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‘On Forced Migrations:

Trans-National Realities and National Narratives in Post-1945 (West) Germany’

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The forced migrations that accompanied the end of the Second World War and the forging of the subsequent peace settlement in Europe were massive in scale, uprooting up to 20 million people. They were also highly trans-national in character. Their planning and implementation required the involvement of various regional, national and inter-national authorities. Even more importantly, the victims of the flight and expulsion included members of most ethnic and national groups on the continent, particularly in central and eastern Europe, and the forced migrations entailed innumerable crossings of national boundaries at a time when many of those boundaries – and in several cases even the political entities that they were supposed to demark – were in flux.¹

By contrast, the establishment of the European post-war order brought with it the re-emergence of firmly established nation states that claimed extensive sovereignty over their affairs, including their borders and the population flows across them, often in more or less open conflict vis-à-vis other states, particularly those on the opposing side of the Cold War divide. As a result, the portrayal and commemoration of the wartime forced migrations became a highly contested matter, nationally and internationally, and it has remained that way, even in the post-Cold War era. Many different issues have been at stake in the resulting debates and

¹ See, for instance, Philipp Ther, *Die dunkle Seite der Nationalstaaten. ‘Ethnische Säuberungen’ im modernen Europa* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), esp. 168-238; *Zwangsumsiedlung, Flucht und Vertreibung, 1939-1959* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2010).

conflicts. Although the specifics have varied among particular countries and contexts, a fundamental tension has persisted: that between the reality of the World War II era forced migrations as fundamentally trans-national phenomena and the subsequent public discussions of those migrations, which have typically taken place in predominantly national terms. Particular nation states have stressed the suffering of their own citizens, with long-term societal and trans-national consequences that have been mixed at best, at home and abroad.²

The Federal Republic of Germany provides an excellent case study of these dynamics. Germans were, of course, the largest European national group affected by the forced migrations that accompanied the end of World War II and the transition to peace, with at least 12 million people defined as Germans permanently forced out of their areas of residence. The majority, some eight million, settled on the territory of what in 1949 became the Federal Republic, where they soon established themselves as a powerful presence. As 16 per cent of the new state's total population, these so-called German expellees constituted an important demographic and electoral force.³ They were also a prominent factor in the broader public life of the Federal Republic, in which they and their fates during and after the Second World War featured prominently in discourses that became highly politicized and instrumentalized.

This article seeks to cast light on the tension between the trans-national realities and nationally focused perceptions of forced migrations in post-1945 Europe

² Comparative, trans-national studies of this particular field are still lacking, but see Peter Haslinger, K. Erik Franzen and Martin Schulze Wessel, eds., *Diskurse über Zwangsmigrationen in Zentraleuropa: Geschichtspolitik, Fachdebatten, literarisches und lokales Erinnern seit 1989* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2008). For comparative perspectives on post-World War II European public memory more generally, see Claus Leggewie, *Der Kampf um die europäische Erinnerung: Ein Schlachtfeld wird besichtigt* (Munich: Beck, 2011). For a strong, critical recent study of the (West) German case, see Hans Henning Hahn and Eva Hahn, *Die Vertreibung im deutschen Erinnern. Legenden, Mythos, Geschichte* (Munich: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2008).

³ For the statistical information, see Gerhard Reichling, *Die deutschen Vertriebenen in Zahlen. Teil II. 40 Jahre Eingliederung in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Bonn: Kulturstiftung der deutschen Vertriebenen, 1989), esp. 30

through an examination of public discussions of the World War II era expulsions and their consequences in the Federal Republic of Germany. In concise form, it attempts to address several questions. What public discourses emerged around these themes in West Germany? How did they evolve and change over time? What was their contemporary and subsequent impact, within the Federal Republic and beyond? And what can these German developments suggest about broader trends in public discourses about forced migrations in post-World War II Europe?

I

In the Federal Republic, the forced migrations that took place during the final stages and the aftermath of the Second World War were quickly absorbed into a nationally oriented public narrative that provided a highly selective and restricted reading of the events, focusing on the presumed injustices suffered by the German victims and eliding most other key points. The leading propagators of this narrative were the German victims themselves – the so-called expellees (*Vertriebenen*) – particularly through the extensive network of pressure groups that they had established by the early 1950s. With a self-proclaimed total membership of over two million, the expellee organizations cut a powerful public figure in the Federal Republic, especially in its early years, and they spread their message through numerous channels, ranging from political rallies and media appearances to a wide range of publications.⁴

Their narrative of the wartime forced migrations revolved around the suffering endured by the German expellees. Taking the final months of the Second World War as the starting point for their analysis, expellee activists denounced the unjustified and

⁴ On the organizations, see Pertti Ahonen, *After the Expulsion: West Germany and Eastern Europe, 1945-1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Matthias Stickler, 'Ostdeutsch heisst gesamtdeutsch'. *Organisation, Selbstverständnis und heimatpolitische Zielsetzungen der deutschen Vertriebenenverbände, 1949-1972* (Düsseldorf, Droste, 2004).

immoral ‘crusade against the German people’ that the Allies had allegedly launched at that stage, influenced by Soviet and East European Communists and other evil forces.⁵ The resulting forced mass removal of Germans from eastern and east central Europe had amounted to a vast iniquity, which expellee activists attacked in hyperbolic terms. In their view, these expulsions were not just ‘a crime against humanity and a violation of the basic ethical principles of our civilization’.⁶ Because of their sweeping scope and indiscriminate brutality, they purportedly constituted something far worse: ‘the greatest collective crime in history’, which endowed the German expellees with a victim status comparable to that of Jewish victims of the Holocaust.⁷

Such exaggerated descriptions of the iniquities of the expulsions went hand-in-hand with a broader tendency of the expellee activists to relativize their responsibility for the Third Reich’s crimes – and, by extension, to downplay the German people’s responsibility for any transgressions at all. The standard rhetorical gambit was to condemn any ‘violent acts’ committed by the small clique of Nazis that had allegedly controlled the Third Reich, without providing details, and to stress that the expellees themselves had exerted ‘no influence’ on the system.⁸ Instead, they had been victimized by a series of long- and short-term developments over the previous decades, starting with the rise of anti-German nationalist sentiments in east-central Europe before the First World War, escalating with the disastrous Versailles peace settlement and its consequences, particularly for German minority groups in inter-war

⁵ Sudeten German activist Rudolf Lodgman von Auen’s 16 October 1952 address at an expellee rally in West Berlin, in Karl Albert Simon, ed., *Rudolf Lodgman von Auen: Reden und Aufsätze* (Munich: St Jörg, 1954), 115.

