Deutschland: The image of Germans in Polish literature

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23 October 2009

The figure of the German in recent Polish literature reveals shifts in perspective from the experience of war to that of exile and resettlement. Representations of the German other in Polish self-imagining.

In the mid-1970s, while visiting the United States, a certain Polish man was having a chat with an American. When asked, “Where are you from?” he replied: “Poland”. “Where is that?” probed the American, keeping up the friendly exchange. “In Europe,” said the Pole. “But where exactly?” the local man insisted. “Between Russia and Germany,” was the Pole’s succinct answer. “But,” exclaimed the puzzled American, “there is no space in between there!” They finished their coffee in silence.

The present essay, whose subject is the relationship between Polish and German cultures, emerges in some sense from a place that does not exist – the place for which there has always been too little space.

Strangers at home

In 1981, in the very midst of Poland’s experiment with Solidarity, Jan Jozef Lipski wrote his essay “Two homelands, two patriotisms”, [1] which outlined a proposal for the renewal of Poland’s collective identity.

The need for this renewal, in Lipski’s view, came from the fact that Polish patriotic consciousness had fallen under the sway of megalomania and xenophobia, which work to unite society through feelings of hatred and injustice directed at its neighbours. Megalomania allows one to deride the Czechs, sneer at the primitive Russians, reproach the Ukrainians for their cruelty; xenophobia, meanwhile, relentlessly revives the loathing of Germans and reproduces the most nonsensical prejudices against the Jews. Megalomania works to bleach bloody stains out of native history – that is, wrongs that were done to the Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Czechs or Jews – and assists in maintaining a sense of moral purity. The hatred of the foreign Other certainly holds a community together, but such a community fails to notice that the glue that binds it is made of poison. This toxic cement of collective life turns against the community itself: if it has coalesced around the hatred of Germans, it is easy to steer its emotions by kindling anti-
German sentiments in order to exclude; if it is united in its contempt for Russians and all things Russian, then it will never discover Russian elements in its own culture, consequently failing to establish a true dialogue with itself. Megalomania and xenophobia are not simply the rejection of the unknown, but, most importantly, they draw a narrow perimeter around what is seen as one’s own. A community that cuts itself off from the Other can only define its identity by stating who and with whom it does not wish to be. Such a collective is not interested in discovering how much of the Other is part of itself, or how heterogeneous it really is.

Lipski contrasts this kind of *Ressentiment* patriotism with critical patriotism that he also finds in Polish tradition. Critical patriotism is rooted in the readiness for solemn reckonings, acknowledging both the good and the bad, or even the worst, acts committed by the native community. It does not shun the duty to love one’s homeland, but it always asks what kinds of actions this love seeks to motivate, and who it is willing to exclude. This reflective patriotism does not question heroic achievements, but neither does it allow the past to be reduced to a catalogue of triumphs. Guided by a sense of responsibility, next to sources of pride it places causes for shame and disgrace.

Lipski thus aims to convince us that the stranger is within us, in the shape of both denounced evils as well as regular cultural influences, so that any attempt at building a national identity based on excluding the Other leads to denial and hatred. Megalomania and xenophobia are not simply passions directed at outsiders; they also form a blueprint for relations within the community itself – their essence rests in coercing all members into a uniform model of identity, which in turn consists of a tally of despised characteristics.

“Patriotism derives from love and it is meant to lead to love – in any other form it becomes an ethical aberration,” writes Lipski. This Christian-sounding project can, however, be expressed in different terms: if we wish to communicate with each other better, we need to get to know ourselves more completely. This entails allowing the foreignness within us to be heard, and consequently for the strangers standing by our side to be granted full expression. It is thus impossible for Poles to relate to each other differently without first changing their attitude towards Russians and Germans.

**Strangers, go home!**

A few months after the publication of Lipski’s essay, martial law was instituted in Poland. Beginning in 13 January 1982, people gathered on the city streets on the 13th of every month to vociferate their hatred of communism, condemn the authorities for their crime, commemorate the victims of martial law, manifest their protest.

The demonstrations were surrounded by a tight cordon of militia. Robust and well equipped, they were carefully selected for this kind of task. They were known as ZOMO: the Motorized Squad of Citizens’ Militia, the most despised segment of Polish security forces. The crowd faced these dumb, baton-wielding warriors of the communist state, shouting, “ZOMO – Gestapo! ZOMO – Gestapo!” Louder and louder, with mounting aggression, till they were hoarse. Sometimes this was enough: the militiamen marched into action with their rubber truncheons drawn, clashing with the small groups into which the crowd had split. If, on the other hand, the protesters managed to advance a
few hundred meters, a basic political message entered the chants. The crowd passed the empty party headquarters, yelling, “Soviets – go home! Soviets – go home! Soviets – go home!”

These were peculiar cries. ZOMO recruits were always young men: our neighbours’ sons, our classmates, cousins, brothers. They were our own society’s flesh and blood. The cry: “Gestapo!” did not mean that they were German, but rather that they treated other Poles the way Germans had during World War II. This insult served to exclude their actions from the set of acceptable community behaviours, expressing the underlying belief that being a member of ZOMO was as foreign to modern Polishness as the methods employed by the Gestapo had been during the war. The second cry, meanwhile, meant that the martial law and the whole communist project in Poland were an eastern import enacted by people who were ideological and cultural outsiders. Both these slogans meant more or less that under martial law, Polish society was oppressed by forces so foreign to its identity that they could be equated with the Gestapo; a society that took orders from a government politically so alien that it was essentially Soviet.

Martial law – one of Poland’s greatest post-war traumas – was thus never named in local terms. And foreign names ascribed to it pushed evil outside the boundaries of the community, while bestowing on the community itself features of a collective supra-historical martyr. As the two slogans implied, forty years after the war we were still besieged by the Germans and the Russians. The acute anachronism of this idea points to the need for different diagnoses and new evaluations. But the appearance of World War II stereotypes meant that the task of finding more fitting labels for militiamen and party functionaries first required a reconceptualization of the Gestapo and of the Soviets. [2] And that is because collective identity always constructs itself in opposition to internal and external Others. [3]

**Almost Jewish**

The first attempt at such a reconceptualization following martial law was undertaken by Andrzej Szczypiorski in his novel *The Beginning* (1986). The significance of this book lay not so much in proposing a new version of history, but in a regrouping of sentiments surrounding the Other.

With respect to Polish-German relations that are of interest to us here, Szczypiorski’s contribution is both apparent and ambiguous. It is apparent in that the author broke with the stereotypical portrayal of the German. Its ambiguity, meanwhile, lies in the fact that the renewal of Polish-German relations proposed in the novel takes place at the expense of the Jews and the Russians. The author achieves this in a straightforward manner. He tells the story of a beautiful Jewish girl, who having been reported to the Gestapo by a fellow Jew, becomes the subject of a rescue mission on the part of her neighbours, while the final link in the chain of solidarity turns out to be Johan Müller – a German who saves Miss Irma Seidenmann from the hands of the Gestapo by pretending to be her friend. Years later, in 1968, Poland’s communist authorities expel Miss Irma from her job, and then from the country. Through this story, Szczypiorski not only points out that Germans could be humane and good, and that post-war communism was anti-Semitic; above all, he seeks to weaken the effectiveness of employing nationalism as a key to interpreting collective experience. We have relied on this key to explain Poland’s twentieth century
history: if we were oppressed by two nations motivated by anti-Polish ideology, then our raison d'être had to consist of nationalistic patriotism. Szczypiorski, however, shifts the centre of gravity from the nation to the totalitarian regime and, surprisingly, introduces the German as an ally in the Polish struggle against totalitarian authority. Post-war Germans are no longer National Socialists, but rather – as befits their innate perfectionism – model democrats.

Szczypiorski thus tells the story in which Poles become almost Jewish: they suffer persecution, but all the more so when forced to watch the persecution and killing of Jews. Because of this double injury – empathizing with the Jews coupled with the immensity of their own sacrifice – the Poles, like the Jews, find themselves trapped years after the war in painful ruminations and in their hatred of Germans. The author exploits this parallel to propose a change. His novel seeks to convince us that since, like the Jews, we treat Germans with emotional distance, we can use this to break the barriers and begin a new narrative – a dialogue between a doubly-injured victim and its sworn enemy. First, however, we have to let go of the generalizing view that sees all Germans as criminals or their accessories.

**Germanus sedens**

Although full of sentimentality, Szczypiorski’s novel did a lot of good. It legitimized writing about the civilian experience of the war, it included the German civilian among the war’s victims, it showed that building human relationships in the post-war world is closely linked to how one talks about the wartime world, and it undermined nationalistic thinking. At the same time, the sense of incompleteness generated by the novel created the right conditions for countless civilian wartime narratives to break through national categorizations and to unveil thus far overlooked experiences.

