through the lens of Poznania (Wielkopolska), a region in western Poland that was a classic German–Polish borderland until 1945, the hotbed of the influential chauvinist-clerical National Democracy party, and, in Curp's eyes, the 'epicenter of Poland's postwar transformation'. The study is based on rich archival material, mainly government and party-related documents, as well as Polish accounts written by the participants in the popular memoir competitions in post-war Poland. While Curp had access to both the English and Polish literature, he could only consult German primary and secondary sources to the degree that translations exist.

The book offers at the same time both more and less than a history of ethnic cleansing in post-war Poland. Only a small part of the book deals with the forced population movements, during which millions of Germans had to leave the territory of post-war Poland to be replaced by millions of Polish settlers from all parts of pre-war Poland. The greater part examines the establishment of communist rule from the end of the war until the second half of the 1950s. Curp's main concern is the role of popular support for and popular resistance against communist rule. Unlike Padraic Kenney, whose study on post-war Poland argued that the communist project found considerable support among workers hoping for upward social mobility,[3] Curp

[3] Padraic Kenney, *Rebuilding Poland: Workers and Communists 1945–50* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

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is convinced that the considerable solidarity between the post-war regime and the people rested on their complicity in the project of 'ethnic cleansing'. After being brought to power with the help of the Soviet Union, Poland's communists closed ranks with the country's nationalists and carried out a national rather than a socialist revolution. By expelling the millions of Germans who found themselves on Polish territory after the war, redistributing their property and erasing the traces of their settlement, the communist government both satisfied the desire for revenge after the horrors of German occupation and realised the nationalist project of an ethnically homogeneous Poland. When the government departed from this nationalist course at the end of the 1940s, popular support for the communists declined significantly. Only the return to a national road to socialism following the end of Stalinism in 1956 brought people and regime together again. Their bond lasted as long as the latter could uphold the belief in a continuing German threat.

Curp's argument could have been even more convincing had he developed it further and backed it up with additional evidence. Instead, he explores a number of side issues that are connected only remotely to the book's main theme. Also, an important discussion that is missing is the degree to which his findings, which are based on sources from one region in Poland, allow conclusions to be drawn about the country at large. Utilising the extensive new research on Polish history published in German would have helped to back up his thesis and paint a more complex picture.[4] Nevertheless, *A Clean Sweep?* is an important, thought-provoking contribution to the study of both Polish history and ethnic cleansing, and it significantly expands the literature on this topic available in English.

Post-war Czechoslovakia is the other main country involved in the expulsion of the Germans from east central Europe, which constituted the largest forced migration in history. With the publication of his dissertation under the title *National Cleansing: Retribution against Nazi Collaborators in Postwar Czechoslovakia*, Benjamin Frommer offers a truly excellent study on the post-war history of this central European state. The expulsion of the Sudeten Germans is not the focus of the book. Instead, the book deals with the Czech attempts to prosecute the country's Nazi collaborators – both Czech and German – in the territory that constitutes today the Czech Republic. However, Frommer dedicated one of the book's eight chapters to the 'wild retributions' against the country's Germans immediately after the war, and another one to their forced 'transfer' to Germany.

[4] For example, Michael G. Esch, *'Gesunde Verhältnisse': Deutsche und polnische Bevölkerungspolitik in Ostmitteleuropa 1939–1950* (Marburg: Herder-Institut, 1998); Andreas R. Hofmann, *Die Nachkriegszeit in Schlesien: Gesellschafts- und Bevölkerungspolitik in den polnischen Siedlungsgebieten 1945–1948* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2000); Peter Oliver Loew, *Danzig und seine Vergangenheit 1793–1997: Die Geschichtskultur einer Stadt zwischen Deutschland und Polen* (Osnabrück: fibre, 2003); Andreas Kossert, *Preußen, Deutsche oder Polen? Die Masuren im Spannungsfeld des ethnischen Nationalismus 1870–1956* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2001); Markus Krzoska, *Für ein Polen an Oder und Ostsee: Zygmunt Wojciechowski (1900–1955) als Historiker und Publizist* (Osnabrück: fibre, 2003); Katarzyna Stoklosa, *Grenzstädte in Ostmitteleuropa: Guben und Gubin 1945 bis 1995* (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschaftsverlag, 2003); Philipp Ther, *Deutsche und polnische Vertriebene: Gesellschaft und Vertriebenenpolitik in der SBZ/DDR und in Polen 1945–1956* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998); Gregor Thum, *Die fremde Stadt: Breslau 1945* (Berlin: Siedler, 2003); Matthias Weber, ed., *Deutschlands Osten – Polens Westen: Vergleichende Studien zur geschichtlichen Landeskunde* (Frankfurt a.M.: Lang, 2001).

