

Rinke, Andreas: *Le grand retour. Die französische Displaced-Person-Politik (1944-1951)*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang/Frankfurt am Main 2002. ISBN: 3-631-37863-7; 507 S.

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Since the appearance of Wolfgang Jacobmeyer's basic study¹ on displaced persons (DPs), widespread research activities have developed in this field. While many of these studies focus on regions or specific DP-groups, Andreas Rinke presents an analysis of the French DP-policy both in France itself and in the French occupied zone in Germany, and thus provides insights not only into French post-war administration but also into that nation's dealing with the past. Rinke identifies a lack of research in the field of French politics towards displaced persons after World War II that seems all the more significant because many politicians of the Fifth Republic were apparently deeply impressed by various experiences during the war: as deportees, prisoners of war or forced labourers. While even recent studies have occupied themselves with the British and American perspective as regards DPs, Rinke focuses on French policy while being aware of the overall background of allied DP-policies. On a broad basis of administrative sources – mostly sparing the DPs' perspective and leaving them as mere passive objects – the author not only analyses those various political efforts to re-integrate the men and women who returned from Germany or from their labour commandos in the East but also reflects on the general discourse in French society.

The release and the return of more than two million French prisoners of war, forced labourers, and deportees clearly was the Government's predominant aim. The fact that it could not just regard the DP-question as an administrative problem but as a social, political and economical problem of its own society as well, clearly marks the difference between the French and the Anglo-American position. Rinke points out that the French Government instituted a somewhat harsh policy towards non-French DPs in France, e.g.

handing over many of them against their will to the Soviet Union. At this point one of the great merits of Rinke's book becomes evident: to analyse French policies towards both French DPs in other European countries and non-French DPs in France itself – and demonstrate the complexity of motives, means and aims of administrative behaviour. However, the French government often lacked this clear insight into the interdependence of its policy towards both groups while its major aim remained the return of the French DPs as soon as possible – not for humanitarian but for economical and demographic purposes.

Rinke states that the attitude towards different groups of DPs varied considerably: it was callous (regarding the non-French DPs) and sympathetic (regarding the French DPs) at the same time – depending on nationality. Regarding the post-war reaction towards Middle- and East-Europeans in France and Germany, only minor differences can be detected. In both countries, the local population assumed that particularly DPs from Eastern Europa were generally inclined to theft and plundering. Apparently, the racist ideology in Germany and the democratic tradition in France led to similar results in people's perception. At this point it would have been helpful to analyse the long-term notions that prevailed in each country.

At no time did the French public comprehend why many East-European DPs remained unwilling to return to their native countries, thus ignoring that contempt, punishment, or even death awaited them once they returned beyond what was becoming the iron curtain. Yet, as Rinke argues, the harsh treatment might even have had the effect that the DPs had better chances to reintegrate themselves while the American „caring“ policy made them subsistent on donations. On the other hand, French DPs soon felt a kind of neglect as regards the commemorative acknowledgments within the society they returned to. Among the various French groups of victims they occupied a bottom place in the hierarchy. While former members of the resistance movement demanded an active role in

¹ Wolfgang Jacobmeyer: Vom Zwangsarbeiter zum Heimatlosen Ausländer. Die Displaced Persons in Westdeutschland 1945-1951, Göttingen 1985.

French public life, it took decades for Jewish deportees to return into the focus of the remembrance's discourse – French history textbooks did not mention the Holocaust until the Sixties. Furthermore, French society remained suspicious of former prisoners of war and French forced labourers, insinuating that they purposely had refrained from fighting against the Germans.

Rinke shows the particulars: how repatriation was organised, which impact the Cold War had on the Government's position, and which measures were taken in order to integrate the returning DPs. The remaining questions raised by Rinke's book focus on the relationship between political culture and political actions. It is somehow puzzling that the long French tradition of human rights and of cosmopolitan liberal thoughts proved to be absent in regard to that country's DP-policy. The postulate of individual liberties and self-determination had to stand back when France set off to regain its territorial sovereignty after the German occupation. Thus Rinke's analysis confirms that the „national“ perspective dominated the sphere of political actions regardless of „higher“ universal principles.

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