Hugo Service’s monograph is a significant step forward to a better understanding of the complicated migration and nationalization processes that were under way in Poland’s northern and western territories between 1939 and 1949. The analysis is embedded into a more general history of war, border shifts, changes in political systems and forced migrations in East Central Europe at the time. It thus provides the ground for a detailed comparison between the processes unfolding in the Polish districts of Opole (Oppeln) in Upper Silesia and Jelenia Góra (Hirschberg) in Lower Silesia. While Opole had a large autochthonous population partially remaining there after the war, Jelenia Góra suffered from an almost comprehensive forced population exchange. The book is clearly written and structured and will therefore reach out not only to academics from the field but also to a more general public.

The book analyzes events in a chronological order. The final months of the war brought about the evacuation and flight of parts of the Silesian population, followed by an influx of settlers from different parts of pre-war Poland and from abroad. While the Polish government tried to distribute equally some of the migrants from Central and eastern Poland, the vast majority was resettled under rather chaotic circumstances. Not all the settlers wished to stay. Many just looted abandoned properties and returned to their homes in Central Poland; Soviet forces dismantled industrial plants and transported them to the Soviet Union.

At the same time, local authorities started to force parts of the German population out to make space for arriving Polish settlers. While in the first months after the war this process was deliberate and often guided by motives of revenge, in 1946 and 1947 the expulsions unfolded in a more coordinated way. As a result, most ethnic German inhabitants of both districts had to leave. Ironically, surviving German Jews had to abandon their homelands too. The newly arriving settlers came from all social strata and regions of prewar Poland. They differed largely in terms of culture and linguistics, leading to conflicts particularly in the first years after the war. Especially problematic was the situation of surviving Polish Jews arriving in Lower Silesia and in Western Pomerania in huge numbers.[1] Most of them had not only lost their families but their property also – with recurrent pogroms in Central Poland after the war providing the stage for their subsequent mass emigration.
After 1945, the link between Polish communism and Polish nationalism was very strong. The communists incorporated the Polish National Democrats’ program of secure, righteous Polish borders and an ethnically homogenous state, and ironically collaborated with leading figures of the (traditionally anti-communist) National Democrats. An important common goal was the repolonization of former German territories by means of changing street names, repainting German inscriptions, and demolishing German monuments. Apart from resettling huge numbers of Poles from other regions, they also urged native populations traditionally speaking Polish dialects to stay.

Service analyzes these complicated and contradictory verification processes in astonishing detail. One example included the twists and turns of repolonization policies in Silesia. The official desire to recover the Polishness of Silesians brought about mixed results. In many cases, families were divided between those remaining as Poles and those emigrating to Germany; former members of the Nazi party ended up as verified Poles while other Silesian dialect speakers had to leave as Germans. Since most of the postwar administration consisted of newly arrived Poles, the consequence was a “complete misapprehension of local cultural identity” (248). Although this identity was not necessarily German but rather distinctive Silesian, many locals did gravitate towards German culture and rejected the Polish administration.

Not surprisingly, after the political liberalization of 1956, numerous natives emigrated to West and – to a lesser extent – to East Germany. However, in 1960 the indigenous population in Opole district still made up 61% of the total population – more than in any other of the new Polish districts (301). Paradoxically, Polish attempts to make them feel Polish in many cases had the opposite effect: In the latest censuses many of them declared German or Silesian nationality. After 1989, many Poles from Opole were holders not only of Polish but also of German passports – enabling them to work in the European Union over a decade before their Polish neighbors could do so.

One of the most excellent features of the book is its rich archival base. Here, it is especially the German and Polish eyewitness accounts that add vividly to the monograph. While the author is conscious of the inaccuracies inherent in these sources, it might have been instructive to highlight the political raison d’être of these accounts. As far as German expellees are concerned, West German researchers interviewed them to document their hardship as well as atrocities committed by Polish and Soviet troops and administration. Matthias Beer has shown that this large-scale research project and the way people were interviewed had clear political objectives as part of the culture of (West) German revisionism to regain the lost eastern provinces. For their part, Polish eyewitnesses cited in the book documented their post-war experiences in various writing competitions in the 1960s and 1970s – decades after the actual events. Beata Halicka has highlighted the difference between the published texts and the uncensored originals in the archives, thus unmasking the editors’ significant interventions.

While analyzing the events, the author has consistently kept the broader picture in mind. He thus frequently looks at the situation in southern East Prussia where the new Polish government tried to assimilate the autochthonous and Polish dialect-speaking Masurians – with rather fair results. As Andreas Kossert and Richard Blanke have pointed out, the decisive factor in the Masurians’ failure to integrate in the postwar Polish melting pot might have been their Protestant faith. While one cannot underestimate the inclusionary strength of the
Catholic Church in Silesia, for obvious reasons it could not unfold among the Protestant Masurians. [5] In the conclusion, Hugo Service has a closer look at the situation of expellees in the two German states. He closes with the important statement that the expulsion of millions of Germans from their homelands in Eastern Europe prepared the ground for communist take-over and land reform policies.


Citation: