The German Archipelago. German Minorities and Interwar Eugenics

Veranstalter: Working Group on the History of Race and Eugenics, Oxford Brookes University; University of Göttingen;
Datum, Ort: 16.12.2011–19.12.2011, Oxford
Bericht von: Simon Wilson, Oxford Brookes University

Hosted at Balliol College, Oxford, this workshop on the interwar European *Volksdeutsche* and their experiences with eugenic ideas was organised by Tudor Georgescu of Oxford Brookes University's Working Group on the History of Race and Eugenics, and Björn Felder of the University of Göttingen. It was supported by the Cantemir Institute (University of Oxford), and Germany's Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media. Over the course of two days the conveners sought to bring together some of the leading international scholars working on the history of race and eugenics in Central and Eastern Europe to discuss the racial ideas and practices of ethnic German communities in this region. In particular the conveners sought to discover regional connections between these ideas and practices, and the organisers were successful in organising an immensely enjoyable weekend in the pursuit of this aim.

TUDOR GEORGESCU (Oxford) began Saturday's first panel on the *Volksdeutsche* Eugenics with a discussion of eugenic concepts and practices in early twentieth-century Transylvanian Saxon communities. The paper discussed the importance of Siegmund and Csallner in the development of an indigenous eugenic discourse, and the role of the Church and political Self Help movement as executives within the minority. Tudor suggested that the existence of the Church and the Self Help movement provided a dual executive that set the Saxons apart from other minorities, and allowed them to put racial policies into practice. The paper examined the politicised revival of 'National Neighbourhoods' and their introduction of *Ehrengeschenke* – substantial financial incentives for parents of racially valuable children – as evidence of the indigenous character of the Saxon eugenic discourse.

The second paper was presented by BJÖRN FELDER (Göttingen) on the progression from proto-eugenics to euthanasia in the Baltic Germans living in Latvia and Estonia. The paper began with an outline of the Baltic Germans' political history that emphasised the communities' historical independence from Germany. It went on to challenge existing scholarship on the rise of Nazism in the Baltic German communities, suggesting that there existed a widespread consent toward Nazi ideology that has not been generally acknowledged. The paper then turned to eugenic practices during the 1930's, including the presence of racial ideas in school curricula, the adoption of sterilisation methods, and the implementation of a eugenic health index.

PAUL WEINDLING (Oxford) concluded the panel with a history of the racial ideas surrounding the Volga Germans, noting their significance with regards to the questions: 'What is a German?' and 'What is eugenics?' The paper focussed on the communities' 'tragic history' of famine and disease, and discussed the interaction of concepts of race with the famine relief effort, continuing to explore the negative comparisons made between the Volga Germans and other German minorities in the contemporary racial literature.

The second panel on Eugenics and National Identity began with FILIP KRČMAR's (Novi Sad) paper on the Swabian-German *Kulturbund* and the presence of eugenic issues in Yugoslavian *Volksdeutsche* periodicals. This paper explored the work of the contentious *Kulturbund* organisation that worked to protect German cultural and social interests, and emphasised its publishing capability as particularly important for the promotion of its social agenda. This agenda included eugenic concerns such as the maintenance of the birthrate, in addition to the reduction of alcoholism and marriage within families. Significantly, eugenic articles in the *Volksdeutsche* periodicals expressed familiar concerns regarding racial degeneracy, and the loss of traditional, rural ways of life as the German minority gradually urbanised.

JOHN C. SWANSON (New York) provided the panel's second paper, which dealt with the questions surrounding the meaning of be-

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ing German in interwar Hungary. The paper outlined a history of German communities in Hungary from the 18th century, and noted an important tension between identities rooted in rural 'Germanness,' and the increasingly widespread understanding of a biologised Volk. The paper noted that while „eugenics" or „racial hygiene" were not used by Hungarian Germans in typical biopolitical arguments, arguments based on „German blood" were more common, and were used in support of national socialism in Hungary. Finally, the paper explored the illegal recruitment of Hungarians into German SS regiments, charted regional variations in recruitment, and reflected on hostile German attitudes to Hungarians serving in these regiments.

