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A Time of Retribution

Paying with Life and Limb for the Crimes of Nazi Germany

By Christian Habbe

After Hitler's war had been lost, millions of ethnic Germans in regions that are today part of Eastern Europe were expelled -- often under horrendous circumstances. It has been proven that at least 473,000 people died as they fled or were expelled. The Nazis' crimes had been far worse, but the suffering of ethnic Germans was immense.

It was a deceptively beautiful summer. Never before had the light of East Prussia seemed so bright, the sky so high, the countryside so vast, as in 1944, wrote Hans Graf von Lehndorff, a doctor and chronicler, in his diary. And yet the streets were already filling with columns of refugees; Germans from Lithuania, whose abandoned cattle roamed the countryside. Light tremors echoed distant detonations. Sometimes at night, a red glow was visible in the east, where border towns along the Niemen River were burning: Unmistakable signs that Soviet forces were moving inexorably closer.

They arrived on October 21. Red Army soldiers pushing through the East Prussian village of Nemmersdorf massacred some 30 old people, women and children, leaving in their wake houses full of dead bodies. Thoughts about the sky, light and countryside were replaced by shock. When the East Prussian front collapsed in mid-January, the destruction and violence wrought by the Soviet troops surpassed anything the Germans had ever suffered. The inhabitants of eastern parts of East Prussia were the first to flee in blind panic.

An Unprecedented Shifting of Populations

But the wave of terror soon swept over all the areas inhabited by Germans between the Baltic and the Danube. Hitler's ruthlessly waged total warfare had ended. Now the time of retribution was dawning everywhere. Red Army forces took revenge for the burning of Mother Russia and its millions of victims, revenge for Poland, where Germans had carried out the "physical destruction" decreed by their Nazi dictator with horrific zeal, and revenge for the six-year bloody suppression of the Czechs. The Yugoslavs, who tormented tens of thousands of members of the ethnic German minority in detention camps before chasing them out of the country, had previously experienced how the occupiers had waged anti-partisan warfare with massacres of civilians.

Millions of Germans in eastern Europe met the same tragic fate, paying with life and limb for the crimes of Nazi Germany. They were hunted down, humiliated, raped, bludgeoned to death, or carted off as slave laborers. "A tempest of reprisal, revenge and hatred swept through the land," writes historian Klaus-Dietmar Henke.

At the end of World War II, an unprecedented shifting of populations took place in eastern parts of central Europe, as Germans became pawns shuttled to and fro at the whims of the victors and their deal-making. But the people fleeing the Red Army were unaware that the Allies had already agreed with the Polish government-in-exile to hand over large parts of eastern Germany to Poland and resettle the Germans who were living there.

All those who didn't manage to escape in time fell victim to the frenzied expulsions that were carried out until July 1945. The organized resettlement of Germans and ethnic Germans from Germany's former eastern areas and the Sudetenland began in January 1946. In all, some 14 million Germans lost their homes.

'Unimaginable Suffering'

As Lehndorff noted in his diary, columns of "refugees marked by unimaginable suffering" began moving westward from January 1945 onward, past destroyed towns, war rubble and piles of dead bodies. Later on these treks became interwoven with others heading in the opposite direction; hundreds of thousands of people who had been overtaken by the Red Army and were now trying to get back to their home towns.

One of these was East Prussian refugee Hermann Fischer, who later recounted the picture of horror he found upon his return to his village:

"I saw the graves of 11 people at the bottom end of the village, including that of Paul Bisler, who was buried in front of his own house at dawn (He had died or been shot to death, and his rotting body was found in bed by the school-aged boy Max Neumann). At the home of Neumann-Zölp there were the graves of two women who had taken their own lives. The Wersels had taken in the child of one of them. Gustav Anders-Horn had been shot dead. His corpse had been eaten by pigs. Altsitzer Gruhn had been shot dead. So there were graves everywhere. The villages looked sad and desolate, with rubble everywhere, furniture, doors, windows ripped from their hinges and smashed. The wind howled through the open houses and buildings."