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On the basis of Czech archival sources and the country's daily press, Frommer develops a multifaceted picture that leaves no doubts regarding the problematic aspects of the Czech retribution process. Nevertheless, the Czechs also deserve credit, according to Frommer. Unlike other European societies, the Czech society immediately sought comprehensive retribution against the misconduct and crimes committed during the war by Germans and their collaborators, including ethnic Czechs. The government and the courts faced enormous difficulties in taking legal action against a new sort of crime that required first the development of a suitable juridical basis and procedure. The early phase was characterised by a number of problematic political decisions and a thirst for revenge that interfered with the ideal of an unprejudiced legal prosecution. Over time, however, the courts proved increasingly successful in resisting political pressure and defending juridical standards.

Frommer attributes a good deal of the responsibility for the violent excesses and shortcomings of the retribution process to the government of Edvard Beneš, who served as the country's president from 1935 to 1948 (including his tenure as the president of the government-in-exile). Frommer demonstrates, for instance, that Czechoslovakia's government-in-exile paved the way during the war for the excesses of violence in 1945, by promising terrible revenge against the Germans. Thus 'wild redistribution was not simply an organic explosion of antipathy; it was consciously desired, planned, and executed by Czech leaders'. The government encouraged vigilantism and did little to stop the terror of the 'revolutionary guards' and the spread of lynch law against real and pretended collaborators during the weeks and months immediately following the war. The post-war government, and in particular Beneš himself, were responsible for forcing the 'People's Courts' to execute death penalties within only three hours. In these cases, the law did grant the right of appeal. Even though the number of death penalties imposed – about 700 – was not excessive when compared with other countries at that time in a similar situation, numerous judicial errors with deadly consequences were unavoidable. In its desire to terminate the presence of Germans in Bohemia once and for all, the government even declared sexual liaisons between Czechs and Germans punishable offences, thus introducing a form of legal segregation that, according to Frommer, bore similarities to the Nuremberg Laws. In the end, the courts evolved into a force of moderation. Against the backdrop of a government that was willing to abuse the retribution as a weapon against political opponents, the courts proved to be the institutions most committed to the rule of law and the principles of democracy.

In the very instructive chapter on the relationship between retribution and forced migration, Frommer points out the paradox of the expulsion of the Germans: the government tried to justify the forced migration as a way of punishing Nazi crimes and the alleged treachery of the Sudeten Germans. In fact, however, the deportation of all Germans made a comprehensive legal retribution impossible. Save for prominent war criminals and those convicted immediately after the war, many of the German suspects, and even some of those who were already convicted, escaped legal action by being pushed out of the country. Since the government decided to punish the country's German inhabitants collectively instead of individually, individual guilt was

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often not prosecuted. On the other hand, being German automatically resulted in expropriation and expulsion, and, in many cases, also in mistreatment and murder.

Although some might not agree with Frommer's positive assessment of the Czech retribution process, his well-written and thoroughly researched book makes a very convincing case for a differentiated view on the intricacies of Czechoslovakia's post-war policies. Even though ethnic cleansing is not the focus of the book, Frommer's study sheds light on that fact that retribution is a significant and yet under-researched aspect of the history of central Europe's forced migrations after 1945.

The books reviewed here do not provide us with fully satisfying conclusions regarding the history of ethnic cleansing. On the contrary, they make it clear that too little is known about the complex political and mass psychological mechanisms that led to forced migrations, about the interplay between governments and populations, the role of imperialist ambitions and the radicalising impact of war, or about the interconnections between ethnic and social conflict. Given that the Soviet Union and east central Europe's socialist governments played a key role in the continent's ethnic cleansing in the twentieth century, we should be careful not to overestimate the significance of radical nationalism and ethnic conflict when it comes to the history of forced population movements. In many cases, expulsion and deportation went hand-in-hand with modernising projects that were carried out through land reforms and the redistribution of property. In these cases, governments were willing to exploit ethnic conflicts in order to meet socio-economic goals which otherwise would have been harder to reach. Whereas it is relatively easy to assess the government's role in these processes, the precise role of popular support is much harder to determine. But it seems as though the prospect of personal profit, be it in the form of material gains or of social and professional advancement, contributed to the widespread societal support without which the expulsion of entire populations would have been much more difficult to carry out.

There is a constant demand for historical overviews on topics of public interest such as ethnic cleansing. However, as evidenced by the books reviewed here, we first need a critical mass of unbiased and methodologically sophisticated studies on the various cases and aspects of ethnic cleansing before analytically satisfying overviews can be written.

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