⁶ Sudetendeutsche Landsmannschaft pamphlet ‘Die tschechoslowakische Frage’, September 1952, Sudetendeutsches Archiv, Munich (hereafter SDA): NL Lodgman, XII/1.

⁷ See, for instance, Walter Rinke’s 18 July 1954 address at a Silesian expellee rally, reprinted in *Bulletin des Presse- und Informationsamtes der Bundesregierung*, 21 July 1954, 1203.

⁸ See the pamphlet ‘Die tschechoslowakische Frage’, cited in note 6, and Rudolf Lodgman von Auen, as quoted in ‘Überwältigendes Treuebekenntnis zu Volk und Heimat’, *Sudetendeutsche Zeitung*, 4 June 1955.

eastern Europe, and culminating in the calamity of the expulsions at the end of the Second World War. In this fashion, the expellees portrayed themselves as hapless victims who had undergone decades of torment in the hands of overzealous Slav nationalists, only to become innocent pawns of scheming Nazis and tragic victims of an unparalleled collective crime. Their narrative omitted most of the wider international context of the expulsions, such as the precedents set by the Third Reich and its wartime policies or the forced removals of many other European ethnic groups that had also taken place around the end of the war, thereby presenting a highly selective and distorted picture of the recent past.⁹

Although the expellee groups were the main promulgators of such nationally oriented interpretations of World War II-era forced migrations in the Federal Republic, theirs were by no means lone voices in the wilderness. Other actors also expounded similar – albeit typically slightly less reductionist – views, especially in the first decade-and-a-half of the Federal Republic’s existence. Prominent politicians from Chancellor Konrad Adenauer to key Social Democratic opposition leaders echoed the expellee activists’ broad sentiments, supporting most of their key political demands, at least on a rhetorical level, and describing the expulsions of Germans in a similarly de-contextualized way. The standard public narrative emphasized German victimhood while largely ignoring other ethnic and national groups affected by the forced migrations at the end of the war and playing down any causal connections between the Third Reich’s actions and the expulsions of Germans. Adenauer, for instance, excelled in repeatedly stressing the very concrete ‘misery and misfortune’ that ‘millions’ of Germans had suffered, while acknowledging National Socialist

⁹ For more elaboration, see Pertti Ahonen, ‘The Impact of Distorted Memory: Historical Narratives and Expellee Integration in West Germany, 1945-1970’, pp. 238-56 in Rainer Ohliger, Karen Schönwälder and Triadafilos Triadafilopoulos, eds., *European Encounters: Migrants, Migration and European Societies since 1945* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003).

atrocities only in much more abstract terms, as crimes ‘committed in the name of the German people’.¹⁰ Similar arguments were also widely propagated in the West German mass media, particularly during roughly the first two post-war decades.¹¹

These dynamics did, of course, alter later, by the mid-to-late 1960s and early 1970s, particularly after Willy Brandt’s Social-Liberal coalition’s Ostpolitik introduced fresh, less inward-looking accents to West German discourses about the expulsions. In a symbolically significant gesture, the Brandt government endorsed a proposal to replace the term ‘expulsion’ in West German school textbooks with the more comprehensive and neutral – albeit arguably euphemistic – term ‘population transfer’, for instance, and East European perspectives on the forced migrations began to find much wider public circulation in the Federal Republic.¹² Subsequently, the discursive landscape grew ever more diverse, as voices critical of the earlier standard arguments gained strength. But contrary to the claims of those who have maintained that the fate of the expellees subsequently became a political taboo, there was no full-scale rupture in public narratives; traditional discourses about the expulsions and their wider setting persisted in the Federal Republic, certainly among the expellee lobby but also in the broader public sphere, as various politicians, especially those from the CDU/CSU and groups further to the right, as well as some cultural commentators, stuck to the old hymn sheet.¹³ The chorus of old voices continued to sing familiar-sounding, nationally oriented tunes, and that trend persisted even beyond the caesura of German unification. Indeed, the new discussions about German victimhood in the

¹⁰ Robert G. Moeller, ‘Germans as Victims? Thoughts on a Post-Cold War History of World War II’s Legacies’, *History and Memory* 17 (2005): 157, 163.

¹¹ Ahonen, *After the Expulsion*, 54-200.

¹² Helga Hirsch, ‘Flucht und Vertreibung. Kollektive Erinnerung im Wandel’, *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, B 40-1 (2003): esp. 25.

¹³ For such ‘taboo’ arguments, see, for instance, Manfred Kittel, *Vertreibung der Vertriebenen? Der historische Deutsche Osten in der Erinnerungskultur der Bundesrepublik, 1961-1982* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2006); Andreas Kossert, *Kalte Heimat. Die Geschichte der deutschen Vertriebenen nach 1945* (Munich: Siedler, 2008).