As long as European consciousness was dominated by war narratives that centred on frontline campaigns, partisan activity or espionage, civilian experience remained on the sidelines. But the wartime picture changes radically when we introduce the perspective of those focused not on fighting and killing, but on surviving – the perspective familiar from books such as *The Tin Drum* (1959) by Günter Grass, *The Silence of the Sea* (1942) by Jean Marcel Vercors, or *A Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising* (1970) by Miron Bialoszewski. And along with it change national characterizations. Soldiers are not really free to mix with enemy armies, but the mixing of civilian populations of diverse – and hostile – national provenance is a common occurrence. They are also often, for various reasons, isolated from the war itself.

Precisely this kind of historical setting features in Stefan Chwin’s novel *Hanemann* (1995). [4] The author recounts the life of the main hero – a German doctor living in Gdansk specializing in anatomic pathology – who just before the war loses his beloved, Luiza Berger, in mysterious circumstances. Until Luiza’s death, Hanemann studies human cadavers, convinced that they all conceal some immortal, immaterial element. But when her remains appear on his dissection table, he realizes that death takes away everything. Following this crisis of worldview, he quits his job, sits down in a chair and gives himself over to purposeless musings. Even the mass exodus of Germans from Gdansk in 1945 does not stir him from his melancholy trance. He awakens only when resettled migrants arrive at his home.
So what does Chwin do with the image of the German and Polish-German relations? First of all he brings back the picture of a melancholy German, which constitutes a forgotten element of Polish cultural tradition and derives its roots from the poetry of Heine and von Kleist, interwoven with the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich. Its essence lies in portraying a vulnerable subject who recognizes his frailty in the face of the elements. Thus potent existence, depicted as stormy seas or soaring mountains, transforms, through a dark epiphany experienced by the subject, into a den of nothingness. The melancholy subject espouses the belief that nothing is more certain than something, while the admission of his own frailty leads him to *acedia*. Through his choice to be passive and his refusal to fight nothingness, he becomes the opposite of all models of active life. Hanemann thus presents the antithesis not just of Prussian Junkerism or Nazi will to power, but of a more general will to live. Hanemann is foreign by choice, an existential Other – a man contesting existence itself. Thus, while Szczypiorski de-Nazified the German, Chwin demilitarized him.

The feeble German, the melancholy *Germanus sedens*, matters not only because of his reference to a forgotten aspect of German heritage, and because he illustrates the fraternal relation between Hanemann and Hamlet, thus complicating the depiction of all Germans as dangerous expansionists. The mention of the mass escape from the city and the post-war episode encountered by the main character are equally significant. By allowing Hanemann to remain in the Polish city after the end of the War, Chwin opens up the vast chapter whose subject are German civilians in Poland in 1945 – a chapter until this point barely present in Polish consciousness.

**Germanus sacer**

In the same year as *Hanemann*, Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo sacer. Il potere sovranore la nuda vita* [5] (1998) was published in Italy. In it, the author discusses one of the main anthropological traditions, stretching from ancient Greek thought into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which centres around the opposition between “naked life” (*zoe*) and “biopolitical life” (*bios*). Every political system based in this distinction reproduces a method by which the state achieves sovereignty and that is dangerous for society. This method is shared by the Greek and Roman republics, by the medieval monarchy, by totalitarian regimes and democratic systems.

All power seeks sovereignty. Sovereignty is achieved not when the state can impose laws, but when it acquires the ability to create exemptions from the laws that it institutes. The fullest embodiment of the suspension of the rule of law – conceptualized in this way – is the state of emergency. This should not, however, be understood as the time of stricter control. For Agamben, it is the ambiguous zone in which breaking the law is indistinguishable from obeying it, so that a given act cannot be judged as either atrocious or law-abiding. This ambiguous zone, created through a sovereign decision suspending/breaking the law, gives birth to naked life – life that can be killed but not sacrificed. This is *homo sacer* – the sacred man. Naked life is in the same measure exempted from the law, as it is essential to the law and to the state: if the state could not declare a state of emergency, thereby suspending the laws which it had previously instituted, and if it could not maintain naked life in this ambiguous zone, it could not be said to have power. Thus, conversely, the exception proves the rule, the outcast embodies the society, martial law defines the rule of law, and naked life links the structure of
sovereignty with the structure of sacrifice. The totalitarian regime was one in which the state of emergency became permanent. The concentration camp became its structural space, while the Muslim became naked life both exempt from the law and created by the law. In other words, the living dead found in concentration camps were not a by-product of the totalitarian regime, but rather the essence of its power, which through the camp manifested yet another, though not the last, of its incarnations.

