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# Essentializing Ethnicity: Expellees and Ethno-National Categorizations in the European Postwar Moment, 1943-1948

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## Abstract

This article introduces an ongoing project that examines a key aspect of the transition from war to uneasy peace in the aftermath of WWII in Europe: the ethno-national categorization of the expellees forcibly transported across inter-state borders as national minorities. Using Germany as a case study, it argues that the level of ethno-national homogeneity between incoming expellees and more established population groups in the 'postwar moment' has been exaggerated. In fact, this period witnessed complex processes of redefining and renegotiating the boundaries of the postwar national community in which ethno-national categories were contested and whose consequences have been far-reaching.

## 1. Forced migrations in twentieth century Europe and their interpretations

Massive cross-border forced migrations, or expulsions, were a key feature of Europe's twentieth century history. Several major waves of forced population movements swept the continent, starting before the First World War, continuing into it and its aftermath and reaching a crescendo during and after the Second World War. Although significant forced migrations also took place subsequently, in the Cold War era and afterwards, particularly amidst the violent disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, the population movements around and after WWII were easily the most devastating such events in twentieth century Europe, both numerically and in terms of their overall impact. Predictably, they have drawn extensive attention from historians and other scholars. Two quotations from major interpretative surveys by two leading authors illustrate the way in which these events feature in historical accounts of 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe.

In the words of Dan Stone: "Some 12 million ethnic Germans were expelled from the Sudetenland (Czechoslovakia), Romania, Hungary, the Baltic States, Poland, and elsewhere; and continuing its wartime policy of deporting "enemy peoples" ... the Soviet Union also authorized the 'transfer' of more than two million Poles from the USSR and some 700,000 Ukrainians out of south-east Poland into Soviet Ukraine between 1945 and 1947. At the end of the process, Poland, whose population before the war was comprised of only two-thirds ethnic Poles, was almost entirely ethnically

homogeneous." (Stone 2014, p.19)

And, to quote Sir Ian Kershaw: "In all, at least 12 million Germans were deported from central and eastern Europe into the occupied zones of Germany .... Expulsions – euphemistically called population transfers – were far from confined to ethnic Germans. Mass deportations of Poles and Ukrainians as well as Germans followed the border alterations agreed at Yalta and Potsdam ... At least 1.2 million Poles and close to half a million Ukrainians were evicted from their homes, often amid great violence and brutality, and packed off to distant destinations. Another 50,000 Ukrainians left Czechoslovakia, while over 40,000 Czechs and Slovaks went in the opposite direction .... About 100,000 Hungarians were expelled from Romania, and nearly as many were deported from Slovakia to the Sudetenland, while 70,000 Slovaks entered Czechoslovakia from Hungary." (Kershaw 2015 pp. 477, 474-5)

Stone and Kershaw are outstanding historians, and both books cited here are excellent, insightful interpretative surveys of recent European history. However, in these particular passages the texts also illustrate a tendency of most of the relevant historical literature, certainly the more general literature, to portray the forced mass migrations that swept Europe around the end of WWII as consisting of distinct and clearly identifiable ethno-national groups. In other words, the (usually) unstated underlying assumption is that undisputed Polish nationals were pushed from here to there, Ukrainians from there to here, Germans from all kinds of areas towards the west, and so on. The result was allegedly a transfer of co-ethnic migrants into what became nationally homogeneous post-1945 nation states.

## 2. Challenging ethno-national categorizations of forced migrants

This assumption of a neat and tidy ethno-national categorization of the forced migrants in the European “postwar moment” (Zahra 2011) – the crucial but under-investigated transitional period, roughly between late 1943 and 1948, from wartime to the uneasy era of “violent peace” (Gatrell & Baron 2009) – is what my ongoing work aims to challenge. I am currently pursuing a broad project, funded by the Academy of Finland, in which our four-member team is working towards a comparative, transnational analysis of the ethno-national categorization of forced migrants in the European postwar moment, based on a series of regional case studies.

In this endeavour, we engage with – and contribute to – the specialized historical and social scientific literature that has begun to emerge during the last two-to-three decades, as issues of national belonging in modern European border regions have come under nuanced scrutiny. Pioneering, historically grounded constructivist scholarship has highlighted the complicated nature of political identity formation in such borderlands. On the one hand, scholars have paid attention to “borderland nationalism” (Spevack 1996) and “long-distance nationalism” (Anderson 1992), i.e., cases in which particular borderland and diaspora populations have developed stronger feelings of national belonging than regular residents of their titular nation. On the other hand, various cases of ethno-national ambiguity or even

indifference in linguistically and culturally mixed border regions have also been explored (Van Ginderachter & Fox 2019; Zahra 2010). Intersectional differences, including the frequently contrasting treatment of men and women and the particular priority often given to children as malleable elements within particular nation-building projects, have received considerable attention (Zahra 2008). This highly valuable new scholarship has consisted primarily of regional case studies, with a heavy emphasis on certain areas, particularly Polish–German and Polish–Ukrainian borderlands (Service 2013; Kulczycki 2016; Snyder 2004; Wylegala 2019). Another typical feature has been an extended time frame, in which the postwar moment around 1945 has often featured as one episode among many within a long-term trajectory of historical development (Bjork 2008; Karch 2018; Murdock 2010).