Convoys of carts carrying displaced, half-starved people were heading in all directions. Hordes of children abandoned or separated from their families languished in the forests in the east. Somehow these "wolf children" survived, straying from one bullet-riddled farmstead to the next. The fate of these approximately 5,000 children is a particularly heart-wrenching episode borne out of circumstances reminiscent of accounts of the Thirty Years' War, the last in Europe that had seen depopulation on this scale.

Hundreds of thousands of people didn't survive their flight, expulsion or imprisonment. They starved or froze to death, or succumbed to epidemics or injuries. Some died as a result of the chaos and of the cold, wanton behavior of Russian soldiers. This also befell the Lehndorff family. Red Army soldiers seized the family's estate in East Prussia on January 25. "In the ensuing chaos," Lehndorff's diary recalled, "my brother was seriously injured with a knife. My mother was only able to bandage him up provisionally. Then other Russians came, asked who he was, and shot him and my mother together." Who cared that his mother had previously been detained by the Gestapo?

A 'Tragedy on a Prodigious Scale'

It soon even dawned on the victors that something was going seriously wrong. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill called the mass expulsion of the vanquished a "tragedy on a prodigious scale."

And yet Churchill and US President Franklin D. Roosevelt had discussed the resettlement of populations of Germans or people of German heritage even before the US had officially declared war on Hitler. In the summer of 1941, the two men met on the British battleship *HMS Prince of Wales* anchored off the coast of Newfoundland, Canada, to hash out the details of an Atlantic Charter for a postwar political order.

Once the Nazis had been destroyed, the two leaders decided, self-determination and other rights removed by violent means would be reestablished in Europe. However, there should be no territorial changes that did "not accord with the freely expressed wishes of the peoples concerned."

The Polish and Czechoslovakian representatives were briefly dumbstruck, but then vehemently rejected the very notion. Czech President-in-Exile Edvard Benes, for example, demanded the forcible resettlement of Germans, and even proposed what he called a "painful operation" -- with success. The Allies gave in. They said the charter didn't necessarily apply to Germany. After all, it wasn't a "bargain or contract with our enemies." As early as September 1942, British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden told the Czechs that his cabinet would "agree in principle to resettlement." Meanwhile, Roosevelt indicated to the Poles that he wouldn't object to resettlement.

When the victorious Allies met in Potsdam in the summer of 1945 to lay down the new borders of Europe's nations, Stalin flippantly remarked that there weren't any Germans left in the territories

they were handing over to Poland. "Of course not," said US presidential advisor William Leahy to Harry Truman. "The Bolshies have killed them all!"

No Interest in Protecting the Barbaric Instigators

Hitler's Master Plan East, part of his *Lebensraum* policy, had foreseen both the Germanization of all the lands from the Baltic states to Crimea and the expulsion and enslavement of 30 million Poles and other Slavs, as well as, according to ministerial memo, the "scrapping of racially undesirable sectors of the population." Given those circumstances, the Western Allies weren't particularly interested in protecting the barbaric instigators of the war against reprisals from the east.

Nevertheless, Western negotiators worried that they had made too many concessions to the Soviets. "I regret being unable to see any sign of decisiveness on our part," US Secretary of State James Byrne commented in August 1945 after the conclusion of the Potsdam Conference. Even so, the Western powers did manage to slip a proviso into Article XII of the Potsdam Agreement that the "transfer" to Germany of German populations was to be carried out "in an orderly and humane manner."

The first bloodbaths in East Prussia in the fall of 1944 clearly showed that this would not apply to areas east of the Oder-Neisse Line. Nazi Propaganda Minister Josef Goebbels used the massacre in Nemmersdorf to foment hatred of the "beasts" in the Soviet Union.

The Red Army rolled across eastern Europe faster than people could flee through the snow and bitter cold. Soon a brutal inferno broke out in Germany's eastern provinces.

