

Evacuations in the German-French Border Region During the Second World-War

Veranstalter: Universität des Saarlandes; Université Paris-Sorbonne (Paris IV); Ruhr-Universität Bochum

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The international workshop with participants from eight different countries took place on 10 and 11 June 2011 in the municipal archives of Saarbrücken at a few steps from the Franco-German border. The meeting had been born out of a recent research project launched by the Universität des Saarlandes, an initiative that meanwhile has extended to the Université Paris-Sorbonne (Paris IV) and the Ruhr-Universität Bochum.¹ Headed by Rainer Hudemann, Johannes Großmann, and Nicholas Williams (Saarbrücken) as well as Olivier Forcade (Paris) and Fabian Lemmes (Bochum), the project aims at connecting young as well as established historians around a thriving field of transnational research: assessing, understanding, and contextualising civilian evacuations during the Second World War. Thematically, the project corresponds to a growing scholarly interest in different forms of forced migrations and nuanced approaches to state-society relations in extreme settings like war.² With an analytical mix of transnational, comparative, and 'crossed' perspectives, the study of evacuations promises furthermore to provide fresh impulses on current methodological debates in history.

Introducing the thematic framework of the workshop, FABIAN LEMMES (Bochum) and JOHANNES GROSSMANN (Saarbrücken) situated evacuations, a phenomenon largely left aside by historical research until today³, in the larger context of migrations.⁴ They suggested defining evacuations as temporary movements of people but also of objects by state authorities as a means of their protection, or of coercion, in times of (imminent) war. An analysis of evacuations should first of all focus empirically on the actual procedure of moving people or things. Further,

comparative as well as transnational aspects should come into view, tracing evacuations as universal cross-border phenomena in Second World War Europe. Another important dimension is the category of social spaces that are transformed, emptied, or created by evacuations. Finally, in a perspective of the *longue durée*, the importance of evacuations as a „phenomenon of the 20th century“ deserves discussion.

Opening the first of the seven panels, JULIA TORRIE (Fredericton, Canada) outlined the chances of a transnational approach to the phenomenon of evacuations. Torrie pleaded for a pragmatic employment of transnational, comparative, and *histoire-croisée* frameworks. Such a methodological mix would help coming to grips with complex war-time situations that transcend national borders. This plea skilfully set the tone for the following presentations and debates.

Several contributions examined evacuations in a wider European context. JOHN STEWART (Glasgow) presented the British case, in which a total of 1.5 million civilians were evacuated during the war, among them many schoolchildren from London. While evacuation was voluntary and usually short-term, conflicts occurred between the evacuees and their hosts, revealing and often strengthening existing class and urban-rural boundaries. Stewart also stressed important regional variations within the British Empire. A lively debate ensued around the talk of ALEXANDER FRIEDMANN (Heidelberg / Saarbrücken) on evacuations in Belarus in 1941. Friedmann noted the „pragmatic and cynical“ Stalinist approach to evacuations: valuable material as well as qualified men and party members ought to be saved and the rest left to the mercy of the Germans.

¹ See http://www.nng.uni-saarland.de/en/research/research_focus/evacuations.htm (accessed on 16 June 2011).

² See e.g. recently Richard Bessel and Claudia Haake (eds.), *Removing Peoples. Forced Removal in the Modern World*, Oxford 2009.

³ One of the few comparative studies is Julia Torrie, „For their own good“. *Civilian Evacuations in Germany and France, 1939 – 1945*, New York 2010.

⁴ See Klaus Bade et al. (eds.), *The Encyclopedia of European Migration and Minorities. From the Seventeenth Century to the Present*, Cambridge 2011.

In addition to ignoring the very problem of civilian and particularly Jewish evacuations, a chaotic organisation, the unexpectedly rapid German advance, as well as a lack of information on German atrocities meant that few people could be brought into safety. Friedmann concluded that evacuations were „moments of truth“ for a given regime.

Another informative contribution was given by GEORG KREIS (Basel) on the Swiss case. Here, the perceived danger of a German circumventing attack on France via Switzerland caused panic among the population and mass flights to the Swiss interior. Kreis highlighted diverse facets of evacuations, notably the economic aspect of securing private property and unintended constructive effects such as the initiation of a strong Swiss financial presence in the United States due to evacuated bank assets. The effects of evacuations on Polish refugees stranding in France after the war and on the transformed Polish Western borderlands respectively was addressed by the presentations of PAWEŁ SEKOWSKI (Paris / Cracow) and MACHTELD VENKEN (Leuven). They showed the disruptions evacuations can cause for people as well as for social spaces, and how difficult it is to rebuild identities and connect them with new places of settlement.

