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## THREE STUDIES ON GERMANS' FATE AFTER 1945

Freya Klier, *Verschleppt ans Ende der Welt. Schicksale deutscher Frauen in sowjetischen Arbeitslagern*, Frankfurt a/Main 1996, Tischer Verlag, 150 pp.;

Manfred Gebhardt, Joachim Küttner, *Deutsche in Polen nach 1945. Gefangene und Fremde*, ed. Dieter Bingen, München 1997, R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 240 pp.;

Werner Terpitz, *Wege aus dem Osten. Flucht und Vertreibung einer ostpreußischen Pfarrerrfamilie*, ed. Michael Schwartz, München 1997, R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 227 pp.

The fate of Germans in East–Central and Eastern Europe, including Poland, after 1945 has become just as fashionable a subject as late 20th century forcible population transfers. Books dealing with this question are being published in Poland and Germany, and it is no longer ultra rightwing authors who discuss this subject in the Federal Republic. The earlier biased attitudes had, of course, nothing in common with science, but they confined research to political correctness just as effectively as censorship does. The question as now become a subject of normal research and discussions, leading to the appearance of source publications<sup>1</sup>. The three studies under review are in fact source publications.

The first book under review is a study by Freya Klier, a writer and stage director, not a professional historian. Klier took part in the dissident movement in the German Democratic Republic. This human rights defender has, in an interesting way combined the demand for a history from the

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<sup>1</sup> Let us mention the following recent reminiscences: M. Buber–Naumann, *Als Gefangene bei Stalin und Hitler*, Frankfurt a/Main–Berlin 1993; H. Schüler, *Workuta*, München 1993; H. Rauschenbach, *Von Pillkallen nach Schadrinsk*, Leer 1993.

bottom, for a social and not political history, with interest for the Germans' postwar fate, which for a long time was taboo both in the German Democratic Republic and in the Federal Republic. The book was meant to be a protest against the kind of history presented in the reminiscences and biographies of the principal architects of the Third Reich, politicians and senior officers. This was to be a protest against histories in which the fate of those who had paid the highest price for the war, the price of their life and health, was but a supplement to the great history.

Great changes are indeed taking place in Germany, one of them being a break with the tradition of East German propaganda, which is understandable. Klier, while clearly dissociating herself from all attempts to belittle German crimes by emphasising Soviet ones, also distances herself from West German habits. ... *hier eine Wehrmachtsgeneration; die bevorzugt auf russische Greueltaten verwies, um die eigene zu schmalern, dort deren Kinder, die aus ihrem Wohlbehütetsein heraus das Leid ihrer Mütter als "Strafe für Auschwitz" wegwischten* (p. 11).

Klier's book contains fragments of talks, accounts and reminiscences of 11 women who lived in the east of the Reich until 1945 and who in the final stage of World War II experienced the brutality of Soviet soldiers (mainly repeated raping) and were deported for forced labour to the USSR. Each chapter of the book deals with a stage in the women's fate: the passing of the front, deportation to the USSR, working and living conditions in Soviet camps, return to Germany and attempts to start a normal life. The picture is, on the whole, concordant with the one known from the *Ostdokumentation* of the German *Bundesarchiv*. Very interesting are the fragments reflecting the difficulties of starting a new life after the return, the frequently abortive endeavours to re-establish contacts with the nearest relatives.

Klier is clearly disappointed with the attitude adopted by the Russians during present-day discussions on the events of those days. Although the acts of the rape and robberies committed by Soviet soldiers in 1945 are known not only to eye witnesses but to all who even superficially deal with that period, Russian historians consistently ignore these facts and Russian ex-servicemen do not recollect anything of the kind.

The other two books mentioned at the outset have been published within the *Biographische Quellen für Zeitgeschichte* series of the Munich *Institut für Zeitgeschichte*. Both are accounts written down long after the actual events. The volume edited by Dieter Bingen contains two accounts by Germans who were forced to stay in Poland after 1945. Manfred Gebhardt, who had no previous connection with Poland, stayed as a prisoner

of war from 1945, when he was 18 years old, until the end of 1949. He later became a party activist in the German Democratic Republic. Joachim Küttner stems from a German landowning family in Great Poland. He knew the Polish language well, served in the Polish army and after the war lived in Poland under a fictitious name as a Pole until he fled to West Germany in 1958.

By this publication Bingen wants to continue the methodological principles formulated in the fifties by Martin Broszat, who was then preparing *Dokumentation der Vertreibung der Deutschen aus Ost-Mitteleuropa*. According to these principles, reminiscences written down long after an actual event are valuable as a source despite obvious lapses of memory and mistakes (p. 8). However, Bingen says nothing about the advisability of using a source which shows only one aspect of a situation. For instance, it can be said that the truth about the Polish western territories is conveyed in the accounts of the Germans whose homeland they were as well as in those of the Poles who after many vicissitudes found a homeland there. These two completely different perspectives form a whole only if they are taken together. Not to speak of the fact that an account does not always contain truthful information, even when the author wants to be truthful<sup>2</sup>.

I will not discuss Küttner's reminiscences for they cannot be regarded as a source material. But they are worth reading, being an interesting description of the fate of a German who, thanks to his good knowledge of Polish, lived in Poland as a Pole for several years. However, since he betrayed his true identity only to a few German friends, the reader does not learn anything about the relations between Poles and Germans, save for the information that people formerly employed on Küttner's parents' estate helped him to obtain Polish documents. The account is only a description of Polish post-war reality and of the situation of a person who for many years had to take care, e.g. during frequent unavoidable drinking-bouts at work, not to betray his identity. The account is interesting but, in my view, it is untypical and consequently of little use for defining the situation of Germans in Poland after 1945.