'The Start of a Terrible Suffering'

A woman from Heiligenbeil (today's Mamonovo) remembers freight trains packed with refugees from Masuria in what is now northeastern Poland, all of whom had had to stand for days on end. "Pregnant women who had given birth had frozen to the floor. The dead were thrown out of the windows." There were equally horrific scenes out on the streets: Families with horse-drawn carts, handcarts or just their suitcases in their hands dragged themselves through blowing snow and icy winds, far too weak to move out of the way if a Russian T-34 tank rolled into their convoy, as they sometimes did.

But even the German army, the Wehrmacht, tried to stop would-be refugees from fleeing along the few roads that were still open. "We're organizing our defense, not a retreat," SS leader Heinrich Himmler declared. The Nazi leaders did little if anything to protect their people from Soviet tanks, fighter bombers and vengeful soldiers.

East Prussian refugee Herman Fischer recalls, "The Russians arrived on January 24. We had great difficulty getting the district official out of his party uniform and hiding it in the straw. If we hadn't, we'd all have been doomed. That evening my wife and I were stood up against a wall with a submachine gun pointing at our necks. Only the pleas of Polish girls saved us. The daughters of Ernst L. were raped by an entire Russian combat unit in an ordeal that lasted from 8 o'clock in the evening until 9 the next morning ... It was the start of a time of terrible suffering."

Many people were so desperate that they took their own lives. But not everyone could get their hands on the poison that was handed out at pharmacies with the tacit approval of the Nazi Party. East Prussian Ella Knobbe reported, matter-of-factly, "An acquaintance of mine, Mrs. Emma Stamer, born Reisberg, from the neighboring village of Silberbach, committed suicide together with her husband, Fritz Stamer, by drinking battery acid because she could no longer bear the shame of having been raped repeatedly in front of her husband. The bodies of around 30 executed German soldiers lay in the barn of farmer Browatzki."

Countless Credible Accounts

In the 1950s, a team of historians commissioned by the West German government to investigate the events surrounding the flight and expulsion of Germans after World War II amassed more than 40,000 such eyewitness accounts and stories. Their findings were apparently so shocking that the government decided not to publish them for many years. Historian Hans-Ulrich Wehler believes Bonn

had reason to fear that the "countless credible reports of tanks simply plowing through lines of refugees, of people forced to drink out of latrine barrels until they perished" would prompt the people to weigh the crimes of the Nazis against the suffering of the expellees.

Certain topics, particularly the mass rapes, were too sensitive for the nascent West Germany to consider. Even the women themselves mostly kept silent about their ordeals, out of embarrassment and a fear of being stigmatized. They therefore simply repressed the memory of their trauma. Psychological counseling wasn't available.

Nazi Evacuation Delays Worsened Suffering

Eyewitness account No. 15 from the Bonn investigation report gives an inkling of what hundreds of thousands of women must have gone through: Thirty-nine-year-old E.O. from Elbing in West Prussia was fleeing with her young children, 7-year-old Horst and 1-year-old Christa, when Soviet soldiers picked them up and locked her in a specially prepared room with other women.

"I was raped twice a day for seven days, each time by several soldiers," she said. "The seventh day was my worst. I was picked up in the evening, and released the next morning. My genitals were completely ripped open, and I had an arm-wide sore all the way down to my knees. I could neither walk nor lie down. There were three more terrible days like this one before the Russian soldiers decided we had had enough, and chased us naked out of that hellhole."

Together with other victims, she was sent on a death march -- barefoot. She survived, though 600 others like her did not. She even managed to return home with her children, but her apartment had been completely ransacked. Somehow she found the strength to obtain a handcart and trek to the west with Horst and Christa. Only when she reached the safety of the village of Weyer in the Oberlahn district in Germany did she finally break down and try to drown herself. She was saved at the last minute.

Any Attempts to Flee Were Punished

How much suffering could have been avoided if the cynical Nazi leaders hadn't delayed the evacuation of Germans time and again? Any attempts to flee were punished. As late as August 1944, Himmler blustered in a speech to Gauleiters, provincial governors under Hitler, about cultivating "a botanical garden of Germanic blood" in the East.