After prisoners were released from concentration camps at the end of the War, the state of emergency was in the first place applied to the German population. This was permitted by a rule that, using Agamben’s conception, can be described as follows: Polish and Soviet armies formed a quasi-state structure founded through the law of the fight with Germany. This law (bios) specified who belonged to the community (whoever battles the Germans is a legitimate citizen) and who was the enemy. But the German civilians living in the Soviet Union and Poland were both included (as civilians) and excluded (as Germans) through the operation of this law. In other words, they were subject to a law that sanctioned the suspension of law. This population, therefore, unlike members of other nations freed from concentration camps, acquired the quality of collective naked life (zoe) when gripped by the state of emergency. *Germanus sacer* became a purely biological being – he could be killed but not sacrificed. His killing was therefore neither registered nor rewarded. [6]

The entrance of Polish and Soviet troops into occupied territories marks the beginning of many months of torment for the German civilian population: pillage, mass murder, rape, and concentration camps became the law of the post-war state of emergency. Polish literature abounds in texts dealing with this subject, whether documentary, journalistic or fictional. What is important, however, is both the ending of the silence and the diversity of voices. These disparate texts, while describing a nationalistic reality, suspend the operation of the nationalistic criterion.

When national identity retreats into the background, the War emerges first of all as the story of human bodies. The less armed they are, the more vulnerable. These bodies can be freely disposed of; they do not resist. An example are female bodies, which shared the same cruel fate during the post-war state of emergency. Some were killed following gang rapes and dumped in city streets while their husbands and children dug mass graves for them. The lucky ones served as sexual meat for longer. [7] In Pomerania there were numerous cases of mass suicides committed by the women (and sometimes by the majority of a town’s inhabitants) just before the entrance of Soviet troops so as to avoid dishonour. This was the operation of the so-called Nemmersdorf syndrome: “Nemmersdorf, a small East Prussian village, today known as Mayakovskoe in Kaliningrad county, was captured by the Soviets in October 1944. A few hours later it was recovered by a Werhmacht unit.” [8] But everyone was already dead: “By the first homestead four naked women were crucified on a wagon. [...] Two naked women hung crucified on the barn door, their arms nailed to it. [...] In the houses we found seventy-two women and children, plus one man, all of them dead. Almost all had been savagely murdered, only a few had been shot in the back of the head. We also saw swaddled babies whose skulls had been smashed with blunt objects.” [9]

The operational law was revenge: the Germans were dealt the same fate as that previously suffered by the Poles, Russians and Jews. For years afterwards German
women remained silent, aware that the soldiers were avenging their kin and that rape is sexual warfare in which the men are punished through the disgrace inflicted on the women. German women thus did not speak of their humiliation, because such confessions brought shame. It took forty years for European cultural discourse to create conditions in which the story of the raped German women could be told in a narrative free of repeated stigmatization of women. The appearance of such books in Polish translation demonstrated that a gulf existed between war and peace. This gulf was filled by time that simultaneously flowed and stood still.

What was done to the Germans as the civilian population was being reduced to the state of naked life lingered in Polish memory as our national “outrage”. Outrageous, however, is not the same as “fictional” or “extraordinary” – rather, it is the “ordinary” that had been concealed. During the war, German criminality and Russian savagery were “ordinary”, [10] as was Polish self-sacrifice. Polish acts committed on the German population are closest to wartime normalcy (the act of killing), but they are not linked to the war or to the fight with other soldiers. The bestiality of these acts gives them their “outrageous” quality. But what is “outrageous” has to be suppressed. And as anything that is suppressed, this outrage came back years later in the form of horror.