## 3. New perspectives: borderland regions in the ‘postwar moment’

Our project builds on this recent scholarship and develops it further in two directions. First, we provide in-depth examinations of four cases from particular borderland regions that have been explored much less than the leading examples mentioned above. The four cases are: so-called “ethnic German/*volksdeutsch*” expellees transported into occupied (western) Germany, particularly those uprooted from south-eastern Europe; “ethnic Germans” and other ethno-national entities regarded as



undesirables in defeated Hungary; population groups forcibly moved and ethnically reclassified in the disputed border regions between Italy and Yugoslavia; and expellees transported into postwar Finland from formerly Finnish parts of Karelia that the USSR annexed after WWII. Importantly, our examination of these cases focuses specifically on the postwar moment around 1945, not only as a sequel or a prequel to momentous events, but as a brief but crucial epoch of indeterminacy and reorientation. In other words, we intend to restore to the postwar moment at least some of “the exciting but transitory openness of the political circumstances produced by the end of the war”, whose absence in the historiography leading scholars have lamented (Eley 2008, p. 208; Horn 2020). We approach the postwar moment not just as a coda to the story of World War II or a prequel to the Cold War, but as a crucial period in itself: a moment of uncertainty and openness when various arrangements and outcomes seemed possible and many terms and understandings that subsequently became fixed were still undetermined.

#### **4. Grassroots experiences: the forced migrants**

Our project questions the overly sweeping ethno-national categorization – or ethnic essentializing – of European forced migrants in the postwar moment in two contexts. The first concerns the forced migrations themselves and the perspectives and experiences of the people caught up in them. Straightforward ethno-national

labels did not match the self-perceptions of large numbers of forced migrants in the late stages of the war and the subsequent postwar moment. This was particularly true in borderland regions that had traditionally been zones of interaction and coexistence between neighbouring ethnic groups and polities. Here senses of belonging were typically complex, fluid, and shifting – and often not nationally exclusive. Hybrid identities were common. A large proportion of the population lacked a clear-cut ethno-national affiliation in 1945, as specialized recent literature has begun to show. There was considerable national ambiguity and indifference to – or even lack of interest in – explicit and exclusive national categories.

Although these grassroots dynamics were evident in a number of European regions at the end of WWII, the most abundant evidence stems from the largest ethno-national group affected by these forced migrations: people defined as “ethnic Germans”. The empirical examples provided in the rest of the article will also be drawn from this group. The supposedly unified Germanness of the “*volksdeutsch*” communities of eastern Europe, a key ideological tenet of National Socialism, had been largely fictional all along. East European communities that defined themselves as German had in most cases intermingled closely with surrounding society in preceding decades and centuries, with the result that their nationality – an amorphous category even in the best of times – was often much less clear than official proclamations claimed (Weger, 2008).

This fact had been recognized, at least implicitly, even in the Third Reich, as the various ethnic German evacuees brought

into the Reich with the expectation of being sent to newly conquered East European territories as Germanic colonizers had first been subjected to extensive screenings and examinations whose purpose had been to determine their racial qualities. Many had been found wanting and had therefore spent months, or even years, in observation camps and other institutions, being taught Nazi-style discipline, cultural values, and in many cases even such basic civic skills as how to read and write proper German. A sense of a unified national community had been lacking, all official propaganda notwithstanding, as presumed beneficiaries of such *Heim ins Reich* actions had privately complained about being kept “like prisoners” and “not being treated like re-settlers but rather like convicts” (Schulze 2001). Many had held on to alternate or hybrid ethno-national identities, and the same trend continued in the early postwar context too. American occupation authorities in southern Germany, for example, noted with concern that many an expellee classified as an ethnic German rejected “the prospect of living the rest of his life in a foreign community where the natives are unfriendly and resentful, where the habits are strange, and where everything already belongs to someone else” (Douglas 2012, p. 315).

These issues require more attention, certainly in the German context but elsewhere too. Scholars need to be sensitive to the multiplicity and complexity of identities and senses of belonging, as perceived by the people themselves in the immediate postwar moment. Correspondingly, researchers should be cautious about applying essentializing national categories

that may really reflect later political developments and imperatives rather than contemporary postwar perceptions. Our ongoing project aims to promote these objectives, and the other case studies within in explore such dynamics also in other contexts than the postwar German setting used as an example here.

