ETHNO-NATIONALISM IN POST-WAR POLAND

Bleating of the Lambs: German Children and Ethno-Nationalism in Post-War Poland

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Before the end of World War II, in a twist of irony for the ages, ethnic German populations in Poland were persecuted and expelled from the territories of Breslau (Wrocław), Stettin (Szczecin), and Danzig (Gdańsk), regions that Poland gained as a result of the Potsdam Agreement of 1945.1 The conditions these ethnic Germans, largely Polish-speaking and sometimes Polish-identifying, endured were severe. Poland’s reaction to its newly acquired territories, of which a few had been German territories for more than 500 years, was complex, due to the new Polish state’s political ideology becoming intertwined with a widespread social desire for retribution for Nazi atrocities during the war. Ethno-nationalism and the desire for retribution led to a suspension of morality during and after the war, which manifested in social persecution. The way Poles treated ethnic Germans following the war became a direct reversal of the way that Nazi Germany had treated Poles during the war. Ethnic Germans were systematically deported from Slavic nations and, in the process, were subjected to starvation, exposure, collection in former concentration camps, rape, violence, and death. This brings to light the question of whether the persecution of ethnic minorities is a goal or a side effect of ethno-nationalism.

This paper will examine the relationship between the ethno-nationalism of 1940s Poland and the ethnic German children living there. Children play an enormous role in the creation of nation-states, especially those states with nationalist ambitions. The way that children identified themselves, either as German or as Polish, provides valuable information on how nationalism affected identities in mid-twentieth-century Europe. In the case of the expulsions, it was as though previous conceptions of identity were turned upside down. Before 1945, people who were ethnically German had the privilege of claiming German nationality and engraining nationalistic values in their children in the hope that they would be beneficial to the children in the long run. However, when Nazi Germany lost the war, the privilege and pride that came with being German in former Nazi-controlled nations was lost. Suddenly, identifying as ethnically German became the most likely means for being persecuted and deported. The widespread deportation of Germans caused most families to be separated, and children often found themselves abandoned or without relatives.2 The choices children made without their guardians regarding identification are perhaps some of the best evidence of the early effects of nationalism and of the cunning of children themselves. Children could reject their German heritage, swear allegiance to the new nationalist state and remain in their homeland, or they could maintain their German heritage and be deported back to Germany.

In the fall of 1945, ten-year-old Helga was confronted with this choice; a childless Polish couple offered to adopt her as she waited for her mother to reclaim their property which was about forty kilometers away. Helga would have done well to take the offer—she spoke Polish, she was only ten-years-old, and the couple were farmers with, presumably, a more stable household than her mother’s. And yet, she refused the offer because she “wanted to stay German.” Shortly after her refusal, Helga received news that her mother had died. Polish authorities did not allow her to go to the funeral. The last she is mentioned is in a deaconess’s report from the children’s barracks at the deportation camp in Potulice.3 Helga’s story is not necessarily unique; about two percent of the ethnic German expellees were children who chose to maintain their German heritage and be deported to Germany.4 Many did not know anyone in Germany or even speak German. A nun looking after children in the Potulice camp aptly deemed this attitude “childish ignorance,” and was shocked when she asked her charges (twenty-eight children selected for deportation) “where do you want to go [from the deportation camp]?” and they answered simply ‘Do Niemcy” (Polish for “to Germany”).5

Ethnic German children’s experiences, in terms of treatment and identity during the expulsions, were overwhelmingly impacted by the political atmosphere of nationalism and the tense social atmosphere caused by the Second World War. They were persecuted by Poles and other Slavic peoples in Poland as the result of a widespread notion of German collective guilt and the nationalist fervor of the Polish state desirous of a homogenous population, which for the purposes of this paper will be referred to as “Polonization.” From the Potsdam Agreement of 1945 to 1950, ethnic German children were caught between the processes of re-Polonization and de-Germanization which resulted in their separation from their families, maltreatment, deprivation of German identity and unconsented adoption to Polish families; such measures were taken either out of fear of the children’s future potential as political disturbances or out of the need and desire for the repopulation of the national Polish state.

Historiography

The historical analysis of the German expulsions remained relatively undiscussed in the years following its documentation, because the victimization of Germans was not and still is not part of the conventional understanding of World War II and Holocaust history. Historians are hesitant to address the subject because of these conventions, but also because of the lack of documents translated into English. In the last decade, a number of bold historians have begun the process of translating and examining the German expulsion documents and contextualizing their place in the rise of ethno-nationalism. It is also these historians who provide the context for the further development of children’s history in the German expulsions.

Children’s voices within primary source narratives are few and far between, despite the vast collection of primary material on the German expulsions. Immediately after the war, the West German government commissioned Theodor Schieder (whose reputation in modern times is somewhat marred by his ardent support of Nazi ideology) to compile documentation of German expellee experiences; his compilation would become the staple collection of primary documents of the German expulsions. Die Vertreibung der deutschen Bevölkerung aus den Gebieten östlich der Oder-Neisse (The Expulsion of the German Population from the Region East of the Oder-Nisse) is just as extensive as its name. It includes the memoirs of German expellees and witnesses, governmental instructions, correspondence and memos, and records and reports of non-governmental agencies involved in the administration and supervision of the Reclaimed Territories. That said, Theodor Schieder’s work is a compilation, not an analysis. The sources in his books are arranged regionally and then semi-thematically within their sections, which makes the already challenging process of uncovering children’s voices even more difficult. Finding information about children is difficult because their memoirs are not typically considered as informed, relevant and valuable as adults. And so to learn about children one has to take a different approach and look for documents written by those most involved with children: women. Children’s history is a gendered one, there can be no arguing this. R.M Douglas’s work on children uses sources almost exclusively from the female perspective. Schieder’s compilation supports this method, wherein children’s experiences are related through the voices of mothers, nuns, deaconesses, nurses and female farmers. The sources make it clear that men had little to do with ethnic German children—the few exceptions being doctors and inspectors. Because of the need for a gendered, extremely narrow approach, it is not surprising that the history of children tends to merge with the history of women.