This policy led to a human tragedy in Breslau, known today as Wroclaw, where 700,000 inhabitants, refugees and injured people had held out until the Russians were almost at the gates to the city. Almost 90,000 people perished in the ensuing panicked evacuation of the city and the subsequent siege. By contrast, Gauleiter Karl Hanke was able to save his skin aboard a Fieseler Storch light aircraft, the last plane to leave the city.

The order to evacuate East Prussia came so late that Soviet tanks were able to cut off hundreds of thousands of refugees when they reached the Baltic Sea. Virtually encircled, the masses only had one route open to them: Through the relative safety of the as yet unoccupied region around Danzig (today's Gdansk) -- and across the frozen Vistula Lagoon. Thousands set out onto the brittle ice, and the makeshift route Wehrmacht soldiers marked with trees and branches became a treacherous and often deadly path. Night and day, artillery shells rained down and fighter bombers fired on the fleeing refugees, huge craters opened up in the ice, carts sank in the icy water, the bodies of the shot and frozen lay all around.

Gertrud Dannowski, from the village of Deutsch Thierau on what is now the Russian-Polish border, witnessed the icy nightmare:

"Bullets and pieces of ice ricocheted off the tin roof of our cart. Shooting, cries, and screams pierced the still of the night. It was every man for himself in a desperate attempt to get off the brittle ice again as quickly as possible. Dawn broke over a horrific scene: Body upon body, man and horse alike. Often enough, only the drawbars of the carriages protruded out of the ice. The Angel of Death had claimed a great many victims."

Immune to the Horror

Almost a half-million people managed to flee across the Vistula Lagoon and reach the other side. Hundreds of thousands were already there. It was a scene of terrible chaos. Men carried frozen relatives, women threw their children into departing boats in the hope they would be saved. Many families were split up forever. Injured people patched up with bloody paper bandages lined up by the gangplanks. One hundred thousand refugees were already waiting on the Hel peninsula for the next rescue ship. "We had a hard time burying all those who were killed in air raids," recalled one navy officer. "Our men became so immune to the horror that dead women and children who had bled to death no longer affected them."

Nazi Party officials sometimes commandeered boats for their exclusive use. East Prussian Gauleiter Erich Koch even wanted refugees to be thrown overboard. Often enough, if an air raid occurred, ship's crews quickly cast off, leaving refugees being brought out on rowboats to their fate in the icy sea.

A ramshackle flotilla of refitted torpedo boats, icebreakers, freighters and cruise ships desperately shuttled refugees to Schleswig-Holstein and Mecklenburg in northern Germany and to Denmark. The boats, most of them completely overloaded, were moving targets, shot at by fighter bombers and fired on by Russian submarines. Almost 33,000 refugees perished while attempting to flee overseas, 9,000 alone when the *SS Wilhelm Gustloff* was struck by Soviet submarine torpedoes and sank on Jan. 30, 1945. Nevertheless, the maritime operation managed to rescue more than a million people.

Further south, the forced resettlement of the German inhabitants of Silesia and Pomerania had already set the stage for yet more mass suffering. Back in late summer 1944, the Soviet Union had signed a secret pact with the Kremlin-friendly Polish National Liberation Committee confirming the Oder-Neisse Line as the eastern border of Poland no matter what future conferences with the Western Allies would agree at a later date. In so doing, Russia had secured itself regions inhabited by some 7.5 million Germans.

The first major flood of refugees there began streaming westward in January 1945. In the following months, more than 3 million Germans tried to flee the oncoming Red Army.

When the Soviets and Poles divided the country into five voivodeships, or administrative districts, in March of that year -- again in secret -- the forced resettlement of Germans had already been planned in detail. It began immediately after the cessation of hostilities, first in the new West Poland, and then throughout Pomerania, Silesia, Masuria and the Gdansk region from mid-June onward.

The organizers wanted the resettlement to be "quick and ruthless," though the survivors remember it as more of a "wild expulsion." With the backing of police officers and militiamen, army units encircled the inhabitants in their towns and villages.

