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# Forgotten Victims or Beneficiaries of Plunder and Genocide? The Mass Resettlement of Ethnic Germans «heim ins Reich»

by *Rainer Schulze*

The organized resettlement of ethnic Germans, or more precisely, of foreign nationals of German stock[1], from their traditional homelands in Eastern Europe to Greater Germany following agreements in 1939-1941 between the German government and the countries where those ethnic Germans lived is a subject which has not found much attention by historians. There are only a few monographs dealing with this mass relocation, and in surveys of the history of the Third Reich it is either not mentioned at all or at most dealt with in a couple of sentences. Even the recent and highly acclaimed overview by Michael Burleigh is no exception[2]. This is even more surprising

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[1] *Auslandsdeutsche*. The Nazis gave it a racial overtone and referred to them as *Volksdeutsche*, in contrast to those Germans who lived within the Reich, the *Reichsdeutsche*. See also D.L. BERGEN, *The Nazi Concept of 'Volksdeutsche' and the Exacerbation of Anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe, 1939-1945*, in «Journal of Contemporary History», 29, 1994, pp. 569-582.

[2] M. BURLEIGH, *The Third Reich: A New History*, London 2000, pp. 578-581, but in his notes (pp. 887-888) Burleigh does refer to some of the few existing contributions to this topic: R.L. KOEHL, *RKFDV. German Resettlement and Population Policy 1939-1945. A History of the Reich Commission for the Strengthening of Germandom*, Cambridge MA 1957; C.R. BROWNING, *Nazi Resettlement Policy and the Search for a Solution to the Jewish Question, 1939-1941*, in C.R. BROWNING, *The Paths to Genocide: Essays on Launching the Final Solution*, Cambridge 1992, pp. 3-27; G. ALY, *«Endlösung». Völkerverschiebung und der Mord an den europäischen Juden*, Frankfurt a.M. 1995[2] (English translation: *'Final Solution': Nazi Population Policy and the Murder of the European Jews*, London 1999).

as the relocation of ethnic Germans «home to the Reich» (*heim ins Reich*) was part of the overall Nazi policy of «ethnic redistribution» (*völkische Flurbereinigung*) and of their vision of an ethnically homogenous and purified Europe, and needs to be discussed within this wider context[3]. At the same time, the organized resettlement of ethnic Germans was also one of the many forced population transfers in the twentieth century and needs to be seen in this context as well[4].

## I.

In the inter-war years, some 10 million ethnic Germans lived in Europe outside the borders of Germany, the vast majority of them in the newly established states in Central and Eastern Europe. This was no new phenomenon, however – quite the contrary: German populations had migrated into all parts of Central and Eastern Europe in successive waves since the middle ages[5]. Much of this population movement was driven by economic motives, and often the settlers were invited by the rulers of the then existing states. The number of German settlers in Eastern and Southeastern Europe grew considerably when the Habsburg Empire expanded into this part of Europe, and German populations were encouraged and sometimes even actively recruited by the Habsburg rulers to move into the newly acquired territories, such as the Banat (since the early eighteenth century), and Bukovina, Galicia and Voyvodina (since the late eighteenth century), both for developing still underdeveloped areas and for strengthening their defense.

In the course of the migration process, 'pure' German settlers' colonies were set up, but ethnic Germans also established themselves with non-German populations in 'mixed' villages and towns, often including a large number of Jews. Some tried to uphold their ethnic identity and preserve their language, customs and traditions, while others assimilated over the genera-

[3] G. ALY, *«Endlösung», passim*; C.R. BROWNING, *Nazi Resettlement Policy*, pp. 10-15.

[4] E.M. KULISCHER, *The Displacement of Population in Europe*, Montreal 1943, pp. 7-27; J.B. SCHECHTMAN, *European Population Transfers 1939-1945* (Studies of the Institute of World Affairs, 3), New York 1946, pp. 27-363; E.M. KULISCHER, *Europe on the Move: War and Population Changes, 1917-47*, New York 1948, pp. 255-257; M. MARRUS, *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century*, New York - Oxford 1985, pp. 219-227.

[5] For the following, see K.J. BADE (ed.), *Deutsche im Ausland. Fremde in Deutschland. Migration in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, München 1992, pp. 29-134.

tions, marrying members of other ethnic groups, changing their religion, adapting their ways and manners and becoming almost indistinguishable from their non-German neighbors. Most ethnic German communities founded their own churches, schools, co-operative banks, newspapers, sports clubs, social associations, and cultural organizations. However, over many generations most viewed themselves first of all as subjects of the rulers in whose states they lived, and only then, if at all, as members of a wider «German nation».

From modest beginnings, many German settlers prospered and acquired a standard of living that was often higher than that of people of other ethnic groups around them. Many had been awarded special privileges by the rulers, and enjoyed a social and legal status that set them apart. This in turn led to a certain pride in their abilities and achievements, and from this it was often only a small step to feelings of economic and cultural superiority and to perceiving themselves as the «bearers of culture» (*Kulturträger*), especially when they began to feel marginalized and discriminated against because of their ethnic character. With the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century, the awareness and importance of ethnicity, or nationality (or *Volk*) grew in Central and Eastern Europe. It only affected the ethnic Germans in full force after World War I, when, as a consequence of the Paris peace settlements, their generally privileged situation in the territories of the Habsburg and Russian Empires was turned into one of a substantial but often alienated and even hated minority in the new states established in Eastern and Southeastern Europe in the name of national self-determination. Even though the peace settlements included a system of minority protection which was meant to be overseen by the League of Nations, in reality most governments pursued discriminatory policies of some form or another against their ethnic minorities in the inter-war period, especially when their states were hit by economic crisis. The ethnic Germans were often less prepared for this than other minorities, and reacted with bitterness, fear and obstruction to what they regarded as unfair and unjustified treatment or even outright persecution. When the German government, in particular after 1933, stirred up real or perceived grievances, many ethnic Germans felt encouraged to adopt an attitude of non-cooperation with their state authorities and in some instances even of outright disloyalty[6].

[6] For more detail, see A. KOMJATHY - R. STOCKWELL, *German Minorities and the Third Reich: Ethnic Germans of East Central Europe between the Wars*, New York - London 1980.

## II.

For the Nazi regime, the ethnic Germans living beyond the borders of the Reich as fixed by the Treaty of Versailles were an important element in their plans for creating a new European racial order[7]. Already in their first party program, of 24 February 1920, the Nazi party, at that time still called the German Workers' Party, proclaimed: «We demand the union of all Germans in a Greater Germany on the basis of the right of national self-determination»[8], and in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler set out: «One blood demands one Reich»[9].

However, despite all proclamations by the Nazis before they rose to power in Germany to pursue a policy of «ethnic consolidation», once in power their specific policy towards the ethnic Germans abroad was very much determined by the overall foreign policy needs of the moment. While in the mid-1930s some ethnic Germans immigrated to the Reich, mainly because of the increased economic opportunities, the Nazi regime at first did not actively promote a mass resettlement. Instead, it insisted on the right of the ethnic Germans to stay in their ancestral homelands and maintain their ethnic identity, and on the right of the German Reich to strengthen their position and act as their protector whenever and wherever it felt their rights and privileges were infringed upon. This only began to change in 1938, when Germany's conquests beyond the borders of the Versailles settlement led to a change of short-term foreign policy objectives. The Munich settlement included a formal provision for an exchange of populations between the ceded Sudetenland and the remainder of Czechoslovakia, but it was not implemented because it suited Hitler's aims better to retain a German minority in the rump state[10]. More importantly, the need to strengthen the alliance with Fascist Italy made it necessary for the Reich to give in to Mussolini's demand for the eventual removal of the ethnic German population from South Tyrol[11]. But it was only after the successful

[7] For this and the following, see R.L. KOEHL, *RKFDV*, pp. 34-49; V.O. LUMANS, *Himmler's Auxiliaries. The Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle and the German National Minorities of Europe, 1933-1945*, Chapel Hill NC - London 1993, pp. 21-30 and 73-130.

[8] Quoted in J. NOAKES - G. PRIDHAM (eds), *Nazism 1919-1945. A Documentary Reader*, vol. 1: *The Rise to Power 1919-1934*, Exeter 1998, p. 14.

[9] A HITLER, *Mein Kampf*, English translation by R. Manheim, London 1992, p. 3.

[10] R.L. KOEHL, *RKFDV*, pp. 40-41.

[11] Preliminary discussions of a resettlement of the ethnic German population of South Tyrol had begun shortly after the annexation of Austria, but a formal resettlement agreement

invasion and occupation of much of inter-war Poland that this evolved into a methodical policy of mass relocation of ethnic German populations from outside the German sphere of influence as set out in the Hitler-Stalin Pact and the Secret Additional Protocol of 23 August 1939.