But this history of children’s experience in the German Expulsions is incomplete without an understanding of the literature on the German Expulsions in general. G.C. Paikert was one of the first historians to bring the study of the German expulsions into the English-speaking world, and with it he brought valuable statistics and primary sources otherwise inaccessible to non-German or non-European researchers. Paikert worked Schieder’s compilation of documents, alongside governmental statistics found in offices throughout Central Europe, into a comprehensive study called The German Exodus: A Selective Study on the Post-World War II of the Expulsion of Germans and its Effects.

Paikert rarely mentions children aside from their inclusion in some of the statistics he has gathered; however, he makes distinctions between phases of the German expulsions and uses terminology to denote points of progression
in the expulsions. In the first phase, which he calls the “Soviet phase,” Paikert describes the movement of Germans out of the Slavic regions as “flight.” No doubt, the Red Army and the Soviet Union had a great impact on ethnic Germans’ decision to flee the Reclaimed Territories because Soviet forces were notorious for their brutal treatment of civilians, especially women. However, the use of the word “flight” indicates an unconditional response and so would not be accurate to describe the following phases, which Paikert calls the phases of “retribution,” and “legalization.” In the second phase, Paikert refers the movement of ethnic Germans as “expulsions,” thus implying that Slavic nations were consciously rejecting these peoples. By the third phase, he uses the word “transfer,” which replicates the language used in both the Potsdam Agreement itself and in article XXXIII of the Treaty of Lausanne- the model on which the ethnic German expulsions were to be based. Ultimately, Paikert settles on the word “expulsion,” something of a middle ground for the translation of the German word "Vertreibung." Vertreibung can be translated to the diplomatic phrase “displacement” as well as the more emotionally charged “eviction” or “banishment;” whether Paikert was setting a diplomatic precedent or whether ethnic Germans thought the expulsions as exactly that is up for debate.

Historians Norman Naimark and Tomasz Kamusella represent two sides of a debate on language. Naimark joins the tradition of using the word “expulsion” but tends to err more on the diplomatic side with the phrase “forced deportations.” Kamusella, however, takes the plunge and calls the expulsions “ethnic cleansing.” Kamusella’s argument rests on the premise that the force behind the German expulsions was ethno-nationalism, which, as the twentieth century has shown, is one of the most prolific contributors to acts of ethnic cleansing and genocide. Naimark hints at agreeing with this interpretation by including his writings about the German expulsion in his collection of essays with the title: *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe*, but in reference to Poland, he never actually uses the phrase. This struggle over terminology is a representation of the social struggle over the history. Because of the sheer impact of Nazi Germany on Europe and its blatant acts of genocide, there is a tremendous amount of hesitancy of allowing expelled ethnic Germans or Germans in general to be considered victims of World War II or its results.

However, despite earlier hesitancy, ethno-nationalism is the most recent direction historians of German expulsions are taking. Norman Naimark, Tomasz Kamusella, and G.C. Paikert all espouse this particular train of thought. Paikert imagines the expulsions as part of an ethno-nationalistic process in which the ethnic Germans, as a minority, simply could not fit. He writes that because of their distinct backgrounds, Germans were believed to pose a threat to the nationalist or communist ideologies in Eastern European nation-states. As such, Germans were considered “unabsorbable” and potentially “disruptive” to national conformity. Although it seems aimed at adults—particularly men—this concept applied to ethnically German children and to half-German children. To an extent, it was justified by the actions of terrorist organizations with significant figures of Hitler youth, such as the *Werwolf* organization. Professor Perry Biddiscombe has written multiple books and articles on the *Werewolf* organization, although his work tends to serve as analyses on the acts of guerilla warfare committed by the *Werwolf* and the reasons for its failure, rather than research for children’s history. Perhaps inadvertently, his efforts prove that Hitler Youth members did indeed work with SS soldiers in the *Werewolf* and actually did pose a threat to the Slavic civilian populations, which supports Paikert’s analysis of the threat.

The phrase “Polonization” has been developed to denote the ethno-nationalist processes in Poland, and the combined work of Naimark and R.M. Douglas show how the processes affected children. Naimark believes that Polonization occurred in two phases (re-Polonization and de-Germanization) and was intended to homogenize ethnicity and solidify nationalism in the new Polish nation. He cites campaigns with slogans such as “Poland for the Poles,” the renaming of previously German streets and towns, the removal of German

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inscriptions from buildings, and the burning German books and (to the abject despair of historians) archives as proof of the simultaneous processes.9 R.M. Douglas uses Naimark’s argument for Polonization and applies it to children. He argues that children were treated as “war booty” and were kept to make up for wartime population losses or in accordance with “quasi-racial” policies. Such policies were used because many of these children were of mixed ethnicity and, according to Slavic governments, could be “reeducated,” or in Poland’s case, “re-Polonized.”10 Douglas also argues that the systems that Slavic nations used to identify which children to keep and which to deport or exterminate were based directly off of Nazi policies (which, according to Heinrich Himmler, were meant to “not merely ensure that reservoirs of desirable genetic material should not be lost, but to weaken the racial stock of Germany’s eastern enemies.”)11 This policy and other racially-charged parallels between Nazi German policies—coupled with post-War eastern European policies—reveal the influence of eugenics on ethno-nationalism and further support the idea that children were essential components in establishing homogenous populations.

