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Review of R.M. Douglas, *Orderly and Humane: The Expulsion of the Germans after the Second World War*

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Orderly and Humane: The Expulsion of the Germans after the Second World War.

By R.M. Douglas. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012. 485 pp. \$38.00.

The post-World War II expulsion of millions of ethnic Germans from Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, Eastern Germany, Romania, and Yugoslavia represents the “largest forced population transfer...in human history” (1), resulting in the permanent displacement of 12,000,000-14,000,000 people, mostly women and children. As many as 1.5 million expellees died as a result of abuse, starvation, and disease while detained in collection camps; many more died on locked trains without food, water, or heat during weeks-long journeys, or on the roadside while being driven on foot, to Germany. Further deaths occurred as expellees succumbed to hypothermia, malnutrition, and other effects of the ordeal in camps that were hastily erected and poorly supported by a Germany unable to absorb the stream of deported *Volksdeutsche*. These expulsions, which took place “without concealment, before journalists and other observers” (2), aroused little attention at the time and are almost completely unknown outside Germany. Many Germans and German Americans (including this reviewer) know *Vertriebene* and their stories. These narratives constitute part of the founding myth of modern Germany, according to which *Stunde null* represented a new beginning for Germany, with Germans, purified by suffering, repudiating the Nazi past and moving beyond defeat to become a *Wirtschaftswunder*, fully integrated into Europe.

R.M. Douglas, Professor of History at Colgate University, provides a well documented and readable account of the expulsions for an English-speaking audience, beginning with the partition of Czechoslovakia in 1938 and ending with the integration of the expellees into East and West Germany in the 1950s and 1960s. The postwar expulsions were ostensibly carried out with both humane and pragmatic intentions (to correct earlier expulsions perpetrated by the Nazis, to “protect” ethnic Germans from the majority populations’ “justifiable wrath,” to punish the *Volksdeutsche* for alleged collaboration with the Nazi regime, and to assure the stability of the resulting “purified” countries). However, larger geopolitical, sociocultural, and more down-to-earth human, motivations also played roles, as East Central European nations sought to create ethnically monolithic nation-states, denationalizing and expropriating ethnic Germans and expelling women, children, and the elderly, while retaining men, especially those in skilled trades, and using confiscated property as a “virtually inexhaustible political slush fund” to increase their power at home (261).

While the expulsions were to be carried out in an “orderly and humane” fashion (90), Douglas demonstrates that the expelling nations, in imitating the Nazis’ wartime attempts to alter the demographics of Central Europe, inflicted harm mostly upon noncombatants, many of whom were innocent of associations with Nazi Germany and considered the expelling countries, not Germany, their homes. Those managing the transfers neglected the necessary planning, and they were unable (or unwilling) to devote the necessary funding and resources to this immense project; moreover, defeated Germany lacked the wherewithal to absorb millions of ethnic Germans from its diaspora. While it is customary in expellee narratives to blame the expelling countries for the hardships suffered by the transferred *Volksdeutsche*, Douglas also locates blame for “one of the largest episodes of mass human rights abuse in modern history” squarely on the Allied Powers (3). The Allies acquiesced in the mass expulsions; neglected, or refused, to plan for the collection, transfer, and resettlement of the expellees; and turned a blind eye to their circumstances in collection camps, en route, and in Germany. The United States and Great Britain then made cynical use of the notions “orderly and humane” to end the expulsions as the

arriving *Vertriebene* stressed the extremely limited resources and infrastructures of their zones of occupation, blaming the transfers' lack of order and humaneness on the expelling countries and, as the Cold War developed, the Soviet Union.

Since the expulsions are still a sensitive topic in Germany and a source of friction between Germany and the expelling countries, Douglas limits his use of expellee narratives to those that can be independently verified by records of humanitarian agencies and other NGOs, Western diplomats and officials, foreign journalists, and archival records. The author treads a careful line between validating the expellees' hardships and equating their victimization with that of Jews and other ethnic minorities oppressed by the Nazis. He dispassionately relates the history of the expulsions, laying blame on the guilty parties, and drawing important conclusions about forced mass transfers of populations. In the light of occurrences of ethnic cleansing that continue to plague multiethnic nations in our time and Western academics' endorsement of mass transfers as efficient means of solving ethnic conflicts, Douglas' conclusion about the ethicality of mass expulsions, i.e., that they are only practicable if accomplished quickly, yet if done quickly, cannot be done humanely, should be heeded and acted upon to prevent future instances of such a "tragic, unnecessary, and, we must resolve, never to be repeated episode" (374).

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