## 5. Perceived ethno-national differences and postwar nation-building: local conflicts

There is also a second area of forced migrations and their consequences in the European postwar moment around 1945 that needs closer analysis: the role that questions of perceived ethno-national difference between incoming expellees and local majority populations played after the expulsions, in postwar processes of integration, reconstruction, and nation-building. Within supposedly homogeneous postwar nation states, conflicts that divided the population along perceived ethno-national lines were in fact frequently evident on two levels – although the conflicts in question have typically not been analysed much in these terms.

First, on the grassroots level of everyday interactions, it is widely acknowledged in the literature that the arrival of expellees caused very significant tensions and clashes between the newcomers and more established local population groups. Such conflicts have usually been interpreted as struggles over material resources and local and regional identities (Kossert



2008; Krauss 2008). Both of these were important causal factors, but so was another, still under-investigated element: the definition and negotiation of boundaries between perceived ethno-national communities. In other words, the newcomers often faced rejection because they were seen by the local populations not as co-nationals but as foreign intruders. Because of their hybrid identities and other ambiguities of the postwar moment, many of the incoming expellees also initially refused to commit themselves to the majority nationality around them. There is very good evidence of such trends from early postwar Germany. An American opinion poll conducted in Baden-Württemberg in late 1946, for instance, found that around 40 percent of the ethnic German expellees there defined themselves not as Germans but as Hungarians, Czechoslovaks or members of other nationalities. The same poll also showed that only about half of the more established population regarded the newcomers as fellow Germans (Douglas 2012, p. 314). Many other contemporary opinion surveys yielded comparable results, and interviews conducted around the same time further north, in Lower Saxony, testified to similar attitudes, as locals dismissed the forced migrants with comments such as: “they have different blood; I do not want to get too close to them” (Schulze 1990, p. 84).

## **6. Perceived ethno-national differences and postwar nation-building: governing authorities**

The second level where perceived ethno-national divisions featured significantly in the shaping of the early postwar order involved the interaction between governing authorities – both Allied occupation forces and (re-)emerging national governments – and the ethno-nationally ambiguous arriving forced migrants. As Tara Zahra and others have shown, the postwar moment in Europe was a very nationally -- and nationalistically -- charged time (Zahra 2008). The priorities of the governing authorities were to re-establish control and to (re)build sustainable, supposedly ethnically homogeneous nation states, particularly as problems with ethnic minorities were widely blamed for the collapse of the interwar order. These nationalizing priorities left little room for individual or collective ambiguities of identity, such as those common among arriving forced migrants. As a result, rigid ethno-national definitions and affiliations were typically imposed on the forced migrants in the postwar moment. In many cases, political authorities pushed the newcomers into strict national categories, regardless of their subjective sentiments.

The actions of American occupation authorities in early postwar Germany provide an excellent illustration of these dynamics. The United States military government held a very powerful position in defeated Germany, and its decision and policies in the postwar moment set important precedents that significantly

shaped those subsequently adopted by emerging West German authorities. The classification and treatment of arriving “*volksdeutsch*” expellees was one area in which the influence of the American authorities was fundamental, not only for the postwar moment but also for the future Federal Republic.

The US occupation authorities were well aware of the complicated situation on the ground in early postwar Germany, from their opinion polls and other observations. They knew that there was plenty of conflict between incoming expellees and other groups, most importantly longer-established local populations. They knew that many ethnic Germans arrived in the US occupation zone with unclear or confused ethno-national identities. They also realized that there was plenty of rejection of the newcomers, especially the “*Volksdeutsche*”, as a foreign element, and that there was a tendency among many ethnic German expellees to define themselves as ethno-nationally distinct from the German majority population. However, such confusion was highly unwelcome to the occupiers in a chaotic postwar setting in which very large numbers of several different categories of people were involuntarily on the move – not only expellees but also prisoners of war, former forced labourers, liberated concentration camp inmates, wartime civilian evacuees, and others. The occupation authorities wanted distinct dividing lines between different population categories. They wanted a clear message about these issues to come through in their public communications. Accordingly, people expelled as Germans had to be classified as Germans and treated as such. Ambiguity was to be avoided. (Seipp 2013; Holian 2011).