I wish to assert the significance of children involved in the German expulsions as well as those involved in the attempts of re-Polonization. Post-war reactions to children were directly linked to ethnicity and therefore determined the manner in which they were treated. Those who were proven to be ethnic Germans faced deportation while those of mixed ethnicity faced forced adoption. The ways in which Poles rejected children or tried to re-incorporate them into the new state help to solidify two main concerns about ethnic German children. Firstly, the rejection and subsequent abuse of children is suggestive of the fear that German children, if allowed to grow without hindrance, would likely become threats to the new Polish state; either in the form of a wave of violent vengeance against the Polish government and people, or by disrupting the politics of nationalist Poland. On the other hand, the begrudging acceptance of ethnic German or mixed children and attempts to re-Polonize them are indicative of a sense of necessity and desperation.

Poland had been truly devastated by the war, especially in population, so the preservation of “Polish blood” and the demand for future labor, as the result of the expansion of agriculture, would have been of high priority to the stability of the new nation. The disparity between the way that ethnic Germans were treated and the way those deemed ‘salvageable’ were treated is particularly evident in the children’s treatment in the systems of deportation.

Post World War II Poland and Question of Expulsion

The question of “why focus on Poland?” is a significant one since Poland was by far not the only region to expel Germans; however, Poland is one of the strongest examples of the effect of the rise of ethno-nationalism on historically rooted minorities. Following World War II, the recovery of Polish sovereignty from the Soviet Union caused a complete overhaul in its administration and population. The entire region shifted one hundred and fifty miles to the west and lost 178,220 square kilometers of its previous territories. From the formerly German territories it acquired as a result of this shift (called the “Recovered” or “Reclaimed” territories), Poland gained developed industrial urban spaces and infrastructure, as well as valuable mineral deposits and seaports. The Polish people were not exempt from this overhaul; Polish intelligentsia and Jewish populations were devastated nearly out of existence due to the war. By February of 1946, almost a third of the original Polish population was lost to the war and the proceeding social upheaval; most farms and towns had to be repopulated by refugees or people with Polish blood who were transferred from the U.S.S.R. Additionally, when Poland took over the Reclaimed Territories it received their ethnically German populations. These populations, as well as the already existing ethnic German population in pre-World War II Poland, created problems within the new administration, which had adopted an ethno-nationalistic ideology emphasizing the need for a homogenous population. By removing ethnic Germans via deportation, Poland achieved this goal. The establishment of the first national Polish state in 1944-1945 saw a Polish population that was almost completely comprised of Poles.12

12 Davies, *God’s Playground*, 489-491.
Potsdam and Expulsion Procedures

The Potsdam Conference in the summer of 1945 sealed the fate of ethnic Germans in Poland; expulsion was not only approved by the Allies but institutionalized by the Potsdam agreement. The justification of the inclusion of provisions regarding the expulsion of Germans was the notion of collective guilt and a general vindictive attitude towards Germans. The result of the institutionalization of the expulsions of ethnic Germans was the creation of a massive deportation system leading back to occupied Germany; it was a system wherein millions of Germans lost their lives to starvation, disease, exposure or brutality.

It is easy to assume that the expulsion of ethnic Germans and the procedures regarding it were the direct results of the Potsdam agreement in the summer of 1945; however, this is far from the case. Before 1945, ethnic Germans in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, like many other civilian populations, began to evacuate when opposing armies advanced toward them. The evacuations were especially necessary in the face of the Soviet forces, known to be brutal in their “celebration” of successful maneuvers. However, evidence suggests that talks about the forced removal of ethnic Germans occurred even before Soviet advances. In 1940, Polish Foreign Minister Zaleski listed the deportation of Germans as one of Poland’s war aims.13 By 1944, the Polish (and Czechoslovak) government-in-exile had gained Allied support for the “mass transfer of populations.”14 Joseph Stalin was especially in favor of the expulsions, and was quoted to have said, in his characteristically blunt manner: “Throw them out. Now they [the Germans] will learn themselves what it means to rule over someone else.”15 Although Stalin was perhaps most outspoken of the Big Three, Winston Churchill and Harry Truman also supported the expulsion of ethnic Germans.

Although de facto deportations had been taking place in Czechoslovakia and Poland, the decision to enforce them become de jure after the Potsdam Conference. In Article XII of the Potsdam Agreement of 1945, the Allies made it clear that the transfer of “of German populations, or elements thereof” from Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia were to occur in an” orderly and humane manner.” Additionally, the article acknowledged that the already existing deportations needed to be suspended in order to allow for accommodations to be made for refugees’ arrivals in Germany.16 It seems that the ambiguity of this single condition for transfers may have been purposeful in order to accommodate the complexity of the administration involved, but it is nonetheless extremely troubling because the extent of the orderliness and humanity with which Germans were to be treated was left to the discretion of the nations most brutalized by the German armies during the war.