Second World War that emerged by the start of the new millennium gave a major boost to narratives that accentuated the suffering of the German expellees.¹⁴

The general story of the public representations of the expulsions and the expellees in the Federal Republic, as evidenced in public discourses of victimization and guilt relativization in particular, is well-known and well-documented by now, thanks to the pioneering work of Robert G. Moeller and others.¹⁵ But the restrictive, nationally oriented perspective on the forced migrations that prevailed in West Germany also manifested itself in other, less explored ways. The terminology used in public discussions of the German expellees and their expulsions was one key factor that has often been overlooked. The word ‘expellee’ (*Vertriebene*) was crucial in itself. As Matthias Beer has demonstrated, the term was a highly politicized Cold War construct that played an important role in the Federal Republic’s public relations war against the GDR and its Soviet bloc allies.¹⁶ It highlighted the violent arbitrariness of the expulsions and pointed at the USSR and its East European satellites as the primary culprits behind the forced removals. It also contrasted with the GDR’s refusal to address the issue of millions of its citizens mistreated and forcibly uprooted with the support of its main ally, except in the most cautious and generic terms, with euphemistic terminology.¹⁷

¹⁴ See, for example, Bill Niven, ed., *Germans as Victims: Remembering the Past in Contemporary Germany* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) and Gilad Margalit, *Guilt, Suffering and Memory: Germany Remembers Its Dead of World War II* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), esp. 221-297.

¹⁵ See, most notably, Robert G. Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001). For a somewhat contrasting perspective, see also the work of Rainer Schulze, including ‘The Politics of Memory: Flight and Expulsion of German Populations after the Second World War and German Collective Memory’, *National Identities* 8 (2006): 367-82.

¹⁶ Matthias Beer, ‘Flüchtlinge – Ausgewiesene – Neubürger – Heimatvertriebene. Flüchtlingspolitik und Flüchtlingsintegration in Deutschland nach 1945, begriffsgeschichtlich betrachtet’, pp. 145-67 in Matthias Beer, Martin Kintzinger and Marita Krauss, eds., *Migration und Integration. Aufnahme und Eingliederung im historischen Wandel* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1997).

¹⁷ On the GDR, see Michael Schwartz’s exhaustive *Vertriebene und ‘Umsiedlerpolitik’. Integrationskonflikte in den deutschen Nachkriegs-Gesellschaften und die Assimilationsstrategien in der SBZ/DDR 1945 bis 1961* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2004).

Even more significantly, however, the term *Vertriebene* was fundamentally important to the wider West German narrative because of its usefulness as a catch-all category that elided differences and created an impression of seeming national homogeneity amongst a population group that was in fact highly diverse and divided. In part, the terminology had this effect with reference to the concept of ‘expulsion’ as such. The word is suggestive of a planned, largely unitary process, an organized, forced removal of an ethnic community from a particular region on the initiative of hostile, presumably foreign authorities. When applied to the German ‘expellees’, it cultivated the impression of unity within a massive population group whose members had supposedly suffered very similar fates in the hands of external enemies while being resettled westwards during or after the Second World War. That impression was not entirely wrong, of course. Millions of Germans were indeed subjected to more or less systematic expulsions organized by external authorities, particularly from former German territories that became part of post-war Poland or Czechoslovakia, but also from Hungary, Yugoslavia, and other areas in the final stages of the conflict and during the first year or two following its conclusion. But large numbers of the so-called ‘expellees’ had left their homes under very different circumstances. Nearly a million had first come to the Reich as a result of mass resettlements and population exchanges carried out by the Nazis under the auspices of the ‘*Heim ins Reich*’ programme, often in the hope of personal gain.¹⁸ Additional hundreds of thousands had been evacuated by Nazi authorities as the Red Army marched into areas of German settlement in 1944 and 1945, and millions of others had chosen to flee from the advancing Soviet offensive of their volition, still enduring a forced migration of

¹⁸ Klaus J Bade, ed., *Enzyklopädie Migration in Europa. Vom 17. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich, 2007), 1082-83 gives a total figure of 867.000.

sorts, but technically not an ‘expulsion’.¹⁹ Upon closer inspection, the seeming unity of fates among the German ‘expellees’ during the ‘expulsion’ thus becomes an artificial construct that masked far-ranging differences in their forced migration experiences.

The wartime fortunes of the ‘expellees’ had also varied widely. By the end of the conflict, millions had been forcibly removed from territories in which their ancestors had lived for generations. This applied with particular force to many of the so-called *Reichsdeutsche* among the expellees, who had been kicked out of areas that in most cases had been populated overwhelmingly by Germans and had belonged to the Reich, in many cases for the entire period since its creation in 1871. It also held true for large numbers of *Volksdeutsche*, many of whom had belonged to minority settlements of ethnic Germans in eastern Europe that had existed for centuries. But others had entered areas of expulsion only during the war, sometimes as direct beneficiaries of the Third Reich’s policies of demographic re-engineering and exploitation. Prime examples included settlers brought into the parts of interwar Poland annexed to the Reich to serve as colonizers of sorts in place of the Jews, ethnic Poles, and others that had been previously removed from these areas through Nazi ethnic cleansing, or Germans who had entered annexed or occupied territories as officials and functionaries of the Third Reich.²⁰ Such differences and more were submerged under the general rubric of ‘expellees’, papering over important differences among the affected population groups and helping to elide distinctions in the degree to which particular individuals and collectives could be regarded not

¹⁹ For an excellent study of the different phases of the forced migrations of Germans from what became post-1945 Poland, see Bernadetta Nitschke, *Vertreibung und Aussiedlung der deutschen Bevölkerung aus Polen 1945 bis 1949* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2003).

²⁰ See, for instance, R.M. Douglas, *Orderly and Humane: The Expulsion of the Germans after the Second World War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), esp. 39-64.

merely as victims of ‘expulsions’ but possibly also as agents and beneficiaries of National Socialist rule.

The use of the blanket term ‘expellee’ also clouded realities in the setting of post-1945 West Germany. It created seeming, superficial anti-Communist unity among population groups that often had little in common, except for the experience of having had to desert their original places of origin because of developments related to the war. The people lumped together as ‘expellees’ of course came from a wide variety of regions across the European continent, as we have already seen, from the Balkans to the Baltic, with a *Reichsdeutsche* majority but a significant *Volksdeutsche* minority.²¹ The differences between the various groups of expellees were in many cases much greater than any unifying features, given the geographic, cultural and linguistic contrasts between them. An academically trained urban professional from, say, Breslau/Wrocław, a highly developed Silesian city that had been an integral part of the German state, would have had very little in common with a peasant farmer who had lived his entire life in the remote Banat region of Yugoslavia, for instance.