In a second secret protocol signed on 28 September 1939, Germany and the Soviet Union agreed, together with the redrawing of their respective spheres of interest in Eastern Europe, on the principle that the ethnic German populations should be resettled from the territories taken over by the Soviet Union to German-controlled territory. In a speech to the Reichstag on 6 October 1939, Hitler officially announced the policy, though in still relatively vague terms. He set out that «the main task is to create a new ethnographic order; i.e., to resettle the nationalities so that in the end, better lines of demarcation exist than is today the case», and explained that this included «the ordering of the entire *Lebensraum* [living space] according to nationalities, i.e., a resolution of those minority issues that affect not only this region, but beyond that, almost all southern and southeastern European states», which according to Hitler were «filled with in part untenable splinters of the German nation»[12]. Only one day later, this was followed up by a Führer decree that instructed the Reichsführer SS, Heinrich Himmler, «to bring back those German citizens and ethnic Germans abroad who are eligible for permanent return to the Reich»[13]. Himmler used the authority «to give such general orders and to take such administrative measures as are necessary» given to him by Hitler to award himself the (additional) title of Reich Commissioner for the Strengthening of Ethnic Germandom (Reichskommissar für die Festigung deutschen Volkstums, RKF) and to set up a new Reich Commission to organize and coordinate this resettlement program[14].

between Italy and Germany was only signed on 21 October 1939, and the final deadline set in this agreement for the completion of the resettlement was 31 December 1942. Altogether c. 200,000 ethnic German South Tyroleans (or just under 90%) opted for resettlement to the Reich, but by the end of 1942, just over 80,000 had actually been resettled. With the fall of Mussolini and the subsequent German occupation of northern Italy in 1943, the resettlement stopped altogether. For more detail, see, for example, C.F. LATOUR, *Südtirol und die Achse Berlin – Rom 1938-1945*, Stuttgart 1962, or K. STUHLPFARRER, *Umsiedlung Südtirol 1939-1940*, 2 vols, Wien - München 1985.

[12] Quoted in G. ALY, *'Final Solution'*, p. 19.

[13] Quoted in R.L. KOEHL, *RKFDV*, pp. 247 (also for the following).

[14] For more detail on the evolution, organization, and functions of the Reich Commission for the Strengthening of Ethnic Germandom (Reichskommissariat für die Festigung

Initially, the population policy focused on and was largely restricted to occupied Poland and, in particular, its western regions that were annexed to the Reich on 8 October 1939 and became the so-called «incorporated eastern territories» (West Prussia, the district of Posen, and parts of the district of Łodz). This was the region where most of the ethnic Germans from outside the German sphere of influence were to be settled. However, before this could be done, the region had to be cleared of some 8 million Polish inhabitants, half a million of whom were Jewish.

The following discussion will focus on the contractually arranged resettlements of ethnic Germans from two areas: (a) the two Baltic states, Latvia and Estonia, and (b) the regions in Southeastern Europe, which were taken over by the Soviet Union following the Hitler-Stalin Pact, mainly Galicia, Bessarabia, and northern Bukovina. This means that neither South Tyrol, nor any areas in Yugoslavia or Hungary where ethnic Germans had settled, will be considered here, and with reference to Rumania, only the transfers from southern Bukovina and the Dobruja will be dealt with, as they are connected with the German-Soviet population exchanges. The dominant perspective will be that of the ethnic Germans who were subjected to the relocation, and the focus will be on the impact which the resettlement had on them, rather than on the political planning and administrative implementation of these programs. Therefore, the much disputed question of the exact connection between the resettlement of the ethnic Germans and the murder of the European Jews, or the systematic killing of psychiatric patients in West Prussian and Pomeranian asylums, will not be entered into here[15].

## III.

The Baltic Germans («Baltendeutsche»), as the Nazis called them – up till the 1930s they had usually referred to themselves as German Balts («Deutschbalten») – were the first group of ethnic Germans which was

deutschen Volkstums, RKFDV), see R.L. KOEHL, *RKFDV*, pp. 49-70; text of Himmler's order pp. 249-250. See also V.O. LUMANS, *Himmler's Auxiliaries*, pp. 131-137; J.B. SCHECHTMAN, *European Population Transfers*, pp. 272-280.

[15] For contrasting views, see for example, G. ALY, *«Endlösung», passim*; C.R. BROWNING, *Nazi Resettlement Policy*, especially pp. 10-15; V. RIESS, *Die Anfänge der Vernichtung «lebensunwerten Lebens» in den Reichsgauen Danzig-Westpreußen und Wartheland 1939/40*, Frankfurt a.M. 1995, especially pp. 29-38.

resettled into the German Reich[16]. Hitler had been informed by Stalin about his intentions to assert his influence in Estonia and Latvia on 25 September 1939, and discussions about the evacuation of ethnic Germans from these two Baltic states were already well advanced at the time of Hitler's Reichstag speech of 6 October. It seems that initially it was intended to resettle only those ethnic Germans who were considered to be particularly at risk after a Soviet take-over, but by late September it was clear that all ethnic Germans were to be included in the resettlement program. On 5 October 1939, the German legations in Tallinn and Riga were instructed by the German Foreign Office to inform the Estonian and Latvian governments that the ethnic German population of these two states had been put under the special protection of the German Reich. On the morning of 7 October 1939, the first German transport ships arrived to evacuate ethnic Germans to the Reich, accompanied by warships, but both Baltic governments insisted on a proper contractual agreement before they would agree to let their German citizens go. The resettlement agreement with Estonia was concluded on 15 October (in the form of a short protocol), and with Latvia on 30 October (in the form of a more formal treaty)[17].

The provisions of the resettlement agreements allowed the ethnic Germans to take movable property with them, but there were a number of restrictions: they could take most of their household goods and the tools of their trade, but only a limited amount of jewellery and cash. Compensation for all property left behind would be given either in equivalent property or in a money payment after resettlement. German schools in the two Baltic states closed down in October 1939, as did the German churches. German newspapers ceased publication; the last one to shut down was the oldest of the Baltic German papers, the «Revalsche Zeitung» in Estonia, with the final issue published on 31 May 1940. All German organizations and associations, and all German industrial firms and businesses were wound up. Their property had to be handed over to German trustee companies

[16] For more detail on this and the following, see J. VON HEHN, *Die Umsiedlung der baltischen Deutschen – das letzte Kapitel baltisch-deutscher Geschichte*, Marburg a.d.L. 1982; M. GARLEFF, *Die Deutschbalten als nationale Minderheit in den unabhängigen Staaten Estland und Lettland*, in G. VON PISTOHLKORS (ed.), *Baltische Länder* (Deutsche Geschichte im Osten Europas), Berlin 1994, pp. 534-547; W. SCHLAU, *Eine Einführung in die Wanderungsgeschichte der baltischen Deutschen*, in W. SCHLAU (ed.), *Sozialgeschichte der baltischen Deutschen*, Köln 2000², pp. 22-30; J.B. SCHECHTMAN, *European Population Transfers*, pp. 82-130 and 317-333.

[17] For more detail on these treaties, see J. VON HEHN, *Die Umsiedlung der baltischen Deutschen*, pp. 109-116.

(Deutsche Treuhand-Verwaltung, DT, in Estonia and Umsiedlungs-Treuhand-Aktien-Gesellschaft, UTAG, in Latvia), which were subsidiaries of the German Resettlement Trusteeship Company (Deutsche Umsiedlungstreuhandgesellschaft mbh, DUT) in Berlin. They were given the task of liquidating it. The final balance was to be paid by the Baltic states in trade.

In the Baltic states, it was the Baltic German community itself, through their minority organizations, who directed the transfer to Germany. All the German government had to do – after the conclusion of the resettlement agreements – was to provide the means of transport to the Reich, which was almost exclusively by ship. The first transport of ethnic Germans left Estonia only three days after the signing of the resettlement protocol, on 18 October 1939, and in Latvia the transports *heim ins Reich* began on 7 November. In both Baltic states, the main resettlement program was completed by the end of 1939, with only a few smaller transports still leaving Estonia in early 1940. Altogether, c. 13,000 people from Estonia and close to 50,000 people from Latvia were transported to the Reich. Officially, the decision to move to the Reich was totally voluntary, but in practice there was strong pressure to leave the two Baltic states from the leaders of the minority organizations. Most of the ethnic Germans who did stay behind were relocated to Germany in a second program in early 1941, following a resettlement agreement with the Soviet Union, which had now occupied the Baltic states[18]. They were classified as «refugees» rather than receiving the status of «resettlers», and were settled in the *Altreich*, i.e. within the borders fixed by the Treaty of Versailles. Altogether, almost 80,000 people were resettled from the two Baltic states between 1939 and 1941, and the end result was that some 95% of the ethnic German population of Estonia and Latvia had left their homelands.

The process was similar in the territories immediately annexed by the Soviet Union after the Hitler-Stalin Pact; however here, as in all the following resettlement programs, the actual implementation was in the hands of German government agencies. On 3 November 1939, the German Reich and the Soviet Union concluded an agreement on the resettlement of ethnic Germans living in those areas that had become part of the new Polish state in 1918-20 and which were now taken over by the Soviet Union, i.e. the Bialystok, or Narev area, Volhynia and (eastern) Galicia, which now

[18] The German-Soviet resettlement treaty of 10 January 1941 also covered Lithuania, from where c. 50,000 people were repatriated with serious doubts raised as to whether all of them were really ethnic Germans. For more detail, see J. VON HEHN, *Die Umsiedlung der baltischen Deutschen*, pp. 180-191; J.B. SCHECHTMAN, *European Population Transfers*, pp. 131-144.

became western Bielorussia (Belarus) and western Ukraine[19]. Some parts of (eastern) Galicia had actually been reached in mid-September 1939 by German troops first, and they were widely welcomed as liberators from Polish harassment and maltreatment – not only by ethnic Germans, but by many Ukrainians as well, and even by some Jews. However, the German troops withdrew only a few days later to the line that had been agreed with the USSR in the pact of 23 August, and Soviet troops took their place. A number of ethnic Germans, especially younger men, decided to join the German troops as they retreated, rather than come under Soviet rule.

