

The expulsion of the Germans of Czechoslovakia after the Second World War

History and conflicting memories

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ABSTRACT

The expulsion of the Germans of Czechoslovakia in 1945-1946 brought an end to the centuries-long presence of German-speaking populations in this part of Central Europe. The German-Czech disagreement regarding these expulsions remained strong throughout the second half of the twentieth century. The suffering endured by Czechoslovaks under Nazi domination, as well as that experienced by the German-speaking population upon their expulsion have fuelled strong resentment on both sides since 1945. This rancour on the part of those who were expelled was reinforced by the silence that the communist regime imposed on this thorny subject in Czechoslovakia, leaving West Germany with the task of granting reparations. The initiation of a reconciliation process was almost impossible in these conditions. The discussions initiated since 1989 have nevertheless enabled a return to calmer relations, which are more in step with the evolution of memories of the Second World War in Europe.



The Zentrales Denkmal Flucht und Vertreibung 1945 [Central Memorial for the Flight and Expulsion of 1945], conceived by Joachim Bandau and inaugurated in 1999, Nuremberg.

The expulsion of the Germans of Czechoslovakia in 1945-1946 had a number of causes. While economic and social arguments motivated this decision, its moral and even legal foundation remains the collective guilt (*Kollektivschuld*) ascribed to the Germans. Many of the Germans of Czechoslovakia engaged in favour of Hitler's Reich, and the civilian population suffered greatly under Nazi domination, still symbolized today by the destruction of the village of Lidice in 1942. More broadly, the German-speaking community was accused of oppressing the Czech nation since the Battle of White Mountain (1620), which saw the defeat of Czech nobles, who had mostly converted to Protestantism, at the hands of the Catholic forces of Habsburg. The expulsion therefore had an older origin, with arguments formulated during the period in which national discourses crystallized in the late nineteenth century. The creation of the Czech Republic in October 1918 provided Czechs with an initial revenge against the Germans, founded on rejecting the "community of destiny" established by the Habsburg Empire. Despite the participation of German parties in coalition governments, it was in fact the "community of conflict" that determined relations between Czechs and Germans during the interwar period. After 1933, the region of Sudetenland, where the majority of Germans resided in relatively compact communities, was targeted by Hitler's propaganda. Nazi Germany's creation of the Protectorate of Bohemia-Moravia in March 1939 completed the separation of the two groups, while Slovakia became a satellite state of the German Reich. During the Second World War, exiled Czech politicians, chief among them Edvard Beneš, advocated the deportation of the German populations of re-established Czechoslovakia. Western Allies as well as the Soviet Union supported their project.

The expulsion began in May 1945, and initially proceeded according to extremely brutal methods, despite the existence of a legal framework provided by the decrees of May 19, 1945 issued by President Beneš. These texts, called the "Beneš decrees," considered on principle all citizens declaring themselves as German and as "non-trustworthy." Military and paramilitary groups engaged in abuse during the first months, with the most serious and recent estimates approaching 30,000 deaths; this ultimately came to an end when the Potsdam Conference (July-August 1945) obliged Czechoslovakia to proceed with the expulsions with greater respect for the law of nations. In the end, approximately three million Germans were expelled and their property expropriated by Czech and Slovak states (where the proportion of deportees was much lower) until late October 1946.

The refugees, who arrived in a ravaged Germany, experienced disastrous material conditions which were compounded by the disarray caused by expulsion. While most Germans from Sudetenland found asylum in FRG territory, most of those from Moravia and Southern Bohemia crossed the Austrian border. The expropriation was radical and without compensation. It involved both the large estates of the nobility and possessions of all kinds, including companies and any goods that the Germans could not take with them. On the Czech side, there was a broad consensus regarding the legitimacy of the expulsions with only a few voices speaking out to condemn the most brutal phase of the expulsions albeit without contesting their validity. It took until the short-lived thaw of 1968 for Czech intellectuals to revisit the events and to contest the theory of collective guilt, although their voices were drowned out by the "normalization" taking place after the intervention of the forces of the Warsaw Pact—in other words the return to the communist norm from which "socialism with a human face" had deviated.

Associations quickly formed in Federal Germany (Sudetendeutsche Landmannschaft, Sudetenland Patriotic Association) and Austria (Verband der Volksdeutschen Landsmannschaften, Union of Patriotic German Associations) to represent the interests of the deportees, who benefited from a West German law passed in May 1952 which provided a right to compensation for the losses suffered. However, in the Soviet Bloc, no possibility of compensation or reparation was imaginable in the context of the Cold War. The claims formulated by West Germans or Austrians were not heard in communist Czechoslovakia, while the GDR cultivated its good terms with Prague by remaining silent on the question. Not being recognized as victims reinforced the conviction of those expelled that they had suffered an injustice, for on the contrary they were presented as essentialised and collective guilty parties.

German and Austrian associations experienced renewed activity after 1989. They acted as lobbies in an attempt to

make the revocation of the decrees of 1945 a condition for the entry of the Czech Republic in the European Union. These organizations found a receptive ear with the Bavarian CSU (party on the right allied with the CDU on the federal level) in Germany, and with parties of the extreme right (FPÖ) and the centre-right (ÖVP) in Austria. German and Austrian governments were nevertheless careful not to openly support the demands of these associations, in order to avoid hindering the process of European integration. Despite Václav Havel's declaration deploring the "wrongdoing" in January 1990, the question of reparations and the recognition of the illegitimate nature of the expulsions on the basis of collective guilt nevertheless continued to poison relations between the three countries for a number of years, and disturbed accession negotiations with the Czech Republic. The work conducted in parallel by the Commission of German-Czech Historians (Gemeinsamedeutsch-tschechische Historikerkommission) did not find an echo with the associations of deported or Czech public opinion, which continues to legitimize the expulsion but recognizes that relations between the two countries are strained by this painful memory.

However, symbolic gestures of reconciliation took place during the 1990s and 2000s, albeit in very limited fashion. While the German language exclusively uses the word "*Vertreibung*" (expulsion) and in Czech the term that is especially used is "*odsun*" (deportation), the term "*vyhnání*" (expulsion) appeared in 1992 in the Treaty on Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation between Federal Germany and Czechoslovakia. Similarly, the Czech-German Fund for the Future (Česko-německý fond budoucnosti) was created in 1999 based on the model of that for Jewish property, with the objective of discussing the possibility of compensating the Germans who had to work in detention camps before their deportation, along with the victims of wrongful imprisonment. For all that, it never led to concrete results. Despite efforts on both sides, Europe has found a limit to its ambition of constructing a memory of the Second World War—and of conflicts in general—that is truly peaceful and shared.

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