Even the supposed ‘Germanness’ of many of the forced migrants in the Federal Republic was by no means as clear as the widespread use of the generic term ‘expellee’ suggested. Most areas of expulsion beyond the boundaries of the German Reich had been characterized by extensive ethnic ambiguity. Communities that defined themselves as German had in most cases intermingled rather 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 let on. This fact had been recognized, at least

²¹ In 1950, 56.9% of the 8 million expellees in the Federal Republic were from areas that had belonged to Germany prior to 1938. Another 24% had come from the Sudetenland, while the remaining 19.1% originated from other parts of eastern Europe. See Reichling, *Die deutschen Vertriebenen in Zahlen, Teil II*, 30-31.

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 territories in eastern Europe 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.²² A sense of a unified national community had been lacking, all official propaganda notwithstanding, as presumed beneficiaries of the *Heim ins Reich* actions had privately complained about being kept ‘like prisoners’ and ‘not being treated like re-settlers but rather like convicts.’²³ One evacuee from Romania subsequently captured the widespread sense of disillusionment well when he explained that ‘the Fatherland about which [he] once used to dream’ had turned out to be ‘a very disappointing place.’²⁴

Similar divisions and tensions were evident in the Federal Republic too, especially during roughly the first post-war decade. Conflicts between native residents of western Germany and incoming expellees were widespread, all the more so as most of the newcomers were initially distributed to rural villages and small towns, areas that had typically suffered less war damage than the heavily bombed bigger cities but were also much more homogeneous, inward-looking and unused to sudden change. The predictable result of a major influx of impoverished strangers into such

²² Pertti Ahonen, Gustavo Corni, Jerzy Kochanowski, Rainer Schulze, Tamas Stark, and Barbara Stelzl-Marx, *People on the Move: Forced Population Movements in Europe in the Second World War and Its Aftermath* (Oxford: Berg, 2008), esp. 117-18.

²³ Testimony of Otto Schmidt in Theodor Schieder, ed., *Documents on the Expulsion of Germans from Eastern and Central Europe. Vol II/III: The Expulsion of the German Population from Hungary and Romania* (Bonn: German Federal Ministry for Expellees, Refugees and War Victims, 1961), 199.

²⁴ Testimony of Gottlob E., as quoted in Rainer Schulze, ‘Forgotten Victims of Beneficiaries of Plunder and Genocide? The Mass Settlement of Ethnic Germans “heim ins Reich”, *Annali dell’Istituto storico italo-germanico in Trento* 27 (2001): 561.

communities at a time of general hardship and disorientation was conflict, manifested not only in economic competition, but also in a clash of cultures, as different accents, dialects, customs and confessions collided head-on. Unsurprisingly, the conflicts were typically at their sharpest in areas where the cultural contrasts between the incoming expellees and the established local residents were the most pronounced. Although these problems were often downplayed at the time, at least in national-level public discourses that tended to emphasize ideals of unity within a community of rebuilding, they were highly evident in unpublished contemporary data, such as a 1946 US opinion poll from south-western Germany which found that only half of the locals regarded the newly arrived expellees as fellow citizens, and they have been well-documented by historians.²⁵

Less well-known than the tensions between local West Germans and incoming expellees, however, are the definitional and political divisions and distinctions that existed within the expellee community itself, particularly early on, even on the question of nationality. Echoing tensions that had been present under the previous regime too, certain groups among the expellees, especially some of the *Volksdeutsche* communities, were widely perceived as definite outsiders – and in some ways as not even properly German – in early post-war West Germany. In private deliberations, West German officials regarded ethnic German peasants from the more remote regions of eastern Europe as particularly problematic in terms of integration into their emerging new polity. As late as 1952, one senior civil servant in Bonn’s Ministry for Expellees, for instance, envisaged large-scale permanent ‘emigration’ to destinations

²⁵ For good, concise accounts of the post-1945 conflicts, see, for example, Douglas, *Orderly and Humane*, esp. 301-325; Ian Connor, *Refugees and Expellees in Post-War Germany* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), esp. 18-98; Rainer Schulze, ‘Growing Discontent: Relations Between Native and Refugee Populations in a Rural District in Western Germany after the Second World War’, *German History* 7 (1989): 332-49. For the poll data, see Douglas, *Orderly and Humane*, 314.

such as Canada or Australia as a promising solution to the problem posed by ‘expellee farmers (ethnic Germans)’, while stressing that other, more nationally mainstream expellees were to be kept in the Federal Republic.²⁶

Citizenship became another divisive issue among the expellees in the early Federal Republic. While those forced out of areas that had belonged to the German state prior to the beginning of Nazi territorial expansion in 1938 were considered German citizens as a matter of course, many ethnic Germans from further afield were at first excluded from the national community. Baltic German expellees, for instance, were labelled stateless Displaced Persons (DPs) rather than Germans in the early post-war period.²⁷ And even the Sudeten-Germans, the largest expellee group in the Federal Republic, with nearly two million residing in the new country by the end of the 1940s, were not granted full German citizenship until 1955.²⁸

The expellees in the Federal Republic were thus not only a highly diverse but also in many ways a very internally divided population group. However, this fact was downplayed in the country’s mainstream public discourses, particularly in the early years but continuing well beyond them, as the expellees were typically portrayed as a much more cohesive and nationally united segment of the population than they really were. In these discourses, the different groups of expellees, with their highly varied backgrounds, experiences, and present-day circumstances, typically merged into vaguely defined and sketchily drawn ‘millions’, to adopt Robert G. Moeller’s

²⁶ Werner Middelman, ‘Auswanderung – ja oder nein?’, 29 October 1952, Bundesarchiv Koblenz (BAK) : B 150, 526, file 1, p. 13.