In contrast to the earlier agreements with the Baltic states, the Soviet-German agreement provided for an actual population exchange, as Ukrainians, Bielorussians, Russians, and Ruthenians in German-occupied areas were invited to opt for a transfer to Soviet-controlled territory[20]. Open propaganda for the resettlement was prohibited, and only official notices announcing the resettlement were allowed. Registration and transfer on both sides were regulated and overseen by mixed German-Soviet commissions. In early December 1939, the screening of those ethnic Germans who wanted to resettle to Germany began. Each item of property that was left behind was registered and its value assessed according to the existing rates by official assessors who had been trained by the DUT, as the German trustee administration itself was not allowed to work in Soviet-occupied territories. The property taken over by the Soviet Union was to be paid for by oil, other raw materials, and food.

The transfer was carried out partly by lorries, partly by rail, partly by ship (up the Danube river) and partly by horse and cart, the latter usually organized in treks village by village. Those ethnic Germans who made the journey to Germany by horse and cart were allowed to take with them as much of their household belongings as the cart would hold; for all others the amount of luggage was fixed at approximately 50 kilograms per head, and the content was often meticulously inspected by Soviet officials for prohibited articles. The transfer was concluded in late January 1940 and

[19] For more detail on this and the following, see I. RÖSKAU-RYDEL, *Galizien*, in I. RÖSKAU-RYDEL (ed.), *Galizien* (Deutsche Geschichte im Osten Europas), Berlin 1999, pp. 191-212; J.B. SCHECHTMAN, *European Population Transfers*, pp. 145-173.

[20] According to Lumans and Aly, only c. 11,000 of the 750,000 Ukrainians in the General Government decided to take up this option; V.O. LUMANS, *Himmler's Auxiliaries*, p. 164, G. ALY, *'Final Solution'*, p. 21, n. 22. Kulischer estimates that between 30,000 and 40,000 Biolorussians and Ukrainians were moved to Soviet-occupied territory under this agreement; E.M. KULISCHER, *The Displacement of Population*, p. 15.

comprised altogether almost 130,000 people: c. 65,000 from Volhynia, 55,000 from Galicia and just over 8,000 from the Bialystok district.

After the Soviet Union took over Bessarabia and northern Bukovina from Rumania on 28 June 1940, the ethnic Germans who lived in these regions needed to be resettled as well[21]. On 5 September 1940, the two governments agreed upon their transfer to the German Reich. This agreement was very similar to the one for Galicia and Volhynia; if anything, it was even more precise as to which people were eligible for resettlement, the amount of personal property they were allowed to take with them, the process of evaluation of German property left behind, and the compensation procedures. It was, however, just a unilateral transfer of ethnic Germans to Germany, and no exchange of populations was involved. Registration, screening, and actual resettlement began in mid-September, and the transfer was completed by late October. Altogether 93,500 people from Bessarabia and c. 43,000 people from northern Bukovina were brought *heim ins Reich*.

On 22 October 1940, before the resettlement of the ethnic Germans from Bessarabia and northern Bukovina had been completed, the German Reich concluded an agreement with the Rumanian government to resettle the ethnic German population from southern Bukovina and the Dobruja[22]. As these territories had remained part of the Kingdom of Rumania, there was no Soviet pressure on these populations; indeed, they enjoyed a privileged position. This resettlement, therefore, seems to have been motivated more by pressure from the ethnic Germans themselves, and there are a number of reasons which made them eager to leave Rumania: Cernauti (Czernowitz), the capital of Bukovina, was in the northern part which had been annexed by the Soviet Union, and this meant that the Bukovinian Germans in Rumania had lost their economic and political-cultural center. The southern Dobruja was about to be ceded to Bulgaria. There was also Hitler's aim to remove untenable «splinters of Germandom», as set out in his Reichstag

[21] For more detail on this and the following, see T. SCHIEDER (ed.), *The Fate of the Germans in Rumania. A Selection and Translation from Dokumentation der Vertreibung der Deutschen aus Ost-Mitteleuropa Band 3*, published by the Federal Ministry for Expellees, Refugees, and War Victims, Göttingen 1961, pp. 44-55; D. JACHOMOWSKI, *Umsiedlung der Bessarabien-, Bukowina- und Dobrudschadeutschen. Von der Volksgruppe in Rumänien zur Siedlungsbrücke an der Reichsgrenze*, München 1984; E. TURCZYNSKI, *Die Bukowina*, in I. RÖSKAU-RYDEL (ed.), *Galizien* (Deutsche Geschichte im Osten Europas), Berlin 1999, pp. 319-323; J.B. SCHECHTMAN, *European Population Transfers*, pp. 174-205.

[22] D. JACHOMOWSKI, *Umsiedlung der Bessarabien-, Bukowina- und Dobrudschadeutschen*; J.B. SCHECHTMAN, *European Population Transfers*, pp. 225-237.

speech a year earlier. Lumans suggests yet another motive for the transfer: the two regions' relative poverty and backwardness were something of an embarrassment to the Reich, as they did not project the desired image of German superiority[23]. The German government might have also felt that it needed to give Rumania some relief to accommodate the influx of ethnic Rumanian resettlers/refugees into their country following the recent border changes with Hungary. The transfer of the ethnic Germans went on until well into 1941 and covered c. 67,000 people altogether, 52,000 from southern Bukovina and 15,000 from the (northern) Dobruja[24].

## IV.

How did those affected by the resettlement, the 'ordinary' ethnic Germans, experience the event, which changed the course of their lives so dramatically? Obviously, this is difficult to assess. In Nazi propaganda, the resettlement was presented as the fulfilment of the century-old desires of the ethnic German communities to be repatriated to Germany and be re-united with the German *Volksgemeinschaft*, and at the same time as an act of «national loyalty» which everyone was keen to follow voluntarily. Slogans such as «We return joyously ...» («Wir kommen glücklich heim ...») or «The Führer called, and all returned!» («Der Führer rief, und alle, alle kamen!»), served to underline this[25] What we have to rely on, therefore, are (some) private sources from the actual period of resettlement, which have survived, such as letters and diaries, and testimonies collected after the war[26].

[23] V.O. LUMANS, *Himmler's Auxiliaries*, p. 174.

[24] There were only relatively few ethnic Germans living in the southern districts of the Dobruja which were ceded to Bulgaria; see T. SCHIEDER (ed.), *The Fate of the Germans in Rumania*, p. 50.

[25] See, for example, H. BOSSE, *Der Führer ruft. Erlebnisberichte aus den Tagen der großen Umsiedlung im Osten*, Berlin 1941.

[26] The most important collection of individual testimonies to document forced resettlement, flight, and expulsion of German populations from their traditional homelands in Central, Eastern and Southeastern Europe during and after the Second World War is the one compiled and verified by a large research project commissioned in 1951 by the West German Federal Ministry for Refugees, Evacuees, and War Victims, and chaired and coordinated by the historian Theodor Schieder. This project continued and extended the collection of materials which had been started by various organizations immediately after the end of the war. Part of the collected material was published: BUNDESMINISTERIUM FÜR VERTRIEBENE, FLÜCHTLINGE UND KRIEGSGESCHÄDIGTE (hereafter: BVFK) (ed.), *Dokumentation der Vertreibung der Deutschen aus Ost-Mitteleuropa*, 9 vols, Bonn 1953-1962, reprint (without

Even if treated with the necessary caution, these sources show that for the majority of ethnic Germans in the regions affected the resettlement came as something of a shock. This is particularly true for those who lived in countries, that had not yet been taken over by the Soviet Union at the