Since the conferences at Tehran and Yalta, the Allies’ plan was to model the transfer of Germans and Slavs on the methods used by the Greeks and Turks as the result of the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. There were huge problems with this. The Treaty of Lausanne had four main elements: there was about half a million people to be moved, the populations were distinct and relatively un-mixed, the operation was overseen and carried out by a Refugee Settlement Commission and international auspices, and the League of Nations loaned about £20 million to Greece to aid resettlement.17 Very quickly, it became evident that this plan was not going to work for Germans. It had not even worked as well as the Big Three liked to imagine in Turkey and Greece.18 Where there was about half a million people to be moved between Greece and Turkey, there are estimates that around the same number of Germans died during the process in Poland, not to even mention how many were meant to be deported in total, which was in the millions.19 Additionally, there was so little money after the war that providing for refugees on such a massive scale in the midst of the devastation of infrastructure and agriculture was simply not possible. The problem of disentangling ethnic groups for a clean separation also became one of the largest issues because of the significant population of intermarried Slavs and

13 Naimark, Fires of Hatred, 123.
14 Ibid., 109-10.
15 Ibid., 109.
16 Berlin Potsdam Conference, “The US, the Soviets and the British set policy on Postwar Europe July 17-August 2, 1945,” PBS.org, Article XII.
17 Douglas, Orderly and Humane, 71.
18 Ibid., 71.
19 Naimark, 126.
Germans. On the bright side, there were administrative and institutional organizations aiding the transfer on both sides of those involved; they included the Ministry of Public Administration of Germany, the Ministry of the Reclaimed Territories (die Wiedergewonnen Gebiete) of Germany, the International Committee of the Red Cross (CICR), district commissions of both Germany and Poland, and various religious and humanitarian organizations.

The Potsdam agreement institutionalized more than the deportation of ethnic Germans, it also institutionalized German “collective guilt.” “Collective guilt” or “war-guilt” is defined in the Potsdam Agreement’s second article as the understanding that “the German people… have suffered a total military defeat and they cannot escape the responsibility for what they have brought on themselves, since their own ruthless warfare and fanatical Nazi resistance have destroyed German economy and made suffering inevitable.”20 The notion of collective guilt was often taken, however, to mean that all Germans had an obligation to accept responsibility for the wrongs that their government committed on a personal level. In the minds of those who had endured the devastation of the Nazi regime, this meant not only that Germans should suffer, but they deserved that suffering. And no German was exempt from this guilt, not even children—in fact, young German children were accused of having “hitlerite” tendencies, despite the fact that many of them were not even old enough to remember their last names, much less their allegiance to the Führer.21 Especially in Czechoslovakia and Poland, collective guilt was used as a justification for acts of violence committed out of frustration, dissatisfaction, and vengeance—unheeding of the fact that a great deal of the Germans they persecuted lived as minorities in their respective countries and had done so for years before the war without holding any particular loyalty to the German government or nationality.

The violence that resulted out of the notion of “collective guilt” was enacted en masse throughout Europe, but especially in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland. It was unregulated by levels of involvement with fascism or anti-fascism.22 Little discernment was made between men and women, or even adults and children. In most cases, men were killed or drafted or sent to labor camps by whatever forces found them first; this left women, children and the elderly to bear the brunt of the violence. Rape became commonplace, as did suicides of entire families; Germans were refused rations, and in some places required to wear a white armband with an ‘N’ on it, meaning “Niemka” (Polish for “German.”)23 Details such as these line the memoirs of German refugees and lend themselves to the interpretation of the German expulsions as acts of ethnic cleansing used to prepare the lands and people of former German territories for new ethno-nationalistic states.

Ethno-nationalism and Polonization

Ethno-nationalism has come to be known as the most prolific cause of acts of mass violence in the twentieth century and its manifestation in the Reclaimed Territories of Poland has come to be known as Polonization. The concept of ethno-nationalism is built around the idea that races are “exclusive to themselves” and the mixing of races compromises the strength of the either or both sides.24 Therefore, in order to preserve strength, ethnicities must be separated and kept separated. The twentieth century’s favorite method of making this possible was via ethnic cleansing or genocide, and the Poles elected the former.

The presence of ethno-nationalism and its subsequent influence over post-war politics is evident in the tug-of-war between “Germanization” and “Polonization” in Polish territories throughout the 1940s. When Nazis overtook regions, they tried to “Germanize” them by converting whatever policies

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22 Naimark, Fires of Hatred, 127.
24 Naimark, Fires of Hatred?.
in place to Nazi policies. Under Nazi occupation, German memorials were raised and German signs were put up in public spaces. People were registered and segregated based on race so that apartheid could begin in full force. There were race-based limitations on rations and exclusions of non-Germans from certain trains, benches, shops and hotels. Non-Germans were forced to give up their land and homes for the settlement of Germans. And while Slavs were sent to labor camps, Jews were sent to ghettos and concentration camps for labor, and death camps for extermination.25 When the Poles regained control of their governments as well as the territory ceded to them in the 1945 Potsdam Agreement, they began the process of “de-Germanization,” alternatively “re-Polonization” because the two went hand in hand. Whilst removing German inscriptions from buildings to gravestones, burning German books, renaming German towns and streets, and destroying memorials, Poles enacted laws that forbade the speaking of the German language in both public and private spaces. They also pressured Poles and mixed populations to change their names to more Polish-sounding ones- usually by writing the name in the Polish equivalent or by adding –ski, –wicz, or –zik to the end. Polish authorities, such as Silesian governor Zawadzki, tried impress a sense of national Polish unity upon mixed populations, hoping to convince them to re-imagine themselves as Poles, as opposed to groups of Germanic-Slavic outliers.26 27

The entire logic of the process was to reverse everything that the Nazi occupiers had done, and in doing so, save and recreate as much of the Polish identity and population as possible. However, the process of re-Polonization was limiting because there was still a significant population of indisputably ethnic Germans who were not considered eligible for assimilation. Ethno-nationalist ideology refused to allow them to remain in Poland, and so the only other option was deportation back to Germany.