²⁷ Pascal Maeder, *Forging a New Heimat. Expellees in Post-War West Germany and Canada* (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2011), 105.

²⁸ Reichling, *Die deutschen Vertriebenen in Zahlen. Teil II*, 30; Eva Hahn, ‘Die Sudetendeutschen in der deutschen Gesellschaft: Ein halbes Jahrhundert politischer Geschichte zwischen “Heimat” und “Zuhause”’, pp. 111-134, in Hans Lemberg, Jan Křen and Dusan Kováč, eds., *Im geteilten Europa: Tschechen, Slowaken und Deutsche und ihre Staaten, 1948-1989* (Essen: Klartext, 1998).

observation.²⁹ To be sure, the distinctiveness of particular expellee groups was acknowledged in the sense that, based on their areas of origin, they were labelled as ‘Silesians’, ‘Sudeten Germans’, ‘Baltic Germans’, and so on, and the particular groups also formed organizations on the basis of their regional backgrounds, of course.³⁰ But ultimately the different sub-groupings were still lumped together under the generic rubric of ‘expellees’, especially at the aggregate level. As important distinctions in their experiences and backgrounds were elided, a nationally oriented discourse prevailed, in which the expellees featured as a large collective supposedly united by shared experiences of innocent victimhood in the hands of foreign foes based overwhelmingly on the other side of the Iron Curtain. In the process, the portrayal of the expellees and their fates also served to put a nationally focused spin on West German public discussions about European wartime forced migrations as a whole. As the fates of people defined as Germans stood at the centre of the prevailing West German public discourse, those of other ethnic or national groups remained much more vague, or were ignored entirely. The broader immediate context of the expulsions that had come to affect so many Germans by the end of the war was also marginalized. Possible causal connections between large-scale Nazi policies of forced removal, ethnic re-engineering and genocide, and the subsequent expulsions of Germans were particularly poorly drawn. Overall, the outlook that emerged from the West German discourses was highly simplistic and nationally myopic.

II

What, then, were the political and societal effects and consequences of these nationally oriented public discussions of the World War II era expulsions in the

²⁹ Robert G. Moeller, ‘War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany’, *The American Historical Review* 101 (Oct. 1996): esp. 1017-18.

³⁰ Stickler, ‘*Ostdeutsch heisst gesamtdeutsch*’, esp. 13-97; Ahonen, *After the Expulsion*, 24-38.

Federal Republic? Unsurprisingly, the discourses served multiple purposes. The most immediate and obvious benefits probably accrued to the German expellees themselves. The organized expellee lobby in particular was boosted by the public prominence of the expellees and the expulsions. The ongoing discussions drew attention to their concerns, keeping them on the public agenda and helping to ensure that their key desiderata, particularly the provision of suitable social assistance to the expellees and the maintenance of a hope of return to at least some of the most important areas that the Reich had lost at the war's end were pursued in the politics of the Federal Republic, especially early on. These successes certainly enhanced the prominence of the mainstream expellee organizations and their key activists, helping to mask the numerous internal divisions within the movement and to promote the impression of a powerful, millions-strong force huddled together behind a unified leadership. That, in turn, increased the power of the expellee movement as a political lobby with considerable influence in the Federal Republic, in both domestic and foreign policy, at least until the late 1960s.³¹

In addition, the prevailing public discourses arguably facilitated the societal integration of expellees. Particularly during the early post-war period, when millions of impoverished, traumatised and homesick newcomers eked out a very precarious existence in western Germany, typically facing hostility and discrimination from the native population, the distorted and decontextualized public rhetoric arguably provided them with important psychological succour, helping average expellees maintain a sense of self-worth amidst their threadbare existence. A more accurate public narrative of the darkness of the Nazi past and of the grim realities of the post-

³¹ For arguments that stress the way in which the actual experiences and life histories of rank-and-file expellees were instrumentalized and thereby typically marginalized in these discourses, see the work of Rainer Schulze, including 'The Politics of Memory' (note 15), or chapter 6 in Ahonen et al, *People on the Move* (note 22).

war present might well have overburdened the expellees and facilitated the emergence of resentful, anti-democratic groups among them. Arguably the prevailing discourse matched the psychological needs of many expellees, helping them to endure a very difficult transitional period.³²

The myopic, nationally focused perspective on the wartime forced migrations that prevailed in the Federal Republic also served wider political and societal purposes. As we have seen, especially in the early post-war period, discourses that had originated among the expellees were also eagerly adopted and promulgated by other, more powerful societal actors because of their usefulness for post-war reconstruction and Cold War reorientation in a devastated, post-totalitarian society. The distorted, decontextualized discussion of the fates of the German expellees facilitated West German identity-building in a number of ways. The narrative was helpful in promoting social cohesion by cultivating the impression of a community of suffering among the population. The emphasis on the pain experienced by millions of Germans during their forced migration was something to which most other Germans could also relate, at least on some level, given the level of devastation and deprivation that the country faced in the aftermath of the conflict, regardless of the divisions among the populace caused by different experiences during the Third Reich.³³

At the same time, the nationally focused expellee narrative also helped to relativize and suppress German guilt for the manifold crimes of the Nazi era. In opposition to the thesis of collective German responsibility for the murderous regime that the victorious Allies had promulgated, at least in the early post-war years, before rising Cold War tensions got in the way, the expellee discourse accentuated

³² For more detail, see Ahonen, 'The Impact of Distorted Memory'.