the register) München 1984. Of 5 volumes, abbreviated versions were also published in an English translation: T. SCHIEDER (ed.), *Documents on the Expulsion of the Germans from Eastern Central Europe. A Selection and Translation*, Bonn 1956-1960. It has recently not only been pointed out that the collection of this material was politically motivated and intended, by the German government, to support attempts to question the Oder Neisse line as the final German-Polish border, to swing in particular American public opinion behind such a revisionist foreign policy, to establish that Germans, too, were victims of the Second World War, and generally to use the material as evidence at the still hoped-for peace conference, but also that, at least at the beginning, there was a striking continuity with historical research during the Nazi period in terms of general approach, underlying mentality, and compliance with political aims. Some of the leading historians involved in this project had been active in the field of *Ostforschung* (Eastern studies), which had been highly politicized and served as an instrument to justify the annexationist and racial Nazi foreign policy in the East. In particular Theodor Schieder has been strongly criticized, not least because, in October 1939, he wrote a secret memorandum in which he had called for the deportation of hundreds of thousands of Poles from the western territories of inter-war Poland which had just been annexed to the Reich, and of the Jewish population from the territory of the General Government. However, the quality of the personal testimonies collected in the post-war project and of the documentation has not even been questioned by the most vociferous critics of the role of Schieder and fellow historians during the Nazi period. On the contrary, Beer goes to quite some length to highlight the scholarly value and the methodologically innovative and rigorous character of the *Dokumentation der Vertreibung*. For more detail on this debate, see A. EBBINGHAUS - K.H. ROTH, *Vorläufer des «Generalplans Ost». Eine Dokumentation über Theodor Schieders Polendenkschrift vom 7. Oktober 1939*, in «1999. Zeitschrift für Sozialgeschichte des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts», 7, 1992, 1, pp. 62-94; G. ALY, *«Daß uns Blut zu Gold werde». Theodor Schieder, Propagandist des Dritten Reiches*, in «Menora. Jahrbuch für deutsch-jüdische Geschichte», 9, 1998, pp. 13-27; M. BEER, *Im Spannungsfeld von Politik und Zeitgeschichte. Das Großforschungsprojekt «Dokumentation der Vertreibung der Deutschen aus Ost-Mitteleuropa»*, in «Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte», 46, 1998, pp. 345-389; M. BEER, *Die Dokumentation der Vertreibung der Deutschen aus Ost-Mitteleuropa. Hintergründe – Entstehung – Wirkung*, in «Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht», 50, 1999, pp. 99-117, as well as W. SCHULZE - O.G. OEXLE (eds), *Deutsche Historiker im Nationalsozialismus*, Frankfurt a.M. 1999, especially pp. 163-357. See also M. BROSZAT, *Massendokumentation als Methode zeitgeschichtlicher Forschung*, in «Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte», 2, 1954, pp. 202-213. What needs to be born in mind, of course, is the fact that these testimonies document individual experiences and memories and were, in many cases, recorded long after the events which they describe. Therefore, the same degree of caution has to be applied as with any oral history sources. Much of what is described in the testimonies collected in the 1950s is very similar to what was put forward in testimonies collected at a much later date and in a completely different context, such as those which I collected recently during my research in Landkreis Celle, a rural district in northwest Germany: «Collection Rainer Schulze», University of Essex (hereafter: Coll. RS).

time of evacuation, such as the Baltic states, or southern Bukovina and the Dobruja. Many of these ethnic Germans had not been particularly happy with their situation in the inter-war years, and had signed petitions to the German government to intervene in cases of perceived or real discrimination and harassment to improve their situation. In 1939, the Baltic German leadership had even considered an evacuation of their women and children. However, the majority had never seriously contemplated leaving their ancestral homelands permanently. If anything, they had expected or hoped for the annexation of their homelands to a Greater German Reich at some time in the future, especially after the destruction of Czechoslovakia in March 1939. When they were summoned to leave for the Reich, most shared the feeling which one woman expressed in a private letter: «Only a few printed words – and they signify the most profound change of our lives and of our history»[27].

However, even though for most it was not what Nazi propaganda tried to present, a departure characterized predominantly by joy and eager anticipation, the order to resettle was generally followed in great unanimity and discipline. Only very few opposed the resettlement and decided not to follow the Führer's summons. Apart from active opponents of the Nazi regime[28], and those who were married to Jews, the majority of those who opted to stay behind in their old homelands were old and infirm.

For most ethnic Germans, several factors came together in their decision to leave their homes – where their families had often lived for generations – for the uncertainty of resettlement. The majority of ethnic Germans was strongly anti-communist. Many had experienced bolshevism at some point and had taken side against the Bolshevics in the turmoil and upheaval after the First World War. There were fears of an eventual Soviet take-over even in those areas that were still nominally independent, and most were very anxious about what would happen to them in such an event. They expected violence, economic hardship, political discrimination, and deportations to the Soviet Union. The fact that many non-Germans tried to be included in the transfer of populations as well in order to escape

[27] Quoted in M. GARLEFF, *Die Deutschbalten als nationale Minderheit*, p. 534.

[28] One of them was the journalist and politician Paul Schiemann (1876-1944), 1919-1933 editor-in-chief of the respected «Rigasche Rundschau», member of the constituent assembly and the Latvian parliament (I.-IV. Saeima) and leader of the German faction. Jürgen von Hehn calls him «the most important representative of the Baltic Germandom between the wars»; J. VON HEHN, *Umsiedlung der baltischen Deutschen*, p. 6. See also M. GARLEFF, *Die Deutschbalten als nationale Minderheit*, p. 542.

from a communist take-over underlines the importance of the fear of impending danger. The Nazis skillfully used this, and in addition resorted to intimidation, often bordering on blackmail, when they threatened, for example, to hand over to the state authorities lists of those ethnic Germans who had signed petitions to the Führer to intervene, or hinted that for those who decided to stay, the minority rights that still existed would be revoked, with no further protection from the Reich forthcoming.

In those regions that were already occupied by the Soviets – in particular if they had already begun to introduce draconic forms of taxation, property confiscation, and deportations – the overall majority of ethnic Germans needed little further incentive to follow the summons of the Führer. «At no place and at no time were there any debates among the ethnic Germans whether they wanted to resettle or not», reported a German member of the resettlement commission in Bessarabia later, but he also added, «they made up their minds only with a heavy heart»[29]. This led some observers to comment that it was not so much Hitler but much more Stalin who was the motivating force in the decision for resettlement, and that the slogan «Hitler called, and all came» should be rephrased as «Stalin came, and all ran»[30].

In addition, there were not only promises of total reinstatement in status and property, but even actual economic gains and political promotion were offered, and generally a better and easier life after resettlement. This fell on fertile ground after years when ethnic Germans felt (rightly or wrongly) increasingly marginalized. Finally, there was the belief that the resettlement was an order that had to be followed, an impression that was deliberately created by the Nazis. A prominent German Balt later commented:

«Those who feel primarily committed to the Party, say: the Führer ordered it (declaration by E. Kroeger); those primarily committed to ethnic *(völkisch)* considerations say: the people *(Volk)* ordered it (summons of the leaders of the minority organizations); and those primarily committed to religion say: God ordered it (summons of the bishop)»[31].

Arnold Eh., who was born in 1933 in Jekaterinowska in Bessarabia, still remembers the inner turmoil of his parents and grandparents when the resettlement came. Did they want to go?

[29] BVFK (ed.), *Das Schicksal der Deutschen in Rumänien* (Dokumentation der Vertreibung der Deutschen aus Ost-Mitteleuropa, 3), Berlin 1957, Document no. 1, p 7.

[30] See, for example, W. SCHLAU, *Wanderungsgeschichte der baltischen Deutschen*, p. 22, or V.O. LUMANS, *Himmler's Auxiliaries*, pp. 153-154.

[31] Quoted in M. GARLEFF, *Die Deutschbalten als nationale Minderheit*, p. 540. Erhard Kroeger was the leader of the German Baltic Nazi movement in Latvia.

«Actually [an und für sich] no, but then again yes, after we learnt what was planned in the Soviet Union and what would be in store for us, what would happen to us ... So we were rather glad that we got away from there»[32].

Rudolf W. from Gurahumora in northern Bukovina pointed out:

«People were prepared to leave a country which overnight had become foreign, which was not home any more and which could not offer any protection. And you were not a 'Nazi' if you now wanted to get to Germany, to the home of the Germans, where you hoped to be able to feel safe ... No one would have left their home if the events which I described with their compelling consequences had not occurred»[33].

Most testimonies show that there was almost a feeling of inevitability about it all, of fate having struck, and this applied even to the Dobruja, where many locals pleaded with the ethnic Germans not to go. As Nazi propaganda made it appear as if most people were more than eager to go to Germany, those who had second thoughts feared they faced the prospect of being left behind on their own. Otto Sch. from Agemler in the Dobruja, remembers:

«Quite a few tears were shed when we climbed onto the lorries. Everybody said to us: 'Why don't you stay here? Nobody is driving you away!' It could not be helped, however. There had been an agreement between the States that we must go ...

I found it hard at first to have to sell the things, which one had had to work so hard to get, for ridiculous prices, and to have to prepare for the journey. Later on I too began not to care and did not worry myself much more about it. Only my father kept saying: 'Children, we are now going to Germany but I think we are going to our ruin'. Then I comforted him, saying: 'Why, we are not going alone. Everybody from the Dobruja is going too! We shall see what will come of it'»[34].

[32] Coll. RS, 71-1. In order to protect individual identities, the names of ethnic Germans whose testimonies are quoted have been replaced by letters. The letters used here correlate with those used in my earlier publications: R. SCHULZE, *Alte Heimat – neue Heimat – oder heimatlos dazwischen? Zur Frage der regionalen Identität deutscher Flüchtlinge und Vertriebener – Eine Skizze*, in «Nordost-Archiv», NF 6, 1997, pp. 759-787; R. SCHULZE, *Zwischen Heimat und Zuhause? Einige Anmerkungen zu einer Diskussion, die noch lange nicht beendet ist*, in R. SCHULZE (ed., together with R. ROHDE and R. VOSS), *Zwischen Heimat und Zuhause. Deutsche Flüchtlinge und Vertriebene in (West-)Deutschland 1945-2000*, Osnabrück 2001, pp. 288-299; R. SCHULZE, *The Struggle of Past and Present in Individual Identities – the Case of German Refugees and Expellees from the East*, in D. ROCK - S. WOLFF (eds), *Ethnic German Resettlers in Contemporary Germany*, forthcoming.