Deportation

As previously mentioned, the deportation system had existed for years before the Potsdam Agreement gave it a legal basis; the system itself was a network of camps, collection points and railways that transported hundreds of thousands of refugees to East and West Germany. In some cases, occupying forces were involved, but usually the system was administrated by German and Slavic ministries. The Potsdam Agreement actually brought the system to a temporary halt, in order for occupying forces (at least, the United States and United Kingdom forces) to try to better accommodate the sudden influx of refugees. However, Paikert suggests that this was merely a show and that “most of the refugees and expellees settled with little or no official guidance” and “that the heaviest burden-in matters of resettlement and integration-fell upon [the resident populations in West Germany].”28

Regardless of whether or not the occupying forces were involved, the treatment of ethnic Germans in the deportation system was harsh and eerily resembled the Nazi-imposed concentration camp system. The journey a lucky ethnic German (lucky defined as “living”) would take to get to Germany was complicated and inefficient. Firstly, their right to their land would be revoked, or they’d be driven off of it without notice. Sometimes, Polish settlers from the surrounding area moved onto German property before the Germans could or had been mandated to abandon it; in such cases Germans were used as unpaid farmhands until they were required to leave. Some Poles regretted the loss of Germans because of this; however, most of them were relieved to be able to set up permanent residences in the spaces Germans left behind.29 Having lost their land, Germans were driven into the ghettos with little work and little food. They were marked by the letter ‘N’ on their sleeves and forbidden from entering restaurants, taverns and other places of entertainment.30

Those who survived the trek towards the railways meant to transport

25 Davies, God’s Playground, 445-6.
26 Mixed populations in places such as Silesia were called “Autoctons.”
27 Naimark, Fires of Hatred, 134.
30 Naimark, Fires of Hatred, 128.
them to Germany were met with disappointment since the railways were constantly backed up. In the winter of 1945-1946, the railway transports were temporarily suspended because many cars were arriving at their destinations filled with corpses—the result of under-heating or the complete lack thereof.31 While they were waiting to board trains, the Germans who had gathered at railways were sent off as free labor, collected in camps, or continued to wait at collection points, often without food or shelter. Physical weakness was inevitable, but some cases were unusually pitiful, for example, Polish nuns working in a make-shift hospital for a transport in 1947 lamented that they did not know how to “handle the children who [broke] to pieces in [their] hands.”32 The lack of medical facilities and infrastructure in general is troubling because children and the elderly made up a significant portion of the deportee population and tend to be the most prone to illness and accidents.

More often than not, Germans ended up in camps, many times the very concentration camps Nazis had used to collect Jews. If that in itself was not enough of a psychological nightmare, the camp system continued to function as a cesspool of anger, fear, and abuse for everyone involved. This included Jews who had just been liberated. They were forced back into camps because, regardless of their Jewish ancestry, they still were considered by Slavic nations to be ethnically German.33 Several of the largest concentration camps such Auschwitz, Birkenau, Lamsdorf, and Potulitz shifted their internees from Jews to Germans within mere weeks.34 Children were separated from their families in this camp system. They were taken to specialized barracks, camps and childrens homes, the most prolific of which being the barracks at Potulice, the camps at Gronowo, Litoměřice, Brno-Jundrov, České Křidlovice, Boleslawiec, and Bydgoszcz and the children’s home at Schwetz. Occasionally, former Nazi-imprisoned inmates elected to remain behind in these camps, this time as administration and guards over the German expellees. It seems almost unnecessary to say that vengeance was one of the chief motivations for making the decision to stay in the camps, but if there was any doubt, evidence of extreme brutality is plentiful.35

Conditions in camps remained largely the same before and after the shift of internees: abysmal; death rates skyrocketed, families were broken apart, and sickness and malnutrition were rampant no matter who tried to alleviate them. Local humanitarian and religious organizations often sent members to work in camps as nurses or caretakers. The International Committee of the Red Cross was extremely involved in inspecting barracks and trying to regulate conditions, but much of it was to no avail. Despite the fact that most camp internees were typically elderly, women, or children, sympathy was not on the Germans’ side because of their war guilt. Additionally, resources were scarce in the best of places and even if they had been available, they would likely have been held back out of spite. In most parts of Poland, Germans were not entitled to ration cards at all. This begs the question of why the policy should have been any different in the camps.36

Deportation and Children

Children were treated very poorly throughout the deportation process; there were very few extra allowances made for them and the infant and child mortality rates soared. The extent of the maltreatment of children is indicative of the level of paranoia and distaste for all German people, not just those who participated in the war. This paranoia and distaste was justified and then intensified by collective guilt.

Throughout the entirety of the deportation process, there was little kindness or pity for children. In fact, in many places it was a point of pride that German children were suffering; for example, in Czechoslovakia, the head of the Szczecin-Stoleczn Commission proclaimed proudly that German children under the age of two had been refused milk allowances.37 Labor regulations were suspended as well, and children as young as eight years old performed heavy

31 Naimark, Fires of Hatred, 128.
32 Deaconess K. E., in Schieder, Die Vertreibung der deutschen Bevölkerung, Band II, 609.
34 Naimark, Fires of Hatred, 129.
35 Douglas, Orderly and Humane, 132.
36 Ibid., 234.
37 Ibid., 234.
agricultural labor for Polish farmers, such as plowing and harrowing fields. 38 Twelve to thirteen hundred children in Polish Lower Silesia were found to have been forced to work on building projects in the area and another thousand boys were deported to the Soviet Union, presumably, to work in labor camps. 39

