

The “Other” Holocaust – Forced Relocation of Ethnic Germans

Most of the histories of World War II that I have read do not cover what happened to the Germans after World War II. The tendency is to skip from the cease-fire right into the rebuilding of Europe. Our histories leave out one of the largest forced migrations in human history, the ejection of between 12 and 14 million German-speaking civilians from their places of residence in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia, and Poland¹. At least 500,000 of those exiled died (estimates vary between a half million and over 2 million) during the operation as the result of starvation, disease or maltreatment. Even worse, tens of thousands of Germans died as the result of forced labor or “reparations in kind” that went on for years after the war. Those events are largely covered up, by intent, because they do not show the Allies in the best light.

If you think back to the causes of World War II, you will recall that *Lebensraum* or “space for life” was an important component of the Nazi creed. The German people needed space to expand and more natural resources than Germany alone could provide. Hitler said “We are overpopulated and cannot feed ourselves from our own resources.” Germany expanded first into Austria, announcing a union or “Anschluss” of the two countries². Then Hitler pressed for the incorporation of the Sudetenland, that portion of Czechoslovakia that was already home to 3 million ethnic Germans, one quarter of the total population of Czechoslovakia³. Even prior to World War II, there were ethnic Germans throughout Europe.

The decision to forcibly move these people, ironically enough taking place at the same time as Germans were being tried at Nuremberg for war crimes that included the “deportation and other inhumane acts committed against any civilian population”, was felt to be justified for two reasons:

- It was an attempt at “defusing ethnic antagonisms through the mass transfer of populations.”⁴
- It was a justified retribution for the war crimes, most especially the Holocaust, committed by the Nazis during the war.

At the Yalta conference of February, 1945, Stalin had been promised “reparations in kind” to rebuild the ravaged Soviet Union. He would immediately conscript 700,000 German men and women, both POWs and civilians, to work in labor camps. The conditions on the transports and at the camps were so terrible that approximately 270,000 of the deportees died.⁵

The Soviet Union ultimately used several million Germans in forced labor. Most were released in 1953; some were held until 1956. But the Soviets were not the only ones using forced labor.

¹ <http://chronicle.com/article/The-European-Atrocity-You/132123/>

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anschluss>

³ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sudetenland>

⁴ Richard J. Evans, *In Hitler's Shadow* (1989)

⁵ <http://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/a-time-of-retribution-paying-with-life-and-limb-for-the-crimes-of-nazi-germany-a-759737-5.html>

By March of 1947, it is estimated that 4 million Germans were being used as forced labor.⁶

At the end of the war, some 4.5 million ethnic Germans were still in Poland. That was about half the German population at its peak. The Polish Communist party took the position that "We must expel all the Germans because countries are built on national lines and not on multinational ones." Ultimately, about 1 million would be granted Polish citizenship and over 3 million exiled. But prior to exile more than 200,000 Germans would be sent to forced labor camps such as Central Labor Camp Jaworzno, Central Labor Camp Potulice, Łambinowice and Zgoda labor camp. Estimates of the death rate vary between 15,000 and 60,000.⁷

Hungary was at peace with its German population, which numbered approximately 500,000 after the war. This included some number of German-speaking Jews. But in keeping with the Allies Potsdam accord everyone who had declared themselves to be German on the 1941 census was stripped of their property and exiled.

In Yugoslavia, the ethnic Germans were divided into those who could be forced to work and those who couldn't and sent to camps on that basis. The mortality rate in the camps for those who could not work, mostly the elderly and children, was close to 50%. Children under 14 years of age were taken from their parents and placed with Yugoslav families.

The use of forced labor was not confined to Eastern European countries. Approximately 750,000 German POWs were used as forced labor by the French and there were numerous allegations of starvation. In the October 12th, 1945 issue of the New Yorker, conditions in French POW camps were compared to Dachau. Many of these soldiers had been turned over to the French by the Americans. Patton wrote in his diary "I'm also opposed to sending POW's to work as slaves in foreign lands (in particular, to France) where many will be starved to death." He also noted "It is amusing to recall that we fought the revolution in defense of the rights of man and the civil war to abolish slavery and have now gone back on both principles."⁸ Additionally, France expelled 25,000 German-speaking civilians from their homes; some were forced to clear minefields in Alsace.

Jews must reject the concept of collective guilt, if for no other reason than that it forms the theoretical basis for anti-Semitism. Next week the topic will be the life of Simon Wiesenthal, the Holocaust survivor who dedicated his life to tolerance.

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forced_labor_of_Germans_after_World_War_II

⁷ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flight_and_expulsion_of_Germans_\(1944%E2%80%931950\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flight_and_expulsion_of_Germans_(1944%E2%80%931950))

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forced_labor_of_Germans_after_World_War_II