[33] BVFK (ed.), *Das Schicksal der Deutschen in Rumänien*, Document no. 2, p. 14. Rudolf W. had earlier described that the Soviet authorities immediately started with a policy of expropriations and deportations in northern Bukovina after they took over the territory.

[34] T. SCHIEDER (ed.), *The Fate of the Germans in Rumania*, Document no. 6, pp. 197- 198.

Underlying all other motives was a general pro-German sentiment which the vast majority of ethnic Germans shared, something which Otto K., a secondary school teacher from Cobadin in the Dobruja, described later as

«... a feeling of fondness of, or even enthusiasm for, the German cause. It was the belief in Germany which was the decisive factor in the debate of the pros and cons of the resettlement; without it, there would not have been the overall readiness to go and leave the old home behind. Our farmers did believe in Germany and the German people. For them, everything that had to do with Germany was beautiful and good and great. Germany, that was after all similar to the sun in the sky»[35].

During the inter-war years, most had felt discriminated against because of their Germanness. In their turn, they had glorified Germany, and fought hard for the preservation of their Germandom. Under the new power structure in Eastern Europe, it seemed to them that resettlement was the only possible way to continue to live in a German environment.

However, most ethnic Germans found that the actual resettlement was by no means as straightforward a process as they had been promised, and after the initial reception, which was often quite emotional, they did not feel particularly welcome any more in the Fatherland which had summoned them to come home. From the beginning, it was intended to settle most of the evacuated ethnic Germans in the newly incorporated eastern territories, the *Reichsgaue* Danzig-Westpreußen and Wartheland, where Germandom was to be strengthened and consolidated in order to make the annexation of this territory permanent, or to use the Nazi term, «to make it German for eternity». However, only the first 20,000 resettlers from the Baltic states in October/November 1939 were brought to these provinces directly[36]. They were housed temporarily in summer hotels, psychiatric hospitals or urban quarters in or near the port cities of Danzig-Westpreußen before promptly being moved on to the new homes allocated to them.

For the overall majority of the more than 500,000 ethnic Germans who were transported from their ancestral homes *heim ins Reich* between 1939

[35] BVFK (ed.), *Das Schicksal der Deutschen in Rumänien*, Document no. 3, p. 20.

[36] In addition, from September to November 1940 c. 30,000 ethnic Germans from the Lublin – Cholm area in the General Government were sent directly to farms in the Warthegau. The Polish owners of these farms had been forced to abandon them only a few weeks or even days before the arrival of the ethnic Germans and were deported to the General Government. See J.B. SCHECHTMAN, *European Population Transfers*, pp. 214- 224.

and 1941[37], the process of resettlement began with internment in camps, often for a very long time, and for many in more than just one. The Liaison Office for Ethnic Germans (Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle, VoMi), which had the responsibility for the care of the resettlers, set up an elaborate system of camps[38]. For those living at some distance from where the official resettlement transports started, the first camp they experienced was a collection point that was still in their original homeland. On their transport to the Reich, many passed so-called transit camps (*Durchgangslager*) – often more than one –, and upon arrival in Germany, they were temporarily housed in assembly camps *(Sammellager)* for a first medical check-up and delousing procedure. From there, they were transferred to one of the more than 1,500 resettlement or observation camps (*Umsiedlerlager, Beobachtungslager*), which were scattered throughout the German Reich, though mainly in the eastern and southern regions. For some ethnic Germans, the final stage of their «camp career» was a distribution camp *(Verteilungslager)* in their destined settlement district before they were finally placed into what was meant to be their new home. In this process, all resettlers were screened: their occupation and skills were evaluated, their political reliability was examined, and their property claims were assessed to determine the level of compensation they were to receive. Most importantly, however, everyone had to undergo health and racial examinations[39].

Very few had a favourable impression of life in those camps. S.K. from Czernowitz in northern Bukovina was first sent to a camp in Lauban in Silesia. Conditions in this camp, a converted children's home that had belonged to the Protestant church, seemed to him generally acceptable, but even he remarked later:

«A camp it really was, as its main features were mass billeting and catering. Lauban with its staff of four or five welfare workers honestly tried to prevent this from being felt too strongly. The food was the kind one gets when one is served in bulk, but, as such, it was good. In the early morning, there was coffee with bread and jam or margarine; at midday, there were large bowls of stew in which meat was to be found, though there was never any second helping; at Vespers, coffee with bread and jam and margarine, and in the evening

[37] This figure includes all resettlement programs between 1939 and 1941, and not just the ones discussed in this paper. See Table below for a broad overview.

[38] For the following, see V.O. LUMANS, *Himmler's Auxiliaries*, pp. 186-189. Lumans compares the system of VoMi camps with that of the concentration and forced labor camps: «VoMi resettlement camps became the *Herrenvolk* counterparts to the concentration and forced-labour camps housing 'subhumans' and 'asocials' of all sorts» (p. 186).

[39] For more detail, see R.L. KOEHL, *RKFDV*, pp. 100-110.

hot and cold dishes on alternate days. Men and women had separate quarters in this camp and married couples were not allowed to live together»[40].

When S.K. was moved to another camp, a former country house near Görlitz, it was quite a different experience:

«The commandant [was] a notorious drunkard ... The jam was in shorter supply, the little bowls of stew had practically no meat, soap was still harder to find. Pocket money had literally to be demanded. Cleanliness was not his hobby, threats in a state of intoxication ... were the order of the day for him»[41].

This was the kind of experience that most settlers had. Otto S. from Agemler in the Dobruja described life in the camp in Gutenstein, Austria:

«[On the very first morning] they began to teach us how to behave in the camp. First, we had to march in formation when we went to meals as the house was some distance from the dining hall. We had to go in and all sit down at the table. When everybody was seated, the commandant of the camp stood up and called out, 'Tuck in!' Then we started to eat. Quite a few of us made wry faces, as the food was none too good, but that did not help at all. When we had finished eating, the commandant stood up and said, 'All stand up! We will give thanks'. Aha! We thought, there is going to be a grace. Then he said, 'All speak in chorus: – We thank our *Führer*!–'. That was our grace. Many felt it go against the grain, but nobody dared say anything, as we had just arrived and we did not yet know how things were in Germany»[42].

Generally, the camps were overcrowded, which meant that often more than one family had to share one small room, or even worse, up to 150 people were put in one hut. There was hardly any privacy, and few comforts. Gottlob E., an estate owner from Bessarabia who ended up in a camp in the Sudetenland, reported that his grandson's first and lasting impression of Germany was: «Hitler hasn't got any nice beds»[43]. Almost everyone seemed to have complaints about the food: it was not enough, it was of poor quality, and no allowances were made for the traditional recipes and ways of cooking which the resettlers had been used to in their homelands. Most mentioned later that corruption among the camp staff was rife. There were complaints that their luggage, which had had to be sent on in advance, had been pilfered, and some of the valuables had gone. «Thus we were cheated everywhere and there was no one there to help us»[44].

[40] T. SCHIEDER (ed.), *The Fate of the Germans in Rumania*, Document no. 6, p. 196.

[41] *Ibidem.*

[42] *Ibidem*, Document no. 7, p. 199 (italicization in original source).

[43] *Ibidem*, Document no. 4, p. 188.

[44] *Ibidem*, Document no. 7, p. 200.

Many of the grievances were no doubt justified, but others were also the result of homesickness on the one hand and anxiety about the future on the other.

A general problem was the forced idleness and ensuing monotony and boredom in the camps, as there was little do. However, in many camps they were not even allowed to lie down and sleep during the day. In order to counter the growing discontent, from spring 1940, the able-bodied men were required to work in local businesses or as farm hands, which at least removed some of the boredom, but which was often seen as demeaning. The feeling of being patronized increased when schools were set up in the camps to teach the resettlers to read and write, with the additional aim of educating them about Nazi political and racial thought.

«Of course there were people among us who had been badly taught and a few who had never been to a German school. All the same, it was not necessary. They kept on doing stupid things to divert us from all that we really wanted»[45].

Many ethnic Germans from Southeastern Europe were very religious, but when they continued to follow their traditions, including holding regular Bible studies, they were often told that this was not allowed in the camps. Quite a few, therefore, formed the impression that they were «not being treated like resettlers but rather like convicts»[46], and comments such as «If we had known beforehand what was in store for us, we would not have come»[47], are made frequently in the testimonies.

In January 1940, in an internal report on the camps for Baltic Germans in Posen, even representatives of the Liaison Office for Ethnic Germans admitted that conditions were often far from satisfactory:

«The people, lacking any more exact knowledge of the overall situation, feel themselves 'at the mercy of' the camp commandant ... The worst discipline is in the Gneisenaustraße camp; the camp commander goes through the rooms armed with a riding crop. The old ladies shudder; the young people are rebellious ... Parkstraße camp (from Riga) – restless. Much unjustified grumbling ... Hochstraße camp – overcrowded. Mood bad. Martinstraße camp: occupants (Riga suburbs) undisciplined and demanding»[48].

Otto S., who was eventually settled in the Łodz region, summed up his experience of the resettlement camps with the words: «I am glad not to

[45] *Ibidem.*

[46] *Ibidem*, p. 199.