In displaced-persons camps and at camps surrounding collection points, German children were deprived of basic necessities: food, clothing, adequate facilities, and even their families. A deaconess from Bromberg, working in the Potulice (Potulitz) camp in 1948, recalled that infants in the camp were allowed a “water-soup” for months and that if anyone passed the infants’ barracks at four o’clock in the morning, they would hear “the bleating of lambs,” that is, the babies crying from hunger. The same deaconess reported that “of fifty babies, only two remained alive.” This was the direct result of the refusal of milk allocations or the severe inadequacy of those which were given. And the hardship continued; it was often the case that valuables, including clothing, were taken as contraband upon entrance to the camps. So children went around “wrapped in rags.” Even if they had entered the camp with a decent piece of clothing, it was said to have “disappeared” by the time they were sent off on a transport. Especially in winter, this was problematic since heating was nearly nonexistent. The only times the children at Potulice experienced adequate heating was when a commission or organization, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, came to make inspections. Afterwards, the heat was immediately shut off. It should be noted that a wood stove was placed in the children’s barracks when it became apparent that the death rate was too high to escape the notice of inspectors, however it “smoked so dreadfully that windows had to be opened” which entirely defeated the purpose. The most emotional accounts of children that came from the camps, however, were those describing the separation of the children from their families. 40

The extent to which children were maltreated indicates an atmosphere of desperation and revenge. It is understandable that there would have been food shortages after the war, but to deny people, especially children, food from the existing supply based on race is inhumane. The denial of decent clothing and heating does not help the Polish case, either. Similarly, it is understandable that the devastation of inhabitable areas was great enough that children would be required to take part in the labor force, but forcing them to plow fields or work in mines suggests vindication—such kinds of labor are extremely physically taxing for adult male bodies, and even more so for children’s. As for the camp system, the Allies claimed that it was useful in filtering out people responsible for war crimes or crimes against humanity and this makes sense as the camps were reasonably well organized and documented by people like Theodore Schieder. Additionally, camps made the deportation system more organized and therefore easier for humanitarian organizations to impose regulations. 41 However, much of this reasoning is lost in the emotion of the psychological and physical separation of families and identities. Thus, it is perhaps not the methods themselves, but the intentions behind them that implies that there was a psychological motive involved in the situation, one that was just as strong as Polish desperation for food and labor.

I argue that this psychological factor was collective guilt, and that is was this notion that made the treatment endured by German children not only possible, but acceptable to Slavic victims of Nazism. Moral obligations towards children have not changed so much in the last century that the abuse of children was widely understood as acceptable in post-war Europe. There were moves to protect children before the war in the form of kindertransports, and after the war, when children received specific rationing including allotments of milk. Finally, the way that those involved with German children wrote about them implies a sense of responsibility and sympathy that could not have been specific to German mentality. These observations imply that the question at hand is not one of suspended morality towards children in times of war. Rather, the question appears to be whether or not children should endure the consequences of actions governments take in their name.

39 Douglas, Orderly and Humane, 234.
Polonization and Children

While it is easy to assume that the abuse of ethnic Germans was on account of their collective guilt as both the perpetrators and losers of the war, it is important to remember that things are never so simple. The processes of de-Germanization and re-Polonization occurred simultaneously and must be included in this equation. For all intents and purposes, de-Germanization was the removal of all things German from Poland; this included the language, the writing, the culture, the institutions, and most importantly, the people. Re-Polonization, contrarily, was the reinforcement and reassertion of the dominance of Polish-ness in the same areas. Therefore, the two were part of the same overarching process—Polonization, but they were on opposite ends of the spectrum. When it comes to children, the situation becomes convoluted because there was obvious confusion in figuring out which side of the process they were meant to be part of. On one hand, most of the children involved in the expulsions were undeniably ethnically German; their parents were German, or one parent (usually the father) was German, or they spoke German or they gave their loyalty to Germany.42 Logically, these children were to be part of the de-Germanization process; however, things became more complicated when children's parents explicitly stated that they were leaving their children to Poland. This left Poland with a dilemma: should they extend collective guilt to babies and children without definite loyalty or should they absorb the children into the Polish population? If they absorbed them, how could they ensure that the children would not turn on the nation in the future? The entanglement worsened when mixed children were added to the equation. Mixed children were especially problematic because of Poland's fervent desire to keep as much Polish blood in the nation as possible, so these children had to be kept. Nevertheless, many mixed families had been completely demolished, leaving children without care—additionally, some children were so young that they were not aware of their Polish identity and had been swept into camps by their families or communities.

Some weight of the problem was alleviated via the intervention of German administration, especially in exceptional cases wherein children were without any kind of care at the time. Usually, in these cases, the German government would give up the child for absorption into the Polish population. The German ministries of Public Administration and for Reclaimed Territories sent out a message on September 12, 1947 that specifically asked for children in camps to be checked to see if they met the requirements for deportation; that “discovered children of unknown ancestry… children whose parents disappeared,” abandoned children, and children whose parents had “made it known that it was [by their] own volition that the child should keep Polish citizenship,” should be allowed to stay in Poland.43 This included those who expressed a desire to keep their Polish citizenship or who pledged loyalty to Poland. For the most part, when it came to such children Poland stayed true to these guidelines. One “Herr Kierownik” from a nun’s account of the Potulice camp, offered to find a home for two young girls who did not know of any relatives in Germany with whom they could stay; the only condition he told them they had to abide by was that, in times of trouble, they were to say “[they] feel Polish and want to stay in Poland.”44 However, these children were the exceptions.