HILDRUN GLASS (Munich) opened the day's concluding panel on the *Volksdeutsche* in Romania with her paper on the changing conceptions of German ethnic identity in Romania. Her paper outlined the four different German minorities in Romania in the twentieth century, highlighting the Saxons in Transylvania, and minorities in the Banat, Bessarabia, and the Bukovina. The paper highlighted commonalities in understandings of race between the groups; whereas the Saxons and Bessarabian Germans had relatively clear-cut identities, those in the Banat and Bukovina did not, and after entering the Romanian state began to question who was, and who was not, German. Throughout the paper a move away from the historically typical racial self-identification to identification based on 'objective criteria' was noted, though Glass concluded with the assertion that these criteria were not objective at all.

Tudor Georgescu made a second appearance to conclude the first day's proceedings, reading a paper by MARIANA HAUSLEITNER (Munich) on the political radicalisation of the *Volksdeutsche* in Bessarabia, the Bukovina, and the Banat. The paper examined the period 1933-1935, which saw an increase in the influence of National Socialism in Romanian politics, and recognised the importance of National Socialism in uniting the Romanian German minorities as part of the 'greater German people.' The paper dealt with the importance of Romania's National Liberal Party in the oppression of German minorities by removing several of the existing concessions made to minorities, including a ban on school instruction in German and restrictions on minority labour to facilitate the 'Romanianisation' of minority dominated cities. The paper concluded that the failure of the minorities in Romania to unite against the National Liberal party contributed directly to the increased influence of National Socialism.

The second day started with a panel on Nazi Racial Hygiene and the *Volksdeutsche*, opening with a presentation by SUSANNE SCHLECHTER (Wehnen/ Oldenburg) titled 'Missing Resettlers: *'Heim ins Reich'* in the Shadow of Nazi Politics from 1940 to 1944.' Schlechter noted that between September and October 1940 over 90,000 *Volksdeutsche* Romanians were transported to Germany, and highlighted that this period coincided with *Aktion T4*. Her paper outlined her work to trace the route of the missing resettlers, noting importantly that many of the sick and elderly were redirected to 'transit hospitals' in Silesia, under the remit of *Aktion T-4*, where they were killed, while other individuals were killed en route, including infants or *Volksdeutsche* who failed to meet the German resettlement criteria.

MARIA FIEBRANDT (Dresden) followed with a paper on methods of racial hygienic selection during the resettlement of the *Volksdeutsche*. Her paper touched on the practices outlined in Susanne Schlechter's presentation, but focussed on the varied practices of registration before and during the resettlement process. She noted that the selection of unfit individuals by German resettlement officials and physicians was supplemented by lists of individuals with hereditary defects compiled by pre-existing racial hygiene structures within the *Volksdeutsche* communities. Her paper went on to discuss selection practices carried out during the transport of the *Volksdeutsche*, detailing the treatment of Romanians with Trachoma in particular. She concluded that the resettlement process provided the framework in which an existing widespread racial hygiene ideology could be put into practice, in order to create a settler society based on racial hygiene.

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STEFFAN WERTHER (Flemingsberg) began the workshop's final panel on the *Volksdeutsche* and Nazi Germany's Racial Policy. Werther presented a paper on the German minority communities in Denmark, exploring the tension between the conflicting borders of race and nation. The paper began with a brief history of Germans in Denmark following the First World War, noting the increasingly urgent calls for border revisions by the German minority following Hitler's ascension to power. However, Werther noted though that Hitler had no plans for a border revision, preferring instead a relationship between the Danish and German states based on a common race. In this respect Denmark's *Volksdeutsche* were particularly significant; whereas in Romania the German minority held itself to be superior to the host population, in Denmark this was not the case, though the paper noted that Germans in Denmark rarely employed their 'Nordic' identity, suggesting that their German volkish identity was too exclusive to compromise in such a way.