[47] BVFK (ed.), *Das Schicksal der Deutschen in Rumänien*, Document no. 3, p. 23.

[48] Quoted in G. Aly, *'Final Solution'*, p. 45.

have to think about it. Nineteen months we spent there and the life was anything but fit for human beings»[49].

The average stay in the camps was nine months, but for quite a few it was much longer than that. The Baltic Germans, who were the first to come, were settled relatively quickly, but for the following waves of ethnic Germans, the placement process took longer and longer because not enough suitable homes and farms could be made available for them. The process slowed down even further and came to a virtual stop in early 1941 when Poland became an area of military preparation and mobilization for the build-up of the Operation Barbarossa. In April 1941, more than 250,000 ethnic Germans were still living in camps[50]. Especially for those who were regarded as racially or politically untrustworthy and therefore unsuitable for resettlement in the incorporated eastern territories, camp internment often became permanent until the end of the Third Reich. Frustration and discontent amongst this group reached alarming levels, and some Bukovinian and Dobruja Germans actually refused naturalization and requested to be allowed to return to their homelands in Rumania[51].

The resettlement meant that many old village communities and sometimes even families were separated. This started already at the time of the actual transfer, as the elderly and sick as well as many women and children were transported by lorry or train whereas the men were often requested to make the journey by horse and cart. After their arrival in Germany, and on receiving German citizenship, many of the young men were immediately called up by either the Wehrmacht or the Labour Service (Reichsarbeitsdienst), which took them away from their families and their old social networks. Robert Sch. is sure that he only got German citizenship so quickly because they wanted him for military service. Skilled workers and craftsmen were sent to work in the essential war industries, and this contributed still further to the scattering of their original village communities all over the Reich. Moreover, attempts by the resettlement offices to allocate ethnic Germans to farms and businesses which were comparable to what they had owned in their old homelands also meant that families from the same village in the East were often not placed into the same village in the Warthegau. While some of this was accidental, or the result of the war necessities, there was also a deliberate design to distribute the settlers individually, or in

[49] T. SCHIEDER (ed.), *The Fate of the Germans in Rumania*, Document no. 7, p. 201.

[50] G. ALY, *'Final Solution'*, p. 149.

[51] *Ibidem*, pp. 207-209.

individual families, throughout the Warthegau and other territories. It was hoped that this would prevent any possible discontent or protest, which would have been facilitated by surviving networks and associations, and contribute to creating a new homogenous Germanic race. As a result, contact amongst many old village communities had already ceased before the end of the war led to even more upheaval.

Resettlers usually did not put up much resistance against this dispersal. They had, in fact, very little choice – they could either accept the placements offered to them by the resettlement offices, or they could reject them, but the latter meant a continued and possibly permanent stay in the overcrowded camps. For most anything was better than that. Arnold Eh. remembers how he and his family moved into a Polish farm in West Prussia:

«There was hardly any machinery, but we were equipped quite well in the years that we were there ... The eastern territories were supported quite well»[52].

Indeed, those who were eventually settled in the Warthegau were looked after and provided for by the Nazi authorities with great diligence and often received more help than the *Reichsdeutsche*. There were some cases of vengeance attacks on German resettlers by those whom they had dispossessed[53], and some resettlers indicated later that they never felt completely at ease, especially if they were settled in areas which had not been part of Germany before 1918. They were conscious of the fact that they had been given farms that belonged to others. Robert Sch. said that his family felt like «guests» on the farm allocated to them in the Wartheland, and when he returned for a first visit in 1985, he introduced himself to the owner with those very words, that he had been a «guest» on their farm during the war years[54]. Nevertheless, most enjoyed a relatively peaceful, quiet and reasonably well provided-for life until late 1944.

When the German army invaded the Soviet Union, there was hope amongst many of those who had been resettled *heim ins Reich* that this would eventually made it possible for them to return to their old homelands again. However, this was never the intention of the Nazi government, and in the autumn of 1941 the Reich Commissioner for the Strengthening of Ethnic

[52] Coll. RS, 71-1.

[53] See, for example, V.O. LUMANS, *Himmler's Auxiliaries*, pp. 197-198, or J.B. SCHECHTMAN, *European Population Transfers*, pp. 354-361.

[54] Coll. RS, 19/20-4.

Germandom even issued an official decree which explicitly prohibited the Baltic Germans from returning to their former homes, following a formal request from this group[55]. Nonetheless, some did return – mostly as soldiers, as members of the new civil administrations, the police and security services, or as managers of large industrial firms. At first, the Wehrmacht as well as government and civil agencies were quite keen to deploy them in their former homelands because of their expert knowledge of the country and the language. However, soon doubts about their loyalty arose, as they were often much more sympathetic to the local population and advocated a more humane treatment in particular of the non-Russian ethnic groups and also a more constructive policy in the occupied territories. Their deployment was, therefore, scaled down.

Amongst those who returned to their home village was Robert Sch. In 1944, he was stationed with his military unit in Obroszyn near Lwow (Lemberg), which was only about 60 kilometers from Uhersko, the village where he was born. Every weekend that he was off duty, he spent in Uhersko. All his former Ukrainian neighbours and friends were still there, and he befriended some of the Ukrainian girls, one of whom he visited again in the 1990s: «This was the most wonderful time in the military!»[56] Erika G., whose family had owned a large estate in Lithuania close to the Latvian border, returned with her mother and her sister to this estate in 1942/43 and took over the running of it again. However, this lasted less than two years, and, with the retreat of the German troops, they were ordered to leave their estate again in the autumn of 1944 and return to the Wartheland[57]. Any hopes which some of the ethnic Germans might have still secretly harbored for an eventual return to their old homelands were shattered for good by the war. With the collapse of the Nazi regime, all Germans east of the Oder and Neisse lost their homes, either by flight or by expulsion. For the ethnic Germans relocated to these regions from further east, this was the second uprooting only a few years after their first forced resettlement. Those who did not manage to get away in time, or were overrun by the advancing Red Army, encountered terrible acts of revenge[58].

[55] J. VON HEHN, *Umsiedlung der baltischen Deutschen*, p. 195; M. GARLEFF, *Die Deutschbalten als nationale Minderheit*, pp. 545-546 (also for the following).

[56] Coll. RS, 19/20-1.

[57] H. SCHMIDT-HARRIES, *Langlingen. Nachrichten aus alter und neuer Zeit aus einem Dorf an der Aller*, forthcoming.

[58] V.O. LUMANS, *Himmler's Auxiliaries*, pp. 257-260.

V.

Despite all measures of dispersal, the emotional and sentimental allegiance to the ancestral homelands could not be broken completely, and the period of settlement in the Warthegau was too short for any new ties to be developed. Even today, many «repatriates» who are still alive continue to consider the regions which they and their families had to leave in 1939/40 as their true home (their *Heimat*)[59]. Valentin I., who was born in 1928 in Brigidau, Galicia, declared in an interview in 1997 without hesitation: «I am a Galician ... For me, there is only one home, and that is Galicia ... One has grown old here [in western Germany]; the children were born here; one has built up something for the children here, but somehow one is still very attached to it [Galicia]. One simply cannot give it up so easily ... It is similar to birds of passage; they, too, always return to their place of origin»[60]. Many never lost their regional accent completely, and Valentin I. still speaks his specific German dialect when meeting with relatives or friends from his former home region, Galicia.

Most agree that their old ancestral homes had a much stronger impact on their identity than the short period in the Warthegau, even if they were still young when the resettlement came. They still remember the landscape, the customs, the daily routine of working on the fields, the recipes, and the close village community often held together by the Church. «It is still inside me», as Valentin I. put it[61]. Even Johann P., who was only born in 1940, admits that no matter how much he considers himself now at home in northwestern Germany, there is still something else that makes up his identity. His parents had to leave Galicia, where the family had lived since the late eighteenth century, after the Hitler-Stalin-Pact, and were eventually resettled in a small village in the Wartheland. He himself was born in a resettlement camp in Saaz in the Sudetenland. In early 1945, when he was less than five, the family fled westwards and ended up in a small village near Hannover, where he has lived for more than 55 years. However, he still feels strong affinities to his parents' Galician heritage; for example, until the death of his father, they still spoke their regional dialect at home, and until today he has not learnt to speak the dialect of the region which

[59] For the following, see also R. SCHULZE, *Alte Heimat – neue Heinat*, pp. 759-787; R. SCHULZE, *Zwischen Heimat und Zuhause?*, pp. 288-299; R. SCHULZE, *The Struggle of Past and Present*.

[60] Coll. RS, 11/12-2.

[61] Coll. RS, 11/12-4.

has been his home since 1945. This is typical; the uprooted ethnic Germans might speak up to four different languages but often found it incredibly difficult if not impossible to learn the local dialect of the areas where they ended up after resettlement, flight, and expulsion. There is no doubt that for many there are still strong emotional and sentimental ties to the old homelands even after such a long period away. It is particularly at special occasions such as marriages and funerals that the thoughts return to the past, and the loss becomes acute again.