More often than not, the Polish solution to the problem of refugee children was the Polonization of all children—in camps and out. It was a very political decision in itself that rendered those who were not eligible for Polish assimilation unable to connect or reconnect with former German family or community, thus weakening Germanic presence and potential for terrorism in Poland. As mentioned earlier in this paper, one of the key fears reflected by the brutality Poles subjected upon German children was the fear of the future involvement of Germans in Polish politics and society, particularly

42While it may seem unreasonable for a child to give loyalty to anyone, this was actually one of the criteria by which children were determined to be eligible for re-Polonization. “Instrucktion der Minister für Öffentliche Verwaltung und für die Wiedergewonnenen Gebiete von 12. September 1947” in Theodore Schieder, Die Vertreibung der deutschen Bevölkerung, Band 3, (Deutschen Taschenbuch Verlag Gmb & Co KG, München, 1984), 420.

43 The requirements for deportation included children whose parents were members of the former Reich, of German nationality, or who had withdrawn Polish citizenship following September 13, 1946 (which excluded Germans from the Polish national community). Children who “showed distinctive German sentiments,” who were “afflicted by the Hitlerite spirit,” or had German parents abroad, in the camp system or in prison were to be repatriated back to Germany.

44 Sister M. from Bromberg, in Schieder, Die Vertreibung der deutschen Bevölkerung, Band 2, 617.
through terrorism. Slavs, Poles included, realized that the children of Germans involved in the war and the following expulsions had the full potential to grow up harboring antipathy towards those nations which had abused their families. The acts of terrorism committed by the Werwolf organization in Czechoslovakia and other Slavic regions spurred this concern and the conception of the traumatized Hitlerite avenger was born. This fear of German retaliation, on the part of Slavic nations as well as Western nations, is evident in the Potsdam Agreement's outlining of extreme measures to demilitarize Germany and to regulate German education. In Poland, it is clear that there was a belief that the deportation, death, and diminishment of the German people could prevent the emergence of these future German terrorists. Realistically, the Poles could not hope to deport every child as a potential threat to national security; what it could do, however, was weaken their ability to communicate and congregate.

The Polonization of German children included their separation and adoption, but its most important and most influential impact was in shifting German children's primary language to Polish. Language has always played a strong role in defining national boundaries in Europe, and among the children involved in the deportation system, the situation was no different. Polish camps and children's homes often did not allow the speaking of German, only Polish. If there was schooling, it was taught in Polish, regardless of whether the instructor was a German internee or not. The conversation between a young, ethnic German boy named Helmut and the nun attending his group of children at Potulice reflects the problems that resulted from disparities in language: I said to him: “Yes, I say, Helmut, why are you speaking to me in Polish now? The German language is no longer forbidden here and I thought you still wanted to go to Germany— you are a still a German boy!” Brokenly and in quite bad German, he replied: “Sister, I have forgotten everything. We could not speak any German.” Helmut was not the only one in his group who had difficulties with German; great numbers of children grew up in Polish-speaking areas, and as a result knew only Polish or spoke German as their second language. While the enforcement of Polish-only rules in camps or children's homes was beneficial to those who were going to stay in Poland, it was severely damaging to those who were to be transported back to Germany. It was inevitable that they would have difficulties communicating their need for help and finding relatives once they arrived in Germany. It was the loss of yet another survival skill for them. For Polish fears of retaliation, however, this was a good thing. If the children could not communicate among themselves or among their own people, building any kind of mass movement was unlikely.

The separations that occurred in the deportation system made it difficult for German families to reunite with each other, even without factoring in language barriers. Children were routinely separated from their mothers, often without warning. In some cases, the separation included babies as young as one year old. They were loaded on trucks and taken to children's homes and camps which enforced Polish-speaking only and had reputations of high mortality rates from starvation and maltreatment. At these children's homes and camps, such as Potulice, Gronowo, Bydygoszcz and Schwetz, children went through selection processes that were essentially micro-forms of de-Germanization and re-Polonization campaigns. Some groups of children would be selected for deportation back to Germany, others for adoption to Polish families. This process was especially exclusive and is evident in its selections of very small groups of children to be eligible for transfer. For example, from 1945 to 1947, there were 800 children at the camp at Potulice, but the group that the sister from document number 270 oversaw was of only 28 children; all of which had been selected from Schwetz for transfer to Potulice and then to a deportation site. The selected were usually the healthiest-looking and most well-behaved children because anyone on the transport “who was miserable or would cause a stir... would be removed immediately.”

45 “The US, the Soviets and the British set policy on Postwar Europe July 17-August 2, 1945,” Article A. Sec. 3i and Sec. 7.
46 Stenotypist P. L from Lodz, in Schieder, Die Vertreibung der deutschen Bevölkerung, Band 2, 593.
47 Sister M. from Bromberg in Schieder, Die Vertreibung der deutschen Bevölkerung, Band 2, 616.
49 Deaconess K. E., in Schieder, Die Vertreibung der deutschen Bevölkerung, Band 2, 607.
50 Ibid., 608.
According to the deaconess from Bromberg, these precautions were because the Poles did not want to look bad to the Red Cross or other international organizations involved. Those children that were not selected for adoption or transport, and who had not died, were returned to camps in terrible condition, “full of lice and covered in scum.” It can only be assumed that these children either died in the camps or were eventually taken on transfers as the situation became more regulated in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

If they managed to survive the deportation process, children still had a hard time reuniting with family because of language barriers. If they arrived in Germany, they did so with a severely inadequate handle on the language (as in Helmut’s case) and a vague recollection of a relative who their parents may have mentioned once or twice. Sister M. of Bromberg lamented that many of the children in her group left Germany with such vague information, such as “in Germany, in [Westphalia], there lives an aunt, to whom I will go.” Information like this was usually dated and there was no guarantee that the relative in question was still living in the same area or was still alive. Even if the relative was still alive, managing to get from one place to another knowing only Polish made the reconnection extremely difficult—even if Helmut could understand German spoken to him, he would not have been able to adequately respond to Germans much less patient and sympathetic than Sister M. If they were not selected for a transport, children may have been taken to a different camp than the one they started in, and as such, lost contact with the family left behind. Mothers often went to the Red Cross to find their children when they returned to Germany, but most efforts were hopeless because in many cases the children were too young to know their own names, or they had not been registered when they had gone through camps, or (most commonly) they had been adopted by Polish parents and had received new Polish names.