³³ For insightful perspectives on these processes, see, for example, Michael L. Hughes, *Shouldering the Burdens of Defeat: West Germany and the Reconstruction of Social Justice* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

apologetic arguments about the presumed deep divide between a few evil Nazis and the fundamentally decent, uninvolved German people that were receiving wide contemporary circulation in other contexts too. Even more helpfully, the narrative also worked as a tool of Cold War mobilization, given that the main villains lay firmly on the other side of the Iron Curtain, among the Soviets and other East Europeans, Communists above all, who could be blamed directly for the cruelties and injustices of the expulsions. Accordingly, the expellee elites repeatedly cursed both Soviet Russia and Communism, bemoaning the fact that the outcome of the war had brought ‘pan-Slavic imperialism’ and ‘Asiatic Bolshevism’ to the ‘borders of Lower Saxony and Bavaria’, creating a ‘colossal’ danger’ to German and Western ‘culture and civilization’.³⁴ As an added bonus, the narrative could even be used, at least occasionally and discreetly, to jab at the Western Allies for their involvement in the forced upheavals, thereby weakening their claims to moral superiority vis-à-vis the defeated Germans and reminding them of the hazards that the uprooted expellees could still pose, if post-war West Germany were to be let down by its newfound political patrons.³⁵ The oft-evoked doomsday scenario of a large-scale ‘nationalistic radicalisation’ among the expellees had particular potency in this regard.³⁶ With all these potential benefits, it was no wonder that key political actors in the early Federal Republic drew on the expellee narrative repeatedly and emphatically.

But the narrative also brought with it dangers and problematic legacies that became increasingly evident as the years passed and the new state established itself.

³⁴ Eichstatt Declaration of Sudeten German leaders, 30 November 1949, in ‘Der Landesobmann: Bericht über die Zeit vom Ende November bis Ende März 1950’, SDA: NL Lodgman I/0/2:3; Hans-Christoph Seeböhm ‘Die politische Aufgabe der Sudetendeutschen’, *Sudetendeutsche Zeitung*, 23 May 1953; Linus Kather at the CDU *Parteitag*, Recklinghausen, 28-29 August 1948, in Helmuth Pütz, ed., *Konrad Adenauer und die CDU in der britischen Besatzungszone* (Bonn: Eichholz, 1975); Rudolf Lodgman von Auen’s address to the 1949 Sudeten German Whitsun rally in Bayreuth, SDA: NL Lodgman, I/6:1.

³⁵ Ahonen, *After the Expulsion*, esp. 81-115.

³⁶ See, for instance, Rudolf Lodgman von Auen in the *Hauptversammlung* of the Sudetendeutsche Landsmannschaft, 21 September 1952, SDA: NL Lodgman, I/0/2:5.

Some of the most obvious problems related to the Federal Republic's protracted and closely analyzed attempts to come to terms with the Nazi past. As the expellee narrative gained increasingly wide exposure in the 1940s and the 1950s, highlighting German suffering while referring to German crimes and their victims only in broad, detached terms, the costs gradually added up, irrespective of the narrative's previous short-term benefits. The selective public memory fostered a general atmosphere in which difficult questions about individual responsibility and state-society relations during the Third Reich were long dodged. In the words of Michael H. Hughes, the situation was 'tailor-made for masking moral agency', for suppressing investigations of German guilt for Nazi transgressions.³⁷ As a consequence, the cause of justice suffered severely, as West German courts took little action against perpetrators of crimes against humanity until the 1960s, and Adenauer's government, at least initially, invested much more effort in securing the release of convicted German war criminals from foreign gaols than in tracking down unpunished mass murderers at home.³⁸

In addition, the expellee narrative's tendency to airbrush the bulk of the Second World War out of the picture helped to postpone a full reckoning with the fact that Germany had planned, launched and lost the war – and was therefore destined to pay a heavy territorial price for it. As I have argued elsewhere, this problem grew particularly severe because one aspect of the expellee lobby's political agenda – its calls for border revisions in the east to enable a mass return of expellees to their old homelands – became instrumentalized in West German domestic politics early on. Although aware that the pursuit of re-annexations east of the GDR was neither

³⁷ Michael L. Hughes, "'Through No Fault of Our Own': West Germans Remember Their War Losses", *German History* 18 (2000): 209.

³⁸ See especially Norbert Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik: Die Anfänge der Bundesrepublik und die NS-Vergangenheit* (Munich: Beck, 1996).

possible nor desirable, Bonn's governmental and party elites carefully cultivated the impression of a far-reaching congruence of interests between themselves and the organized expellee movement on these issues, primarily because of electoral calculations and the expellee lobby's usefulness for the Adenauer government's broader policy agenda in the Cold War. As a result, West Germany's political leaders soon found themselves trapped in seemingly revanchist Eastern policy stances which caused growing problems for the country's foreign and reunification policies, but which the political leadership was loath to readjust until the late 1960s, largely for fear of electoral retribution from the millions of voters whose interests and demands the expellee organizations were assumed to represent. Even after Willy Brandt's Social Liberal coalition finally broke with the old taboos, de facto if not fully de jure, the expellee lobby's revisionist shadow continued to hover over Bonn, causing periodic public relations crises – particularly for the Kohl government, which courted the expellee lobby for tactical reasons – and complicating the negotiation of the final unification settlement in 1990.³⁹

Outside the Federal Republic itself, the nationally focused expellee narrative in general and its revisionist accents in particular also caused significant problems, certainly from the German perspective. These discourses fuelled fears of German revanchism, above all in Eastern Europe, where memories of the particular viciousness of Nazi oppression were slow to fade in any case. Especially in Poland and Czechoslovakia, the two countries most directly linked to the expulsions and the corresponding territorial disputes, the West German discourses provoked widespread popular anxiety. They also handed a political trump card to the Communist

³⁹ Ahonen, *After the Expulsion*; idem., 'German Expellee Organizations: Between Revisionism and Reconciliation', *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* vol. 45 (2005): 353-372. See also Gerhard A. Ritter, *Hans-Dietrich Genscher, das Auswärtige Amt und die deutsche Vereinigung* (Munich: Beck, 2013), esp. 91-94, 140-47, 163-66.