The ties to the former homelands that still exist can also be seen in the fact that even though hardly anyone expressed any wish to return to their place of birth to live there on a permanent basis again, most said that they would welcome the chance to visit as often as they liked, without any restrictions imposed upon them. They also said that they would like to see some form of official acknowledgement that these regions had been their homes up to 1945 – «to keep the memory alive, that people know about the past», as Johann P. put it: «This has nothing to do with revanchism. I think it's so unfair that this is always equated»[62]. Valentin I., for example, collected money and put up two plaques in Brigidau, Galicia, to commemorate the fact that there had been a German community in the village from 1762 to 1939, and he also supports the restoration of the church and the improvement of the primary school in Brigidau which is now an almost exclusively Ukrainian village.

## VI.

For a long time, the ethnic Germans who were transferred *heim ins Reich* from Eastern Europe between 1939 and 1941 were generally regarded as part of the perpetrators' camp. This was underlined by the fact that, until recently, most studies of specific groups of ethnic Germans chose to ignore the circumstances of the forced resettlement if they discussed the relocation at all, and failed to mention the expropriation and expulsion of the former owners of the farms and businesses which they took over. However, it seems to me that the picture is not simply black and white, but rather a more complex one of different shades of gray.

There can be no doubt whatsoever that many ethnic Germans more than just sympathized with the Nazis and their policies. They welcomed their expansionist and annexationist foreign policy aims; they longed for a less

[62] Coll. RS, 40/41-1.

embattled position than they had enjoyed in the new states in the interwar years; and they appealed to the Nazi authorities to intervene on their behalf. In order to improve their situation, they were generally willing to show disloyalty to the state whose citizenship they held and to be used by Hitler against their governments. In some countries, the minority organizations of the ethnic Germans – often infiltrated and led by ardent Nazis – developed into «fifth columns», undermining the stability of the respective states.

Those who were actually allocated farms and businesses in the incorporated eastern territories definitely benefited economically from the resettlement, as they were better off than they had been in the states of Eastern and Southeastern Europe. Living conditions in the German Reich were higher; their wages and salaries as well as pension payments were adjusted to German levels; and their career prospects were much better. Jürgen von Hehn's conclusion that the Baltic Germans were offered opportunities that they would have never had in the small Baltic states[63] can be extended to the ethnic Germans from other regions who were relocated in the Wartheland. The resettlers were given the homes, farms, businesses, and even the tools, equipment, livestock, and household goods of Poles and Jews who had been expropriated. In some cases, items of clothing were passed on so quickly after they had been taken away from the rightful owners that the new owners still had to tear off the yellow stars. In order to make space for the incoming Germans, the Poles and Jews were expelled, deported, arrested, selected for forced labor in the Reich, or murdered outright. Some Poles were kept on as employees and farm hands to do much of the actual work, in particular as many of the German men were quickly called up for the Wehrmacht, and their women and the older generation had to run the farms and businesses on their own.

Most resettlers did not ask, or did not want to know, whose farms they moved into, or whose businesses they took over, despite the fact that their representatives observed closely what was happening in the incorporated eastern territories in the way of finding them housing and employment. One of the reports from Łodz of 31 January 1940 unequivocally stated:

«The evacuation is progressing very well there. By 12 February there will be an end to the eviction of Jews; then it will be the Poles' turn. Provision of jobs is also progressing well. In any case, one can only be advised to go to Lodz»[64].

[63] J. VON HEHN, *Umsiedlung der baltischen Deutschen*, p. 195.

[64] Quoted in G. ALY, *'Final Solution'*, p. 47.

It seems that even those who did know exactly what was going on did not seem to think much about it. Only recently Arnold Eh. said of the farm which his family received in a matter-of-fact way:

«It had probably been taken away from the Pole. We simply moved in, there was some livestock there, and we still acquired some more, etc.»[65].

All of this makes the ethnic Germans, as a group and individually, beneficiaries if not accomplices of plunder and genocide. However, there is a different side to it.

Despite all personal gains in individual cases, the ethnic Germans as a group were objects of Nazi power politics, used and exploited as the regime saw fit. Their grievances and their hopes were utilized to serve Hitler's foreign policy and military designs. While ethnic Germans in some regions (such as the Baltic states, Galicia, Volhynia, or Bessarabia) were summoned to relocate to Greater Germany, those in other regions (Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, or Bulgaria) were explicitly told to stay[66], because that was more in line with the regime's current needs. Individual ethnic Germans living in Eastern and Southeastern Europe did not have a lot of choice. Their «option for Germany» was not really much of an option at all, as for most there was hardly any freedom to opt against it. Forced option («Diktierte Option»[67]), therefore, seems a much better description for it.

Resettlement meant that the ethnic Germans lost their traditional homelands and were faced with the need to settle in an environment that was very different from where they were born and raised and where their families had lived for generations. Already the term *heim ins Reich*, or repatriation, was nothing but a glossing over of what actually happened to these people, as hardly anyone who was relocated between 1939 and 1941 to what was now Greater Germany had lived within its territory for many generations. They were not «brought home» or «repatriated»: they were in fact uprooted and forcibly transplanted. Older people especially found coping with this

[65] Coll. RS, 71-1.

[66] See J.B. SCHECHTMAN, *The Elimination of German Minorities in Southeastern Europe*, in «Journal of Central European Affairs», 6, 1946, 2, pp. 152-166; G.C. PAIKERT, *The Danube Swabians: German Populations in Hungary, Rumania and Yugoslavia and Hitler's Impact on their Patterns*, Den Haag 1967, pp. 134-151, 255-256 and 273-284.

[67] This is also the title of a collection of documents on the resettlement of the German Balts: D.A. LOEBER (ed.), *Diktierte Option. Die Umsiedlung der Deutsch-Balten aus Estland und Lettland, 1939-41*, Neumünster 1972.

extremely hard. It was made even more difficult by the fact that the Nazi authorities did not allow them to form their own associations based on their regions of origin and to preserve their customs, traditions, and ways of life.

Even though Nazi propaganda stressed how much the ethnic Germans had preserved their Germandom and embodied everything that was good and valuable about the German race, hardened in years of fighting for their Germandom, SS racial experts doubted that each individual ethnic German had actually withstood assimilation with non-German groups and remained of «pure blood». Resettlers were, therefore, subjected to a rigorous racial examination[68]. This usually happened while they were at a reception or observation camp, and it was done secretly under the guise of a medical examination. At the end, taking also political reliability and other considerations into account, everyone was grouped into one of three classifications: O (for «Ost») indicating suitability for settlement in the annexed eastern territories; A (for «Altreich») indicating a lower racial value and therefore suitability only for dependent employment in the Reich; or, in the worst case, S (for «Sonderfall») indicating that they were considered racially unacceptable: some of them were sent to work in the Reich, others were retained in the camps, yet others deported or sent back to their region of origin.

The Nazis made clear differences between the ethnic Germans depending on their region of origin. The German Balts were regarded as racially particular 'valuable', as they were considered to be of old Germanic stock. They were meant to play a special role in the Germanization of the Warthegau. In late 1942, approximately 5% of all agricultural acreage was in the hands of farmers from the Baltic states, which meant they had been allocated 50,000 more hectares (125,000 acres) than they had owned before resettlement[69]. In contrast, the peasant populations from Southeastern Europe, often from a much simpler background, were considered as racially and politically inferior and much less useful for a National Socialist Warthegau. They had intermarried more frequently with non-Germans, adapted their cultural practices, were less aware of developments in the Reich, and some spoke better Polish or Ukrainian than German. A disproportionate number of

[68] For the following, see R.L. KOEHL, *RKFDV*, pp. 106-108; V.O. LUMANS, *Himmler's Auxiliaries*, pp. 189-192; T. SCHIEDER (ed.), *The Fate of the Germans in Rumania*, pp. 51- 52.

[69] J. VON HEHN, *Umsiedlung der baltischen Deutschen*, pp. 192-195; M. GARLEFF, *Die Deutschbalten als nationale Minderheit*, p. 543.

resettlers from northern Bukovina, for example, failed the racial tests and were classified as S-cases[70].

The SS experts also had their doubts as to the political reliability of many resettlers. They felt that the majority of ethnic Germans, whose political, economic and social experiences in the inter-war period had been very different from those of the *Reichsdeutsche*, were at best superficially Nazified. The Liaison Office for Ethnic Germans and local Party organizations, therefore, set up cultural events and classes to educate them, and leaflets were distributed with advice which included, for example, which first names should not be given to children because they were considered to be Jewish[71].

The Nazis had promised that each individual was to be fully compensated for his or her losses and at a large rally on 2 March 1941 in Breslau Himmler repeated this guarantee:

«Everyone will receive at least as much property as he owned in his abandoned ethnic German homeland. Everyone will have a livelihood the same or similar to the one he had, whether it is a position as craftsman, a workshop, a business, or a house»[72].

However, for roughly half of the resettlers, this promise was never realized. They remained in camps, and when they obtained jobs, these gave them more often than not a lower economic and social status than they had had in their homelands. But even for some who were allocated farms of similar size to those owned before, resettlement did not always turn out to be, economically, a change for the better: farmers from Bessarabia, for example, where the land was extremely fertile, complained about the barren conditions in much of the Warthegau. Moreover, nowhere were the newly arrived ethnic Germans given outright ownership of the properties; they received them only «on loan» or «in trust», as administrators or trustees. The question of actual ownership was postponed until the end of the war, and the final division of the requisitioned Polish property was to include Germans from the Reich as well, in particular deserving war veterans[73].

