Forced Migration of German Populations During and After the Second World War: History and Memory

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The compulsory transfer of German populations from their traditional homelands in Central, Eastern and South-eastern Europe during and after the Second World War was an act of forced migration on an unprecedented scale. Some 12–14 million ethnic Germans were affected; up to 2 million lost their lives. For a long time this was at best treated marginally in most mainstream surveys of twentieth-century German history, and did not find a proper place in German public memory. If it featured, it was usually only as an event at the end of the war, and the image most commonly associated with it was that of horse-drawn carts trekking through ice and snow in eastern Prussia in a desperate attempt to escape the Red Army. However, the forced migration movement was a much more complex process and covered a wide range of experiences. Even more importantly, it was a process which began much earlier than the final phase of the Second World War.

The history of flight and expulsion

The forced movement of German populations occurred over more than a decade, and in five distinct phases:

1. **1939–41**: compulsory transfer of ethnic Germans (Volksdeutsche) from outside the German sphere of influence as defined in the Hitler–Stalin Pact, to the German Reich (heim ins Reich);  
2. **1944**: large-scale evacuations of Germans from the eastern territories ordered by the German authorities in the face of the advance of the Red Army;
3. **1944–45**: mass flight of German populations from those areas which came within reach of Soviet troops;

4. **1945**: so-called ‘wild’ expulsions of German populations, especially from Polish and Czech territories;

5. **1945–50**: compulsory transfers of the remaining German populations from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and other eastern and south-eastern European countries under Article XIII of the Potsdam agreement.

These five phases varied as to why the movement was implemented, how it was implemented, and who implemented it. However, the results for those affected were very similar: they were permanently uprooted and had to leave their homelands, unable to return; they had to settle in a new environment, and their arrival in large numbers caused significant problems for the receiving areas. The common background to all five stages of the resettlement of German populations was a broad international agreement that ethnic minorities in nation-states were a potential for conflict, and that this should if possible be resolved either by changing borders or by a compulsory transfer of these minority populations. The latter had been internationally agreed for the first time between Greece and Turkey in the Lausanne Convention of January 1923; the former had been one of the rationales leading to the Munich Agreement of September 1938. However, while the Western powers regarded a forced exchange of populations primarily as a way to achieve international stability and peace, for the Nazis it was an integral element of their policy of ‘ethnic redistribution’ (*völkische Flurbereinigung*) and of their vision of an ethnically homogenous and purified Europe.

With the occupation of Poland, the Nazi leadership developed a comprehensive policy of forced resettlements of German populations living outside the German sphere of interest, as set out in the Secret Additional Protocol of 23 August 1939, part of the Hitler–Stalin Pact. In a second secret protocol signed on 28 September 1939, Germany and the Soviet Union agreed that ethnic German populations should be resettled from the territories taken over by the Soviet Union to German-controlled territory. On 6 October 1939, Hitler officially announced the policy in the Reichstag. This marked the beginning of the *Heim ins Reich* (home to the Reich) programme. Between October 1939 and January 1941, Nazi Germany concluded seven resettlement treaties which led to the ‘repatriation’ of more than 500,000 ethnic Germans.

The German authorities also instigated the second stage of the forced movement of their own populations. In 1944 they ordered large-scale