

Frank, Matthew: *Expelling the Germans. British Opinion and Post-1945 Population Transfer in Context*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2008. ISBN: 978-0-19-923364-9; X, 320 S.

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Following the leads of Ian Connor<sup>1</sup> and Pertti Ahonen<sup>2</sup>, Matthew Frank's monograph is the latest work bringing the issue of the German expellees to an English-speaking readership. Frank focuses on British perceptions of the expulsion of Germans from Poland and Czechoslovakia following the Second World War, taking in debates by politicians, civil servants, academics and journalists, and the public, as well as responses to the situation 'on the ground' by visitors to Germany, diplomats and relief workers.

In the introduction, Frank claims that 'several misconceptions about Britain's role [in the expulsion] continue to circulate and be taken as established fact' [p. 7]. He cites examples of these, including the overplaying of revenge as a factor in wartime deliberations, naivety or blindness towards precedents of population removal and the assumption that the expulsion 'passed with barely a word or comment or protest in Britain'. This work is thus intended to correct these 'misconceptions'. However, it also operates on a wider scale, examining discussions on the concept of population transfer in general, and contextualising these debates with reference to politicians' views of the population transfers under

the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, focusing on debates in official circles, on the ground and in the media, and examining developments in Czechoslovakia and Poland.

Frank's main argument is that there was a central opposition between population transfer in principle and practice. Population transfers between the wars were seen as a 'rational and progressive choice of last resort', but there were sharp differences on its practicality [p. 10]. A crucial explanatory factor for British responses to the expulsion and subsequent refugee crisis was the limits of what could feasibly be achieved.

What could have remained a piece narrowly focused on official and public opinion on the expulsion is given a broader scope and widened through its emphasis and discussion on population transfer as a concept. He argues that 'population transfer' as understood in the 1930s and 1940s denoted an orderly and regulated movement, intending to involve a minimum of human suffering and economic disruption [pp. 8-9]. Chapter One looks at how population transfer was discussed in the 1930s, when it became apparent that many 'danger spots' were developing in Europe. In 1938, for example, Bernard Newman, predicted that the 'transference of population is about to become a matter of European politics' [p. 14]. In common with many, Newman saw the transfers of 1923 as having positive results, turning Greece and Turkey into 'friends and allies'. Frank analyses contemporary responses to a number of inter-war population transfers, both planned and implemented, before turning his attention to wartime debates concerning minorities – and the German minorities in particular. He picks three case-studies illustrating how the Foreign Research and Press Service, the League of Nations Union and the Labour Party dealt with the issue of the 'minorities problem' and how their debates developed over the course of the Second World War. He also looks in depth at a House of Commons statement by Churchill and surrounding debates. These case-studies all came to similar conclusions, that is, that population transfer should be seriously considered at the end of the war. Whilst there were concerns voiced about the scale of the undertaking and the suffering it would

<sup>1</sup>Ian Connor, 'The Refugees and the Currency Reform', in: Ian D. Turner, *Reconstruction in Post-War Germany – British Occupation Policy and the Western Zones*, Oxford 1989; Ian Connor, 'German Refugees and the Bonn Government's Resettlement Programme: The role of the Trek Association in Schleswig-Holstein, 1951-5', in: *German History* 18 (2000), 3, pp. 337-361; Ian Connor, 'German Refugees and the SPD in Schleswig Holstein, 1945-1950' in: *European History Quarterly* 36 (2006), 2, pp. 173-199.

<sup>2</sup>Pertti Ahonen, *After the Expulsion: West Germany and Eastern Europe 1945-1990*, London 2003; Pertti Ahonen, 'Taming the Expellee Threat in Post-1945 Europe: Lessons from the Two Germanies and Finland', *Contemporary European History*, 14 (2005), 1, pp. 1-21; Pertti Ahonen / Gustavo Corni / Jerzy Kochanowski / Rainer Schulze / Tamás Stark / Barbara Steizl-Marx, *People on the Move: Forced Population Movements in Europe in the Second World War and its Aftermath*, Oxford 2008.

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cause, as the war progressed, transfer was viewed as increasingly favourable. The main thrust of the papers examined and Churchill's speech was that it could be the only way to secure a lasting peace in Europe. Greco-Turkish transfer was frequently pointed to as a successful example, as, interestingly, was Hitler's „heim ins Reich“ policy.

Chapter 4 focuses on subsequent responses to the German refugee problem between July and October 1945. Frank shows that British observers on the ground in Berlin – journalists, army personnel and welfare workers – were shocked and horrified at the reality of the refugee situation. Even those who had been sympathetic to the position of Poland and Czechoslovakia in wanting to be rid of the Germans within their borders could feel little satisfaction in the course events had followed. He cites a Daily Mail correspondent, who wrote, '[the] picture of elderly women, and young girls, with children almost dying on the railway stations of Berlin [...] provides [a] test of political convictions. Humanitarian, not soft-hearted, considerations rise unwillingly to the surface' [p. 135]. Concerns over the immanent 'flooding' of the British Zone with refugees and associated worries over disease and food scarcity also played a role in explaining British attitudes towards the expulsion. The publisher Victor Gollancz's criticism of the handling of the expulsion and the subsequent development of the 'Save Europe Now' movement is looked at as an example of public outcry over the treatment of German expellees – but also of how this outcry was restricted to the methods of the transfers; once the transfers were seen to be being at last carried out according to Article 12 of the Potsdam Treaty, at least to some degree 'in an orderly and humane manner', the movement's campaigns turned to other matters.

Frank addresses the issue of the fine line the British government had to tread between trying to enforce Article 12 on the one hand, and maintaining good relations with Poland and Czechoslovakia – particularly Poland – and avoiding accusations of treating Germans preferentially on the other. He shows how, whilst Potsdam demonstrates that the British government was willing to take the initiative on the question of population transfer,

diplomatic considerations dictated how far the government was prepared to go in chiding the expelling countries for not suspending their expulsions.

There are, however, some minor contradictions in the work; Frank marvels that it is 'remarkable how far attitudes to population transfer had travelled since the widespread condemnation of the Lausanne Convention in 1923' [p. 37] just pages after emphasizing how British official attitudes to the latter had been positive and generally regarded the downsides of the transfer, in the words of Lord Curzon, as being 'compensated by the removal of deep-rooted causes of quarrel [...] and greater future homogeneity of population' and that 'more critical assessments were [...] the exception' [p. 25]. More clarity – or consistency – in this chapter would be helpful.

This work is immensely readable, yet thorough and deeply rooted in primary sources. Frank supports his arguments with an impressive range of sources, taking in contemporary research papers, House of Commons debates, departmental writings, memos and correspondence, and newspaper articles and comment pieces. Footnotes are comprehensive and detailed – pointing readers to many books, documents and sources for further reading on issues that could only be dealt with briefly in the main text. Another of the book's strengths lies in the fact that it truly covers 'British opinion', encompassing soldiers, junior civil servants, signatories to petitions, and not just the usual elite group of politicians, journalists and senior army officials who are often taken to represent public opinion as a whole. In this way the analysis is finely nuanced, acknowledging that there was a range of views beyond those most often presented to the public, and not rarely conflicts within individual departments. To conclude, 'Expelling the Germans' is a compelling, well researched and well written work, adding a needed new dimension to the German refugee issue.

Annotations:

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