The other account in the book is more typical and therefore more interesting. Gebhardt's reminiscences do not deal with the German minority in Poland but with a large group of German prisoners of war who worked in Poland for a few years. A historian who decides to write a history of the

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, Küttner writes about the attitude of Poles, illustrating it by a description of a public execution of a German landowner, Christian von Jouanne, in the market square at Jarocin (p. 167). Such an execution did not take place and Küttner has only repeated rumours. One cannot blame him however, for it was safer in those times not to check rumours.

camps in which Germans were kept will undoubtedly have to consult Gebhardt's reminiscences which include an interesting description of the state of feelings among the Germans and their contacts with Poles.

While the first account was untypical, the drawback of the second is that the events which it concerns have not yet been properly researched. This has made it impossible for Bingen to point out which of Gebhardt's experiences were typical and which were specific. It is only now that the increasingly intensive research into post-1945 camps in Poland has made it possible to describe them more fully so that individual accounts do not hang in mid-air. It is known that the PoW section was set up on June 1, 1948 to conduct political work among prisoners. Until that time the PoWs had been treated like prisoners and were given prisoners' food rations. The working hours were not fixed and the PoWs frequently beaten. As a rule they had no free days and received no pay. Officers were not separated from privates and usually acted as elders in the camps. Political work was forbidden, Polish papers were not supplied. But there was no control of the German papers and letters that came in. In most camps German prisoners of war kept together with civilian Germans, former Volksdeutsche and former members of the SS. The state of feelings in the camps was low, especially in the 60 camps of the Coal Industry Central Board (each had from 300 to 1,200 PoWs). The reason why Gebhardt's reminiscences call for a critical evaluation is that the living and working conditions depended, to a large extent, on the colliery which ran the camp. The food rations differed and so did the scale of abuses; sanitary arrangements were not the same (though they were usually bad); the guards' attitude (beating) and postal services differed too. The camps at collieries did not have a uniform structure and identical living conditions.

Courses for "anti-fascists" began to be organised in 1948. Those who completed them could become members of PoW selfgovernment. Food rations were set at 3,038 calories a day; the PoWs had work eight hours a day and were to receive payment for their work (unskilled workers were to receive 25 zlotys, skilled ones 50 zlotys, engineers and technicians 75 zlotys). These changes were resisted by the camp managers who did not understand their sense. The collieries were afraid of changes, for prisoners of war accounted for 50 per cent of their staffs. Beating and force were the only method used by camp managers to make the PoWs work. Gebhardt, who at that time attended a course for activists, does not write of the Poles' difficulties; nor does he mention the difficulties encountered during the badly prepared repatriation of PoWs, conducted from 1948. In the initial

period there was no central camp to steer the repatriation; in practice only sick people were repatriated<sup>3</sup>.

In concluding this review of the publications edited by Bingen let me add that I cannot agree with his opinion about the alleged Polonisation of German children up to the age of 13 (p. 21). Some of the documents in our possession testify to the separation of families while others deny this. In an assembly camp at Głubczyce more than 30 German children were kept for a year because there was nowhere to send them to<sup>4</sup>. Another document speaks of a group of children sent to their parents in the British zone of occupation<sup>5</sup>. In a letter of September 24, 1945 the Minister of Public Administration recommended that only parentless children up to the age of five should be kept in Poland and "if possible, Polonised"<sup>6</sup>. I have no intention of going into details but it is clear that Bingen has repeated a current opinion which cannot be substantiated by documents or which is documented by only a few accounts.

The reminiscences of Werner Terpitz, a pastor from East Prussia, are the last publication we are going to review. He too wrote them many years, nearly half a century, after the end of the war, and included in them the experiences of his family and relations. The book almost completely ignores Polish issues, concentrating on the author's flight from the approaching Soviet troops and next on events in the Soviet zone of occupation. It will be of interest to persons who study these two questions.

It is worth drawing attention to the introduction by Michael Schwartz, who pays much greater attention than Bingen to links between the microsocial and the macrosocial level of reminiscences. This is reflected in the notes which are much more extensive. Schwartz asks whether the news of the Stalingrad defeat had the same impact on the author as it had on the whole community. He points out that Nemmersdorf, now regarded as a symbol of the crimes committed by the Soviets against the German civilian population, does not appear at all in Terpitz's reminiscences. Schwartz compares the then prevalent conviction that the German state had collapsed with what we know today, namely, that despite defeat, many state institutions were functioning quite effectively. He compares the political changes

<sup>3</sup> The situation in camps is described here on the basis of the 1948 report of the political education section of the Department for Prisons and Camps, Warszawa 3.01.1949, Archives of Modern Records, Centralny Zarząd Zakładów Karnych Ministerstwa Bezpieczeństwa Publicznego, fasc. 3/90, pp. 112–119.

<sup>4</sup> P. Madańczyk, *Przylączenie Śląska Opolskiego do Polski 1945–1948 (The Incorporation of Opole Silesia into Poland 1945–1948)*, Warszawa 1996, p. 234.

<sup>5</sup> 16.04.1947, Archives of Modern Records, Ministerstwo Ziem Odzyskanych, fasc. 560, p. 20.

<sup>6</sup> Archives of Modern Records, 295/XIV, fasc. 23, p. 5.

in the Soviet zone of occupation, the favourite subject of historians, with the real everyday problems of ordinary Germans, reflected in the reminiscences. There is a great difference between the two. In the background he also shows persons persecuted by the Nazi authorities, such as Victor Klemperer and the half-Jew of Königsberg, Michael Wieck. I think that this shows best how difficult it is to use biographic sources. This may also explain why the *Dokumentation der Vertreibung der Deutschen aus Ost-Mitteleuropa*, published in the 1950s, is such a weak source.