The largest part of the workshop was dedicated to the study of the French-German borderlands. Outlining the longue durée of population movement in the Moselle region, FRANÇOIS ROTH (Nancy) alluded to the „trois traumatismes“ of 1870/71, 1914-18, and finally 1939-45. Roth pointed to the detrimental demographic as well as psychological long-term consequences of „options“, expulsions, purges, as well as evacuations. Not only did these movements unsettle inhabitants and leave hurtful memories, they also hampered pacific Franco-German relations. On the procedure of evacuations in the Moselle region and the French border regions in general, no full consensus was reached. CHRISTINE GUTH (Metz) argued for a relatively efficient process of evacuation in the regions of the Moselle that lay between the Maginot line and the German border. NICOLAS WILLIAMS (Saarbrücken), in turn, argued that despite good planning, evacua-

tions in the French border regions were carried out in a less stringent way. In his talk, Williams further put forward a comparative framework of evacuations in France and Germany. As a working hypothesis, he claimed that the critical public sphere allowing corrections of measures as well as rational administrative structures in France made evacuations, although far from perfect, more efficient than in Nazi-Germany, where the problem was long ignored and then got caught up in polycratic administrative structures.

The perspective from below was provided by MARCEL NEU (Audigny), who has collected testimonies of evacuees in the Moselle region. Neu's insights proved very valuable to unveil the initially confuse feelings of fear and later the profound disorientation, but also the subsequent rectifications and idealisations in the memory of local people. At this level, there apparently needs to be done more empirical work to shed light on the different phases and levels of evacuations.

Further contributions focused on various aspects of French and German evacuations, indicating the empirical richness of the topic. Concentrating on the organisation of evacuations in Germany, MARKUS FLEISCHHAUER (Coburg) argued for a decisive turn in Germany policy in 1943. From this point, evacuations were centrally reorganised for the whole Reich. Until October 1944, when rapidly increasing streams of refugees finally overwhelmed the authorities, there had thus been a phase of relatively well-organised evacuations in the Third Reich, at least for the examined case of Saarlanders evacuated to Thuringia. MARKUS ENZENAUER (Mannheim) similarly questioned a common view: regarding Nazi propaganda in the case of Alsace, he first stressed that any refrain from territorial claims on this region since 1933 was mere tactics. Second, Enzenauer asserted that contrary to general opinion, for a limited period until around mid-1942, Nazi propaganda in occupied Alsace was met with a certain amount of consent in the population.

Distinguishing between „Effekte“ and „Wirkungen“ of evacuations, MARCEL BOLDORF (Bochum) tried to assess their social and economic repercussions for the

Moselle region. This 'material turn' of studying the phenomenon and trying to grasp its factual effects was largely welcomed in the ensuing discussions. Yet, the analytical framework might need some elaboration, since the difference and relationship between „Effekte“ and „Wirkungen“ did not become fully clear. From a gender perspective, NICOLE KRAMER (Potsdam) showed that evacuations altered traditional views of the woman. Due to the extreme circumstances, women were now depicted as female „warriors“, securing homes and children, but also taking responsibility for the finances of their households. A final aspect of evacuations in the French-German border region was dealt with by PHILIPPE TANCHOUX (Orléans). His presentation traced the evacuation of pieces of art from Alsace and Lorraine. Therefore, France was divided in three zones of decreasing danger, and the plan was to save the population first and then precious objects of art. While this worked rather well for the first evacuation phase until May 1940, the unexpected advance of the German forces to the French interior caused major difficulties in the evacuation process. This latter point of unexpected developments and ensuing dynamics was highlighted by many other contributions for different contexts.

Finally, two presentations focussed on evacuations during the First World War. For the case of Alsace-Lorraine, VOLKER PROTT (Florence) argued that while evacuations happened on both sides of the front running through Upper Alsace, they were largely ad-hoc measures. They were, however, part of an atmosphere of violence characterising Alsace-Lorraine between 1914 and 1919. In view of both the German liberalisation as last resort in the final months of war and the French refraining from a radical ethnic purge of the region, Prott invoked the question why a radicalisation of state violence did not occur in the First as compared to the Second World War. Taking the audience to another European context, CHARLOTTE NICOLLET (Paris) traced forced population movements in the Balkans between 1912 and 1918. In the nationally heated setting of a crumbling Ottoman Empire, minorities were seen as hindrances to ethnically homogenous

nation states. Wars, atrocities, population exchanges, and frequent changes of borders were tools of recasting the political landscape in the Balkans. Yet, Nicollet resumed, contrary to current believe at the time and partly until today, these upheavals of populations were far from pacifying the region.

Resuming the main results of the workshop in the concluding discussion, Fabian Lemmes emphasised some of the key aspects: the role of information and propaganda, the significance of the transnational as well as the comparative angle, and the importance of experiences during the First World War. He also noted to keep in mind that evacuations were not everything and need to be weighed against other experiences like bombings or the „malgré nous“. OLIVIER FORCADE (Paris) alluded to what he called the „trous de mémoire“ in statements of witnesses who tended to smoothen retrospectively their often incoherent experiences. More generally, M. Forcade saw emerging „une histoire de la civilisation matérielle de la guerre“, thus a material turn of war historiography. Finally, he stressed the importance of the diversity of experiences during the war and encouraged further research to focus more in depth on the various forms of „micro mobilité“ connected to evacuations. The crucial issue of the diversity of experiences was taken up by RAINER HUDEMANN (Saarbrücken / Paris) who alluded to the „superposition des expériences“ as central dimension for further investigation. While conscious of the need to contextualise evacuations in a larger framework of forced migrations and war-time experiences, Fabian Lemmes stressed the necessity of a precise definition. Only with a clear definition of 'evacuations', he concluded, can the ambitious project be carried out effectively.

Overall, the workshop was a successful first step within a larger project. The two-day event gave a first impression of both the topic's empirical richness and its potential to open up new perspectives for the study of contemporary societies. At times virtuous, at times exhausting, but always workable mixture or „superposition“ of the French, German, and English languages allowed for an intense and enriching exchange of ideas and methodologies. What is needed now

is detailed empirical work on the different levels of planning, the procedure, as well as the long-term consequences of evacuations. Combining micro histories with meso-level analyses and macro-level comparisons in flexible methodological frameworks seems a most fruitful direction indicated by the international workshop in Saarbrücken.

Conference Overview:

Hans-Christian Herrmann (Stadtarchiv Saarbrücken), Rainer Hudemann (Saarbrücken / Paris), Olivier Forcade (Paris), Fabian Lemmes (Bochum): Official welcome

Topic introduction: Fabian Lemmes (Bochum), Johannes Großmann (Saarbrücken): Die Evakuierungen im deutsch-französischen Grenzraum während des Zweiten Weltkrieges. Stand der Forschung, Konzepte und Perspektiven

Panel 1: The evacuation of civilian populations during the Second World War

Moderation: Nicholas Williams (Saarbrücken)

Julia Torrie (Fredericton, Canada): Avoiding Chaos. German-French Interchange and Civilian Evacuation Policies, 1939–1945

John Stewart (Glasgow): Evacuation in Britain. Process and consequences

Alexander Friedmann (Heidelberg / Saarbrücken): Evakuierungen in der Sowjetunion während des Zweiten Weltkriegs

Panel 2: From evacuation to reception

Moderation: François Roth (Nancy)

Christine Guth (Metz): Le déroulement des évacuations en Moselle 1939/40

Nicholas Williams (Saarbrücken): Die Evakuierungen von 1939/40 im deutsch-französischen Systemvergleich

Markus Fleischhauer (Coburg): Der NS-Gau Thüringen als Evakuierungs- und Verlagerungsgau

Panel 3: Borderland identities and evacuations

Moderation: Rainer Hudemann (Saarbrücken / Paris)

François Roth (Nancy): Les mouvements de

population en Moselle de 1910 à 1950

Markus Enzenauer (Mannheim): Die NS-Propaganda und die „Aktion Elsaß“ während der Annexion déguisée

Georg Kreis (Universität Basel): Unpatriotische Grenzbevölkerung? Zur schweizerischen Evakuationsproblematik im Frühjahr 1940

Panel 4: Evacuations as a socio-economic and cultural challenge

Moderation: Fabian Lemmes (Bochum)

Marcel Boldorf (Bochum): Die Evakuierung Lothringens: wirtschaftliche und soziale Aspekte

Nicole Kramer (Potsdam): Frauen in Bewegung: Die Evakuierung der weiblichen Bevölkerung im Zweiten Weltkrieg

Philippe Tanchoux (Orléans) : L'évacuation des collections d'œuvres d'art des musées de l'Est et du nord de la France à la veille de la Seconde Guerre mondiale

Panel 5: Forced migration of populations before and after the Second World War

Moderation: Olivier Forcade (Paris)

Volker Prott (Florence): A Testing Ground for Ethno-political Population Politics: Alsace-Lorraine from the First World War to the Versailles Treaty

Charlotte Nicollet (Université Paris-Sorbonne): Les déplacements de population en Bulgarie 1912-1918

Pavel Sekowski (Paris / Cracow) : Déplacés et réfugiés polonais en France après 1945

Panel 6: Collective memories in borderland regions

Moderation: Johannes Großmann (Saarbrücken)

Marcel Neu (Audigny): Expériences et témoignages des évacuations de 1939/40 en Moselle

Machteld Venken (Leuven): War Memories. Children in Two European Border Regions, 1945–1970

Conclusions, final discussion

Tagungsbericht *Evacuations in the German-*

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