## 7. *Die Neue Zeitung* and the stances of the US occupation forces in postwar Germany

This message was evident in relevant reporting and commentary in the official American occupation-era newspaper, *Die Neue Zeitung*, which was published in German and aimed at (re-)educating the German population. The Germanness of all incoming expellees, including the “*Volksdeutsche*”, was taken for granted; a wide definition of who counted as a German prevailed. Conflicts at the grassroots level between incoming expellees and longer-established local populations were certainly acknowledged, as in a particular December 1946 feature story about high tensions in a small Upper Bavarian village of whose total population of 1,177 no fewer than 510 were recently arrived expellees. However, the paper found the causes of such tensions in difficult material conditions and in individual feelings of “cold-heartedness” and “indifference” towards fellow citizens rather than in any more fundamental perceptions of difference (*Die Neue Zeitung* – hereafter *NZ* 20.12.1946). The national belonging of the incoming expellee was not questioned in *Die Neue Zeitung*’s coverage. Rather, the paper repeatedly emphasized the need for the local German population to accept the newcomers as “equals in all areas of public and private life” (*NZ* 8.11.1946). It stressed the existence of a “community of need” (*Notgemeinschaft*) between longer-established locals and arriving expellees (*NZ* 5.5.1947) and heaped particular praise

upon a small refugee camp that had allegedly managed to establish a true “national community” (*Volksgemeinschaft*), with excellent relations among the camp residents and close links between them and the surrounding town (NZ 24.1.1947). Overall, the emphasis of the reporting lay on promoting a sense of national community at a time of tribulation, a shared fundamental crisis that locals and expellees needed to address together, as Germans. In other words, a strong essentializing tone characterized *Die Neue Zeitung*’s reporting about the German expellees and their position in early postwar Germany.

This material highlights the significance of the US occupation forces in Germany as postwar agenda setters who shaped key terms and discourses and, to a considerable degree, determined the parameters of future policies, including those concerning the ethno-national labelling of the expellees. Emerging national-level authorities in western Germany largely carried on with the policies established in the postwar moment, partly because the occupiers – who soon transformed into powerful allies – expected them to do so and partly because the priorities established in the early postwar closely matched those of the fledgling West German state in any case. After all, the Federal Republic, too, emphasized ethno-national unity and cohesive Germanness, not least to bolster its claim to be the only legitimate representative of the entire German nation, in defiance of the rival East German state established in 1949.

## 8. Long-term consequences of ethno-national essentializing in the postwar moment

The extensive essentializing of expellees’ ethno-national identities in the European postwar moment, then, had far-reaching consequences, both immediately and in the longer term. It helped to put (re-)emerging European states on a path of extensive national homogenization. Occupation powers and national authorities sought to impose exclusive ethno-national labels on forced migrants, with the objective of building homogenous states that would be free of the perceived problems with national minorities of the interwar era – and draw a clear ethno-national distinction vis-a-vis population groups across current state borders. At the same time, it compelled many forced migrants to suppress and redefine aspects of their complex life stories and ambiguous feelings of belonging in order to fit in with strong external expectations. The effects were manifold and complex, on both the national and international levels.

The essentializing has also had a noticeable impact on subsequent scholarship. The categories of national belonging that were imposed after the war and then incorporated into the national narratives of many post-1945 states have typically been internalized into scholarly analyses too. There has been a tendency for these labels to be applied back to the immediate postwar setting with a seeming precision that simply was not there at the time. That tendency shows in the books cited at the start of this article, and indeed in many

other studies. Specialized scholarship more attuned to contemporary differences and distinctions has emerged, as discussed above, but it remains somewhat scattered and has not yet made sufficient impact on more general interpretative patterns. Our project, with its new empirical foci and broad transnational framework, will try to move things forward in this area.

## 9. Contemporary relevance

In closing, it is worth pointing out that the story of the ethno-national categorization of forced migrants in post-WWII Europe is not just a matter of historical or scholarly importance; it possesses wider contemporary relevance as well. At a time when European societies are struggling with multiculturalism and with ongoing refugee crises that are often presented as unprecedented, particularly in terms of the ethnic otherness of the arriving populations, a critical look at simplistic postwar

national narratives of the arrival and integration of the previous, truly massive wave of forced migrants after WW II can be enlightening. It can serve as a reminder of the fact that those national narratives omitted most of the considerable diversity that came with the expellees, perpetuating myths of national homogeneity and postponing a confrontation with the challenge of ethnic diversity. At least in an incipient form, that challenge had begun to manifest itself much earlier in post-1945 Europe than commonly acknowledged, not with the large-scale arrival of so-called guest workers and other rather obviously different-looking and different-sounding migrants in the 1960s and 1970s, especially in Western Europe, but rather with the influx of early post-WWII expellees whom contemporaries perceived as much more ethnically and nationally diverse than subsequently assumed. A greater awareness of the intricacies of expellee arrival and integration after 1945 could help Europe face similar challenges vis-à-vis today's – and tomorrow's – immigrants (Ahonen 2020; Ahonen 2014).

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