authorities, who could instrumentalize the issue by exaggerating the power of revisionist forces in the Federal Republic and using the resulting angst to boost their own legitimacy by presenting themselves and their Soviet backers as the essential guarantors of national security against the German menace. The negative stereotypes of Germans and the distorted perceptions of the Federal Republic's internal power relations fuelled by these practices proved difficult to overcome later on, even under the auspices of détente. Although the situation has, of course, changed in fundamental ways after German unification, indications of deep-rooted suspicions of Germany and the Germans that are directly traceable to German discourses about the expulsions and the expellees still remain and continue to cause friction in the relations between the Federal Republic and its eastern neighbours – and within Germany itself.⁴⁰

The ongoing controversies generated by the plans for a Centre Against Expulsions (Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen) in Berlin provide a good case study of these dynamics. The project began late in the last century as an initiative of the umbrella pressure group of the German expellees, the Bund der Vertriebenen (BdV). The original proposal, unveiled by BdV President Erika Steinbach in 1999, was a loose sketch for a Centre that would 'use the example of the history, culture and suffering of the German expellees to oppose expulsions worldwide'.⁴¹ That stated objective sounded worthy enough, and appealingly trans-national, unlike much of the previous history of (West) German public discourse on the expulsions. The project therefore received significant support, not only from expellee activists and

⁴⁰ See, for instance, Thomas Urban, *Der Verlust. Die Vertreibung der Deutschen und Polen im 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Beck, 2004); Timothy Burcher, *The Sudeten German Question and Czechoslovak-German Relations since 1989* (London: Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies, 1996); Andreas Götze, 'Der schwierige Weg zur Verständigung. Zur sudetendeutschen Frage in den deutsch-tschechischen Beziehungen nach 1989', *Osteuropa* 45 (November 1995): 1034-47.

⁴¹ *Deutscher Ostdienst*, 4 June 1999, 5

conservative German politicians, but also from a variety of prominent individuals from across the political spectrum, in the Federal Republic and elsewhere.

However, the project also provoked fierce objections and soon got mired in controversy, both within and beyond Germany. Despite the BdV's stated intentions, its original plans for the Centre and the general exhibition about expulsions that was to form its core were in fact still rather inward-looking and focused on the German expellees and their suffering, thereby perpetuating old discourses rather than transcending them. More ominously, such disputes became linked to wider polemics about relative victimization in the Second World War that raged with considerable intensity in the early years of the new millennium. Polish and Czech observers in particular took offence to the enhanced victim status that they suspected the German expellee lobby of seeking through its Centre project. Their objections were strengthened by the widespread apprehension that, once attained, this victim status could be used as a weapon in campaigns aimed at claiming material compensation for property losses suffered by the German expellees.⁴²

The BdV and its allies typically dismissed such criticisms as deliberate distortions or politically motivated defamations, claims that were not entirely groundless, as the Centre project did indeed become instrumentalized at times, most blatantly in Poland, where populist politicians and commentators did not hesitate to seize on old fears about German expellees and to use the resulting controversies to their political advantage, especially in the early years of the 21st century.⁴³ Sometimes the results could be farcically vitriolic, as when the low-brow Polish weekly *Wprost*'s ran a cover story in 2003 that featured the headline 'The Trojan Horse from Germany' next to a collage image of BdV chief Steinbach, dressed in a Nazi uniform, riding on

⁴² See, for instance, Pawel Lutomski, 'The Debate about a Center Against Expulsions. An Unexpected Crisis in German-Polish Relations?', *German Studies Review* 27 (2004): 449-68.

⁴³ For some insightful commentary, see Urban, *Verlust*.

the back of the then German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder.⁴⁴ But, more fundamentally, the polemics highlighted the long-term consequences of West German public discourses about the expulsions, as the fears and concerns generated by the plans for the Centre fed on entrenched expectations, based on past rhetorical patterns. To be sure, the sharpest polemics have faded over the past few years, following the BdV project's co-optation into a governmentally endorsed German foundation that is meant to produce a permanent documentation centre on expulsions in Berlin, on a broad and inclusive basis. The plans for the exhibitions and other key features of the future centre have undergone modifications; compromises have been found; and the most inward-looking aspects of the BdV's early blueprints have been expunged.⁴⁵

But old problems still remain. The exhibition 'Forced Departures' (*Erzwungene Wege*), for instance, which the foundation staged in Berlin in 2006 and which it continues to endorse on its official website, still in many ways harks back to the nationally focused German expellee narrative and its myopic perception patterns. To be sure, the exhibition does look beyond the German case alone, incorporating concise portrayals of numerous other forced migrations from across twentieth century Europe and beyond, ranging from 'the genocide of the Armenians' in 1915/1916 to various Nazi-initiated deportations of the Second World War, including those of Jews, categorised as 'the beginning of the Holocaust', and the ethnic cleansings of post-1991 Yugoslavia. But the exhibition also makes a point of avoiding any 'weighing of the suffering' of particular victims or victim groups against one another; nor does it try to draw causal connections between particular expulsions. As a result, it ends up listing seemingly distinct and parallel episodes in the history of forced migrations, in a decontextualized fashion, which leaves the expulsions of Germans as poorly

⁴⁴ *Wprost*, 21 September 2003.

⁴⁵ The foundation's website can be found at: <http://www.z-g-v.de/index1.html> (accessed 4 June 2013).

connected to the preceding history of the Third Reich as the traditional forced migration narrative in the Federal Republic had done. Similarly, the exhibition also fails to differentiate sufficiently among the German expellees, portraying them as one collective united by very similar histories of victimization and downplaying their diverging backgrounds, wartime experiences, and post-war fortunes. Again and again, the exhibition simply refers to the flight and expulsion of ‘the Germans’ from a wide range of regions, taking for granted the existence of a national community among them.⁴⁶ In these and other ways, then, even the German expellee lobby’s most recent, supposedly inclusive and comprehensive public interpretations of the expulsions remain rooted in the nationally oriented perspectives that have traditionally dominated relevant West German public discourses. Present-day polemics about the place of the expulsions and their commemoration on the public agenda, in the Federal Republic and in the broader affected region, are in large part traceable to the long shadows of this past.

