SCOPE AND OBJECTIVES

Near the end of World War II a drastic and unprecedented event occurred to the German populations living in the easternmost sector of the Reich and in other countries in east central and eastern Europe. Nearly fifteen million of these people, almost the entire stock, left their lands in an ever-westward flight to form the most monumental mass migration of modern times. The greater part left their homes in fear of the closing in of the battle zones and the advance of the Red Army. Other millions were expelled under provisions of the Potsdam Agreement by the victorious allies after the end of the war. These refugees and expellees – less some two million who could not survive the hardships of their forced exodus – entered Austria and Germany, concentrating overwhelmingly in what today is West Germany.

A significant part of these Germans were commonly called Schwaben, i.e., Swabians, indicating (often erroneously) the place of their origin, the Swabian parts of the Germanies.¹ They lived in the long and widespread center basin of the Danube river that lies under the massive crescent of the Carpathian mountains, and hence were also known as Donauschwaben, i.e., Danube Swabians. The great waterway of the Danube, which in one way or another has played such an important role in European affairs, was the lifeline of these Germans and its middle basin the setting

¹ Another possible origin of the popular term “Swabian” may be connected with the fact that east central and eastern Europe, in which regions the Danube Germans lived, used to be the classic thoroughfare of the (in great part German) crusaders led by the “Swabian” emperors, the Hohenstaufens. The more precise term Donauschwabe (Danube Swabian) is relatively new, appearing only after World War I.
of their habitat. It is in this wide region where two of the mightiest families of European nations, the Germans and the Slavs, converge (with the Latins as rimlanders), surrounding the small body of Magyars who do not belong to either one and occupy the center of the basin. It is here also that Catholic, Byzantine and Protestant civilizations meet, giving a unique cultural character and a curious, kaleidoscopic and rather incohesive entity to the area.

The habitat of the Swabians lies in six countries in the Carpathian basin, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, Rumania, Bulgaria and the Soviet Union, in order of the flow of the Danube. The area begins where the river leaves its original, purely Germanic environment in Austria and enters what is now the south-central part of Czechoslovakia. By Hungary – which country before its partition after World War I used to be the principal holder of the basin – it stretches out far and wide. In the north it ends by the crescent of the Carpathian mountain range, now in Czechoslovakia and the USSR, and in the south in the Bácska (Germ, Batschka, Serb. Bačka) and Bánát (Banat), which region became after 1918 partly Yugoslavian and partly Rumanian. It also includes the wide marginal tracts of the river in eastern Rumania, in Bulgaria, and in Soviet Bessarabia, and last of all the delta area (Dobrudsha) surrounding the river's mouth at the Black Sea.

The German populations of the basin were widely scattered, constituting partly sizable, cohesive ethnic blocs, where Germans lived in large numbers (enclaves), and partly isolated diasporae, small ethnic islands in the sea of the other nationalities. There was at no time a German or Germanic indigenous nation or state existing in that area. Nevertheless, two German language areas enjoyed a kind of autonomy in medieval and early modern Hungary. King Andrew II (1205–1235) gave through the Diploma Andreanum (1224) a charter to the Saxons in Transylvania, which the latter still call the Golden Charter (goldener Freibrief). The rights and privileges of the Saxons were gradually expanded by subsequent Hungarian kings until in 1486 the “University” (universitas Saxonum), the administrative and jurisdictional organization of all the Transylvanian Saxons, was constituted. King Stephen V (1270–1272) gave in 1271 a charter to 24 Cipser (Germ. Zipser) towns and villages in the Szepesség (Germ. Zips, Slovak. Spiš) in the north of pre-1918 Hungary, granting them privileges which amounted to a kind of autonomy that was to last for several more centuries. It should be noted that these two autonomies did not apply to the Germans as collective bodies, but, in keeping with the particularism of the Middle Ages, only to certain sections of them.

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