Adoption was, by far, the most prolific and most effective means of Polonization for the state. Despite the wariness of Poles of the political consequences of keeping German children, adoption proved to be a decent option. Adoption accomplished two things for the Polish government; firstly, it added to the Polish population, and secondly, it removed the problem of German child refugees. The Polish population was truly devastated by the war: by 1946, almost a third of the population figure of 1939 was lost. To Polish nationalists, this meant that the amount of Polish blood had sharply diminished (which was not good for ethno-nationalism) and it also meant that there was going to be a massive labor crisis. The Poles that had migrated from the Kresy and from central Poland and the Soviet Union might have closed a great deal of the gap, but the future work force was still diminished by the loss of so many men during the war. Labor was going to be needed for reconstruction and especially for agricultural reform, which created 814,000 new farms in the Western Territories. German children could be used for this labor—after all, many of them had already been used as labor throughout the expulsion—and the supply of them was significant, since thousands upon thousands of them had been adopted out of children’s homes and camps. Besides being an asset to future labor supply, adoption was a satisfactory strategy for Polonization. Adoption meant that Polish families who could not have a child before were able to have one and were then able to raise more ‘good’ Poles. It also meant that the German children would stop speaking German and contributing to German communities, which aided in the continuation of the homogenization of the ethnic population.

At the same time, the adoption of German children was done without consent from any party; children were taken from their mothers and then lost to them forever, leaving thousands of families broken apart. Mothers had extreme difficulties finding their children, because of the shift from German to Polish names. Those children that were reunited with their families often did not recognize them or could not speak with them. Adolescent children came to be viewed as sources of labor and were required to do heavy work which they were not physically capable of doing.
the ten year old girl whose mother died after she refused a Polish couple’s offer of adoption, worked for a farmer and was beaten when she was not able to finish her work, and then, when she refused to be adopted by Polish farmers because she “wanted to stay German,” she was beaten again.57 The Polonization process effectively broke ties between ethnically German or mixed children and their German families and communities. The breaking of these ties, which occurred through the deprivation of language and the separation of families, limited the potential for future German interference and influence in Polish politics. The process of Polonization broke down the strength of children’s German identity, and in doing so, made it easier to incorporate them into the nationalist Polish state as new or “re-Polonized” Poles, which in turn aided the homogenization of the Polish population.

Conclusion

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the expulsions of ethnic Germans began to ebb. By the time the People’s Republic of Poland entered the final stages of the solidification of a nationalist Communist regime in 1956, somewhere around nine and a half million Germans had been expelled or fled to West or East Germany.58 By 1950, about 25 percent of the 7.876 million expellees who had made it to West Germany were between infancy and fifteen years old, so in that aspect the deportation system’s transfer of children was successful.59 Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing how many children did not make it to Germany, whether because of death or adoption or assimilation.

The expulsion of Germans from the Reclaimed Territories and its subsequent impact on German children is a history that cannot be encapsulated within a single essay. The influence of nationalism on children alone deserves its own—preferably a hundred of its own—books. However, some of the key points in the Polish nationalist movement’s relationship with children that may ring true for other types of nationalism-child relationships are: the justification of treatment (via collective guilt and population homogenization in this case), the deprivation of mother tongue, and the separation of families. All of these things proved to be extremely effective for the post-war Polish state. The justification of treatment allowed ethnic German children to be systematically maltreated and removed from their families without considerable resistance. The deprivation of ethnic German children of the German language made it harder for those incorporated into Polish society to communicate with their communities and each other, thereby weakening their potential as a threat to the Polish government. And finally the separation of children from their German families and their subsequent adoption into Polish families not only helped the process of the assimilation of the remaining Germans into Polish society (thereby homogenizing the population) but added significant figures to the Polish labor-force.

What the Slavic regions of Europe did to the ethnic Germans was ethnic cleansing. Contrary to the colloquial implications of the term, mass suffering does not immediately equal genocide and therefore it is not acceptable to use the two as synonyms—especially in the examination of the victimization of post-World War II Germans. However, the Polish government’s endorsement of the utilization of Polonization on ethnic German children in the deportation and the adoption systems proves that the expulsion of ethnic Germans was an attack on a racially defined minority in an ethno-nationalistic state with the goal of achieving a homogenous population—that is, by definition, ethnic cleansing. The inclusion of children in this movement was not only possible but acceptable, because the notion of German collective guilt applied to them and because Slavic peoples needed an outlet for the frustration and desire for retribution they had not been able to express during Nazi occupation. This resulted in something of a suspension of moral obligations towards ethnic German children and caused them to endure poor facilities, inadequate nutrition, inadequate hygiene, and confusion in personal identity. It would be naïve to think that Polonization is the exception to the rule and that other processes of ethno-nationalism have been kinder to the younger generations. It is more likely that the process of Polonization has served as a model for other acts of ethnic cleansing inside and outside twentieth century Europe.

57 Deaconess K.E. from Bromberg, in Schieder, Die Vertreibung der deutschen Bevölkerung, Band 2, 608.
58 Paikert, The German Exodus, 2.
59 Paikert, The German Exodus, Appendix, Table II.
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