Arguably, however, the West German public discourses on the expulsions have also made a much more profound and far-reaching impact in the Federal Republic – an impact that has been largely overlooked. One of the country’s key public policy challenges over the last decades has been to reconcile the reality of the Federal Republic as a multi-ethnic society of large-scale immigration with the myth of Germanness as an ethnically homogeneous and exclusive category. The roots of the national myth of homogeneity reach deep, of course, to long-standing cultural assumptions and particular pieces of legislation, especially the citizenship law of 1913 and its 1934 amendments, which laid the basis for a largely *ius sanguinis* definition of

⁴⁶ *Erzwungene Wege. Flucht und Vertreibung im Europa des 20. Jahrhunderts. Ausstellung im Kronprinzenpalais, Berlin* (Berlin: Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen, 2006), esp. 4, 22, 44, 74-81. See also <http://erzwungenewege.z-g-v.de> (accessed 4 June 2013) and Tim Völkerling, *Flucht und Vertreibung im Museum: zwei aktuelle Ausstellungen und ihre geschichtskulturellen Hintergründe im Vergleich* (Münster: Lit, 2008).

Germanness until modifications to the nationality law were finally pushed through in 2000 and thereafter, amidst pronounced political controversy, making the acquisition of German citizenship somewhat easier for foreign-born residents of the Federal Republic.⁴⁷

The evolution of definitions of Germanness is a highly complicated story, and it cannot be addressed in much depth here, except to suggest that an important factor in its post-1945 development merits more attention: the way in which the nationally focused expellee discourses in the Federal Republic have helped to perpetuate problematic conceptions of the supposed ethnic homogeneity of Germans. By drastically downplaying the great differences in the backgrounds of the incoming people labelled as German expellees, especially those who originated from widely scattered ethnic German settlements across eastern Europe, the post-war public discussions reinforced inaccurate notions of national uniformity among West Germans at a time when the arriving expellees, especially the *Volksdeutsche* – with their linguistic, cultural, and other peculiarities – were already transforming the country into a land of at least limited immigrant multiculturalism.

Later on, public discourse and social reality in this area arguably diverged even more widely, as so-called *Spätaussiedler*, residents of eastern Europe defined as ethnic Germans but left behind at the time of the expulsions, continued to immigrate into the Federal Republic during the Cold War. Problematically, the national affiliation of these newcomers was even less clear-cut than that of many of their predecessors. As even their German language skills were frequently poor to non-existent, attempts to define particular persons' Germanness often had to rely on such

⁴⁷ On this background, see, for example, Dieter Gosewinkel, *Einbürgern und ausschließen. Die Nationalisierung der Staatsangehörigkeit vom Deutschen Bund bis zur Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003); Geoff Eley and Jan Palmowski, eds., *Citizenship and National Identity in Twentieth Century Germany* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

highly dubious criteria as whether they or their ancestors had served in organizations such as the Wehrmacht, the Waffen-SS or the German police during the Second World War or signed the Nazi *Volksliste* in occupied Poland, thereby allegedly demonstrating their Germanness, or at least their desire to be Germanized. If the answer to these questions was yes, the applicants were likely to be welcomed to the Federal Republic as German citizens, regardless of their wider cultural backgrounds and experiences, which in many cases were very far removed from those of more established West Germans.⁴⁸ By not acknowledging such contradictions head-on, West Germans overlooked much of the extensive diversity within their own ranks, perpetuating myths of national homogeneity and postponing a proper confrontation with the issue of multicultural diversity, which had begun to manifest itself much earlier in the post-World War II era than commonly acknowledged, not with the arrival of Mediterranean *Gastarbeiter* from the mid-to-late 1950s onwards but with the influx of expellees on whom the label of Germanness had been bestowed rather too sweepingly up to a decade earlier.

Overall, then, the West German case throws up various issues that have broader relevance in the context of post-World War II Europe. It illuminates some of the complexities and contradictions that have arisen from the post-1945 tendency of European nation states to view the trans-national reality of wartime forced migrations through nationally tinted lenses. That approach was in many ways tempting, perhaps even predictable, in the context of post-war reconstruction and nation building, and it could yield various benefits in integrating impoverished victims of forced migrations, stabilizing social and political conditions, and generally re-establishing some kind of

⁴⁸ For insightful observations, see Timothy Garton Ash, *In Europe's Name: Germany and the Divided Continent* (New York: Vintage, 1993), esp. 233-36. On the dubiousness of Nazi efforts to construct and define 'Germanness' in eastern Europe, see also D.L. Bergen, 'The "Volksdeutschen" of Eastern Europe, World War II and the Holocaust: Constructed Ethnicity, Real Genocide', *Yearbook of European Studies*, 13 (1999): 70-93.

normalcy in the wake of an utterly devastating world war. But the nationally oriented perspective was also fundamentally restrictive and distorted, and in the longer term it caused significant problems, nationally but also internationally, some of which remain at least partly unresolved even in the early 21st century. For the future, a broader, more inclusive perspective is needed: a perspective that acknowledges the suffering of particular individuals and groups, but places the fates of these people in the broader framework of trans-national migrations in a properly contextualized fashion that also pays attention to causal relationship between related sets of events. In that effort, trans-national projects that look beyond any particular nation state and integrate voices from various different groups and communities will be necessary, as, ultimately, forced migrations – or indeed other kinds of migrations – cannot be adequately understood and represented within traditional national paradigms.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ For interesting perspectives, see, for instance, Dieter Bingen, Włodzimierz Borodziej and Stefan Troebst, eds., *Vertreibungen europäisch erinnern? Historische Erfahrungen – Vergangenheitspolitik – Zukunftskonzeptionen* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 2003); Bernd Faulenbach and Andreas Helle, eds., *Zwangsmigration in Europa: Zur wissenschaftlichen und politischen Auseinandersetzung um die Vertreibung der Deutschen aus dem Osten* (Essen: Klartext, 2005); Anja Kruke, ed., *Zwangsmigration und Vertreibung – Europa im 20. Jahrhundert* (Bonn: J.H.W. Dietz, 2006).