"The Germans are to be treated like they treated us," ordered the leadership of the 2nd Polish Army. The aim was to be so "tough and decisive" that the Germans would end up fleeing of their own accord. "The Germanic vermin should thank God they still have a head on their shoulders," boomed one general.

Systematic Torture and Murder

Torture was systematic and murder commonplace in many of the Polish detention camps. An estimated 60,000 Germans are believed to have died in this way. Countless other candidates for deportation were beaten, plundered, and humiliated before being herded onto freight trains bound for the West. Many died from the violence and stress associated with these deportations by train.

The expulsion applied to all Germans. Poles who had been classified as German citizens under the Nazis' "German People's List" were made to undergo "rehabilitation" procedures. Anyone who was rejected by this process was deported as a "hostile element." A law enacted on May 6, 1945 threatened the death penalty for any Poles who aided such people.

The mass deportation continued until the end of 1946. On Dec. 17 of that year, some 1,800 Germans were chased out of the region in and around the city of Stolp (known today as Slupsk). At 7 a.m. they were told they had until midday to leave the city. One of those affected told the West German parliamentary investigators that most of their luggage was stolen from a courtyard "where a Pole stood with a whip in his hand, wildly lashing out at us." He recalled that some "men and women had to strip naked. Jewelry and valuables were taken off them." The last of the expellees were made to wait at the train station until late at night in temperatures of minus 20 degrees Celsius (-4 degrees Fahrenheit) before militiamen pushed and kicked them onto unheated freight trains.

Many Poles had themselves been driven westward by the Soviets during the Russian occupation of eastern Poland. Some of them therefore sympathized with the hounded Germans, and tried to help. The new administrative chief of Lower Silesia threatened to punish "the use of indiscriminate or excessive cruelty." But this had little impact on the brutality with which the Germans were thrown out.

Angry Protest from the West

Politicians and the media in the West protested against the violence. The first train-loads of misery were chugging westward even as the Potsdam Conference was still underway. At the Lehrter Bahnhof train station in Berlin, American GIs pulled about ten corpses a day out of the freight cars that arrived there. The arrival of a ship carrying 300 half-starved children at Westhafen in Berlin provoked angry protest. The US government is deeply dismayed, the State Department wrote in a cable to Poland, complaining about what US officials described as the massive misery and poor treatment of weak and helpless people.

In late fall 1945, German émigré Robert Jungk reported about the "land of death" in the east: "We literally breathed a sigh of relief as we left the Polish zone and entered the Russian-occupied area. We had finally left behind us the pillaged towns, disease-riddled villages, concentration camps, desolation, untended fields and body-strewn roads along which bandits waited to rob us of our last remaining possessions."

Because the Wehrmacht had only retreated from Czechoslovakia in early May 1945, more than 3 million Germans there suddenly found themselves completely defenseless. On May 5, an uprising of communist and radical nationalist groups began against the last remaining occupiers. Here too, ethnic Germans were hunted down.

The "elimination of the German minority," which the Czech government-in-exile had planned back in 1944, became the official policy of the Czech National Front, and one it pursued ruthlessly from early April 1945 onward. The main players in this were the partisans and forces belonging to the "Svoboda Army," which consisted of Czech units that had fought alongside the Red Army. Across the country, Sudetenland Germans, named after the German-settled region near the Sudeten Mountains, were forced to leave.

Thousands of Germans living in Prague were interned, robbed and mistreated. Else S., who was held at the country estate of a certain Prince von Lobkowitz, later described how she was forced to work "from early morning into the night" for 13 months. "Food," she said, "was available in the pig troughs. ... We were so starving that we even ate the poisoned rodent bait we were supposed to put around the potato sacks. One old man went to get a tin can from the garbage pile and was caught by a guard. We all had to line up and watch as the old man was made to strip to the waist, stand on one leg with his arms raised and shout: We thank our Führer -- all the while he was whipped until, covered with blood, he collapsed."

Armed troops fell upon the Germans in towns like Tetschen (Decin), Aussig (Usti nad Labem), and Königgrätz (Hradec Kralove), killing thousands in the process.