STEPHAN LEHNSTAEDT (Warsaw) provided the final paper of the weekend, titled 'Exercising Germanisation: The *Volksdeutsche* and Racial Politics in Warthegau and General Government.' The paper discussed the political status of the *Volksdeutsche* living in Poland during the German occupation. It explored the ways in which those claiming German ancestry were categorised based on their family roots, their language, and their pro-German activities before the outbreak of war. Significantly, the paper highlighted the privileges granted to German re-settlers within Poland; German businesses were granted access to free 'communal labour' and paid preferential rates for seized commercial goods and equipment. Stephan explained the how German families were given the houses of evicted Poles and Jews, and explored accounts of this process. These practices were intended to Germanise the Polish *Volksdeutsche* by improving their material and cultural conditions, but many contemporaries suggested that the individuals they benefited were opportunists, and few of them fit the general government's racial ideals.

Paul Weindling provided the workshop's closing remarks. He highlighted the diverse nature of the *Volksdeutsche* racial activities, and pointed to examples of racial notions influencing policy more generally, situating the *Volksdeutsche* cases in a more global context. He noted that important notions of victimhood and the need to defend the race from a pathological external existential threat influenced many of the German case studies and the rise of racial politics more generally. Weindling argued that historians should attempt to document the experience of living under these racial polities that transformed the lives of so many.

In conclusion, the workshop was successful on several fronts; the commonalities and differences in racial policy pursued by the European *Volksdeutsche* were addressed fruitfully in many of the papers and the discussions that followed. Even those papers that focussed on cultural, rather than eugenic identities, a picture emerged of diverse identities and politics within the *Volksdeutsche* that were certainly influenced by racial concerns, and these concerns clearly modulated their interactions with the host nations. The workshop and its outcomes will certainly prove valuable for the future study of *Volksdeutsche* communities, both in the links it has uncovered between the groups, and in the opportunities for further research it has identified.[1]

Conference Overview:

Volksdeutsche Eugenics
(Chair: Marius Turda)

Tudor Georgescu: „Transylvanian Saxons Eugenics: Concepts and Practices"

Björn M. Felder: „From Proto-Eugenics to Euthanasia: Baltic German Eugenics in Latvia and Estonia 1890-1940"

Paul Weindling: „The Volga Germans as a Focus of Rival Racial Pathologies"

Eugenics and National Identity
(Chair: Calin Cotoi)

Filip Krčmar: „The Swabian-German Kulturbund and Eugenic Issues in Yugoslavia's

[1] This Report has also been published at: <http://PulseProject.org/node/418> (13.03.2012)

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Volksdeutsche Periodicals, 1921-1941“

John C. Swanson: „A people with Two Souls: Making Germans in Interwar Hungary“

Volksdeutsche in Romania
(Chair: Tudor Georgescu)

Hildrun Glass: „Reconceptualisation of German Ethnic Identity in Romania under Nazi influence“

Mariana Hausleitner: „The political radicalization of the Volksdeutsche in Bessarabia, the Bukowina, and the Banat 1933-1935“

Nazi- Racial Hygiene and Volksdeutsche
(Chair: Björn M. Felder)

Susanne Schlechter: „Missing Resettlers: ‘Heim ins Reich’ in the Shadow of Nazi Politics from 1940 to 1944“

Maria Fiebrandt: „Racial Hygienic Mechanisms of Selections during the Resettlement of the Volksdeutsche, 1939-45“

Volksdeutsche and Nazi Germanys’ Racial Policy
(Chair: Paul Weindling)

Steffen Werther: „Volk vs. Race: The German Minority in Denmark and the SS idea of a ‘Greater Germanic Empire’“

Stephan Lehnstaedt: „Exercising Germanisation: The Volksdeutsche and Racial Politics in Warthegau and General Government“

Concluding Remarks, by Paul Weindling followed by discussion

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