[70] T. SCHIEDER (ed.), *The Fate of the Germans in Rumania*, p. 52, n. 40.

[71] I. RÖSKAU-RYDEL, *Galizien*, p. 195.

[72] Quoted in G. ALY, *'Final Solution'*, p. 143.

[73] There is evidence that Himmler intended to reserve these lands for the veterans of his SS combat troops; R.L. KOEHL, *RKFDV*, p. 74. However, the temporary and somewhat uncertain tenure «in trust» did not prevent most of the ethnic Germans to put all effort into securing a new base for themselves.

Nazi propaganda stressed that each group of ethnic Germans had to fulfill its «national mission», and for the ethnic Germans relocated to Greater Germany, this new mission was to Germanize the newly incorporated territories. However, as the ethnic Germans had to find out, Germanization meant more than just colonization. It actually meant that the «repatriated» ethnic Germans were to be the core of a new homogenous German *Volk*. The Nazi Warthegau was not intended to be the home of Baltic Germans, Galician Germans, or Bessarabian Germans who continued the existence of their particular group only in a different territory, but it was intended to be a model for a uniform German *Volk* which had no room for regional peculiarities, customs or heritage.

Resettlement turned out to be not a temporary evacuation, as some ethnic Germans had hoped in 1939/40, and not even the beginning of a new phase in the long history of their ethnic groups – it turned out to be the end of their existence as distinct groups of German population, with their own traditions, customs, and cultural heritage. In 1956, after resettlement from Bessarabia in 1940 and flight from his allocated estate in the Warthegau in January 1945, Gottlob E. summed up his feelings with the words: «I found my Fatherland about which I once used to dream and talk about in such an enthusiastic way, a very disappointing place»[74].

Ethnic Germans as a group were neither solely perpetrators nor solely victims. Some were more actively involved in the events, most more passively, but ultimately they were all pawns. Theirs was an ambiguous terrain – perhaps somewhat comparable to what Primo Levi, in a different context, called the «grey zone, with ill-defined outlines which both separate and join the two camps of masters and servants»[75]. Or as Doris L. Bergen concludes: «Ethnic Germans existed on the edge of the Nazi knife that separated privilege from penalty»[76].

The practice of forced population transfers with the aim of achieving ethnic homogeneity was not a Nazi invention, and it did not stop with the defeat of the Nazi regime. Since the early twentieth century, population exchanges, or the forced resettlement of ethnic minorities, had become

[74] T. SCHIEDER (ed.), *The Fate of the Germans in Rumania*, Document No. 4, p. 190.

[75] P. LEVI, *The Drowned and the Saved*, London 1988, pp. 22-51, here p. 27.

[76] D.L. Bergen, *Sex, Blood, and Vulnerability: Women Outsiders in German-Occupied Europe*, in R. GELLATELY - N. STOLTZFUS (eds), *Social Outsiders in Nazi Germany*, Princeton NJ 2001, pp. 273-293, here p. 274.

an internationally acceptable policy to safeguard national unity and secure international peace[77]. After the defeat of Nazi Germany, the victorious Anti-Hitler alliance used the same pattern of mass expulsion and forced resettlement in their attempt to re-design Central and Eastern Europe[78]. The resettlement of the ethnic Germans by the Nazis was part of their envisaged new ethnographic order and imperial conquest of living space – and the overall consequence was one of loss: loss of some form or other for most if not all individual ethnic Germans; loss for German culture and German heritage as a whole because century-old customs and ways of life were eradicated; loss for and of the people who were evicted, deported, and murdered to make space for the ethnic Germans; loss of a positive perspective for good neighborly German-Eastern European relations for a generation and longer; and ultimately also loss for the former homelands of the ethnic Germans, because the fact that German life in these regions in Eastern and Southeastern Europe came to an end meant that these regions lost a part of their historic make-up which, at the best of times, had provided an element of political, economic, social, and cultural richness and diversity.

[77] The Treaty of Lausanne of 1923 which ended the Greco-Turkish War of 1920-1922 was one of the first important international treaties to provide for a mass resettlement of populations: it included an agreement on the exchange of populations between the two countries that affected c. 1.8 million people, and came to be regarded as a precedent for dealing with ethnic minorities. For more detail, see J.B. SCHECHTMAN, *European Population Transfers*, pp. 11-22.

[78] For more detail, see for example K.E. FRANZEN, *Die Vertriebenen. Hitlers letzte Opfer*, Berlin - München 2001; A.M. DE ZAYAS, *A Terrible Revenge: The Ethnic Cleansing of the East European Germans, 1944-1950*, New York 1994; H.W. SCHOENBERG, *Germans from the East: A Study of their Migration, Resettlement and Subsequent Group History since 1945*, Den Haag 1970.

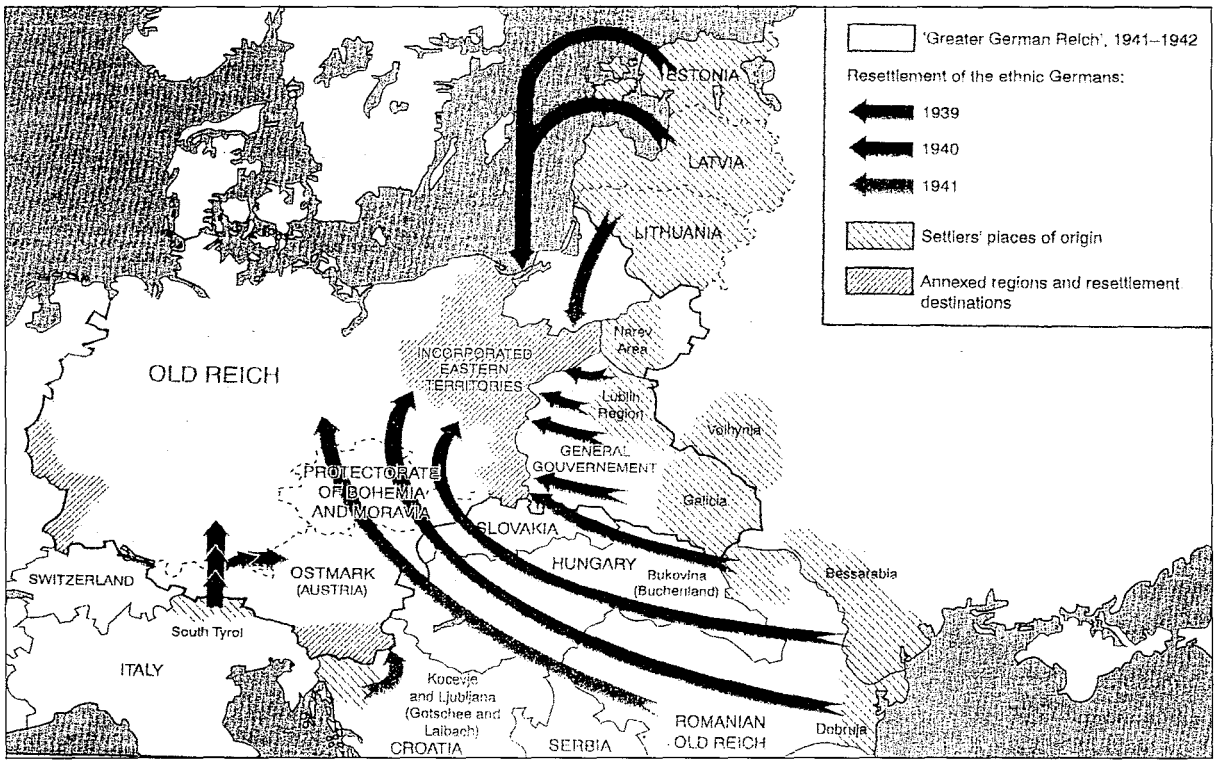
Table: *Resettlement of Ethnic Germans 1939-1941*

| area | date of treaty | number of people resettled |
|---|---|---|
| South Tyrol | 21 Oct 1939 | c. 80,000 |
| Estonia | 15 Oct 1939 | c. 13,000 |
| Latvia | 30 Oct 1939 | c. 50,000 |
| Second resettlement from Estonia and Latvia | 10 Jan 1941 | c. 17,000* |
| Lithuania | 10 Jan 1941 | c. 50,000 |
| Volhynia | 3 Nov 1939 | c. 65,000 |
| Galicia | | c. 55,000 |
| Narev district | | c. 8,000 |
| Bessarabia | 5 Sep 1940 | c. 93,500 |
| Northern Bukovina | | c. 43,000 |
| Southern Bukovina | 20 Oct 1940 | c. 52,000 |
| Dobruja | | c. 15,000 |
| Total no. | | c. 541,500 |

* The ethnic Germans who came to Greater Germany *via* this resettlement program were automatically classified as «refugees» and not as «resettlers», and considered A-cases.

Source: Compiled from all the texts cited in the references. Their figures do not always agree, and this tabulation is meant only as an approximation.

Map: *Resettlement of Ethnic Germans 1939-1941*




Source: From the German Foreign Institute (Deutsches Auslandsinstitut, DAI), Stuttgart 1942, in G. ALY, *'Final Solution': Nazi Population Policey and the Murder of the European Jews*, London 1999, p. X.