Excuses were easy to find. For instance, when fire broke out at a factory in Aussig, the finger of suspicion was immediately pointed at German saboteurs. Thereupon an armed mob staged a bloodbath in which an estimated 2,000 people -- mostly elderly people, women and children -- were beaten to death, shot or simply flung off the bridge into the Elbe River.

At 9 p.m. on the evening of May 30, 27,000 German inhabitants of Brünn (Brno) were given just ten minutes to dress their children and pack. Armed men then forced them into long columns headed out of the city for a march toward Austria. Women and children were interned on open fields for many months. A writer for Britain's *Daily Mail* newspaper reported that the field had "become a concentration camp." Such intimidation proved effective: Three-quarters of a million Germans had been chased out of the country even before their expulsion was legitimized at the Potsdam Conference.

Stalin's Interpretation of 'Reparations in Kind'

Time and again, Western officers attempted to intervene to stop the violent expulsions. US paramedics treated victims of violent attacks, but death swept through the temporary internment camps in the form of starvation, typhoid and abuse. Robert Murphy, the political advisor of the American military government in Berlin, reported that "ruthless evictions have occurred on a sufficiently large scale to antagonize many of our troops against the liberated Czech people."

After the Potsdam Conference, the Allied Control Council demanded a more ordered resettlement. Czech independence leader and later President Edvard Benes promised to proceed in a "humane, decent, right, and morally justifiable" manner, and vowed to punish abuse. But the humiliation continued unabated for a large majority of the approximately 2.5 million Germans who still awaited deportation. And they still had to wear a white sew-on badge with a black "N" (for "Nemecy") to identify themselves as German. They were forbidden from using public transport, visiting bars or parks, and made to take off their caps in the presence of Czech officers.

The American occupying force in Germany felt powerless to prevent it. General Lucius D. Clay, the commander of US forces in Europe, complained about Czech harassment as well as the "difficulties" with the authorities responsible for the deportation, who initially withheld "young, able workers while sending us the aged, the women and small children." Clay described the sight of the expellees spilling out of the freight cars when they arrived in the American sector as a "pitiful" one.

And yet a worse fate still awaited younger, stronger Germans. At the start of 1945, Soviet authorities began picking up workers to help rebuild the war-ravaged Soviet Union. The aim was to use German slave labor in Soviet mines, on construction sites, farms and in timber forests.

Indeed, the Soviet Union had been promised "reparation in kind" at the February 1945 Yalta Conference. Stalin's interpretation of this diplomatic jargon became a nightmare for more than 700,000 German men and women, who spent weeks on trains taking them to labor camps, in some cases beyond the Ural Mountains. The conditions both during the transports and in the camps were so terrible that approximately 270,000 of these deportees died.

Eva-Maria S. was just 16 when she was abducted by the Russians in this way. She recounted her deportation to Siberia in a series of eyewitness accounts that former East German human rights activist Freya Klier put together in the book "Verschleppt bis ans Ende der Welt" (Dragged Off to the End of the Earth). She recalled, "There were about 90 of us in one freight train wagon when we set off. Our journey took us through Poland, where stones often smashed against the sides of the wagons. I can't remember all the details of the journey any more, only that several people died in our wagon. So I immediately volunteered to help get rid of the bodies. These were passed out by other girls, and thrown on top of the coal in the coal-storage car. When the prisoners pulled coal out of the bottom for their little stove, the frozen bodies slid out too. Somewhere along the way, we once pulled about 30 corpses out of that coal car."

As the train trundled through the ruins left over from Nazi Germany's war effort, many of the prisoners realized why the victors were so hungry for revenge.

Eva-Maria S. reported, "I think Belorussia was the worst. Looking through barbed wire on the windows, all we could see was scorched earth, destroyed villages and blown-up factories."

Editor's note: This story originates from the "Germans in the East" issue of SPIEGEL's quarterly history magazine, DER SPIEGEL GESCHICHTE, which was published earlier this year. A second feature, "Germany's WWII Occupation of Poland: 'When We Finish, Nobody Is Left Alive,'" has also been posted in English.

Translated from the German by Jan Liebelt

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