Such is the form given by Janusz Rudnicki to the confession of Ignacy Szypula, the commanding officer of the Lambinowice concentration camp, [11] which between 1945-1946 saw around 60,000 Germans, Silesians, as well as people suspected of collaboration with the Nazis pass through its gates. About 80 per cent of them were killed. The killing took all possible forms, becoming a competition in humiliation and sadism. Szypula ends his account dispassionately: “We buried those who had only fainted. They woke up as the sand fell on them. They screamed like mad, and the gravediggers threw the sand faster. If you ask me today if I still hear those screams – well, I don’t. I do not regret my sins.” The entire monologue is an unbroken catalogue of crimes, rapes and tortures committed because of the sheer ability and freedom to do so. The criminal mind is filled with witnessed or overheard depictions of wartime horrors, so Szypula arranges the German deaths in accordance with his confused memory and imagination. In his consciousness – that of the master of life and death – the prisoners become a single uniform, amorphous body, whose boundaries are only established through torture.

But bodies – beaten, crippled, quartered, raped, crushed – suffer increasing deformation the more intensely they are tortured. The energy of unending torture does not nourish its perpetrators, who, seeking to purge the world of Germans and the Germans of their German-ness, encounter a corporal contradiction: they discover that just as it is impossible to establish guilt through punishment in a Kafkaesque procedure, so it is impossible to delineate the boundaries of a body through torture. Thus the tormentors, acting through the legitimacy of the state of emergency, watch as the collective German body morphs into a shapeless liquid. The body on which they wished to inscribe the verdict turns the sentence into rotting pulp. It seems that Szypula falls victim to the autotelic nature of the concentration camp: the camp produces only death, giving its facilitators no satisfaction apart from emptiness.

Rudnicki’s story should not be treated as evidence of the crimes inflicted by Poles on the Germans; [12] instead, it is worthwhile to observe in it the terror at the probability of such events. The author’s own terror finds its voice through being contradicted – his
narrator is unrepentant, his account is marked by detailed exaggeration, by boastfulness, and by ostentatious arrogance whose only basis is the number of tortured victims. For Szypula, the multitude of those killed testifies to the immensity of German crimes, which could only be resolved through monstrous revenge.

Rudnicki therefore had to create in his main character a monster: if Szypula sought to play down his guilt, if he contradicted himself, sanitized his crimes or showed remorse, then we could say that while still a criminal, unlike the Germans he is a repentant criminal. However, the precision of his depictions, the sadistic flare of his expression which even years later seeks to humiliate his victims, introduces a true novelty into Polish-German relations. First of all, we see the abdication of innocence – by accepting guilt, Polish literature renounces the myth of Poles as immaculate victims as the basis for claims made against the Germans. This is not the renouncing of the claims themselves, but rather a change in motivation. Innocence is replaced by the reality of guilt, which leads to the admission that German victims of Polish camps can also have justifiable claims. This specific notion of equality should not lead to a relativization of German crimes, but rather to the acceptance that “German” and “injured” are not mutual contradictions. We can thus easily see that the appearance of Polish texts about concentration camps for German prisoners turns claim-making into both a Polish and a German right.

But these texts expose mutual accusations as merely a negative form of communication and persuade us to ask what comes next. Viewed through this lens, Rudnicki’s story can be read as a strong critique of nationalism, as well as a challenge to the illusion that breaking with nationalism will automatically equal the achievement of a new way of relating. The critique seems straightforward: nationally-based criteria for imprisonment in both Nazi and later Polish camps lay within strategies adopted by the twentieth century state. This state legitimized the practice of selection according to national origin, by the same token exposing its ideological basis. But breaking with nationalism offers no real solution, either: the ease with which the concentration camp structure was recreated by the Poles, as well as their eager adoption of Nazi practices, suggest that modernity created the conditions in which cruelty can thrive, regardless of the nationality of either the killers or the victims. Perhaps one conclusion that can be drawn from this novella is that the Poles and the Germans may honour each other’s claims, but should also recognize that respecting such claims does not provide sufficient basis for a healthy relationship. Rather, they should come together in trying to benefit from the critical memory of the institutions that they had created. Such common memory of past conflicts may lead to mutual guarding against the birth of violence within new, supranational institutions.

“An unbelievable oversight”

In the volume titled An Anthology of Postnatal Work, Cezary Konrad Keder includes a short story depicting a familiar scene: a town’s inhabitants are chased out of their homes by soldiers, rushed to the train station, shoved into cattle trains, the doors are shut behind them... There are shouts of urgency, battering, crying, falling bodies, a trail of abandoned suitcases...

This could be the transport of Jews to Auschwitz in 1942 or 1943. Or perhaps the exile of
Poles from eastern borderlands into the depths of Russia in 1940-1941. But actually the author – in a very general sketch purposely devoid of detail – depicts a different moment: the resettlement of Silesian Germans in 1945. The aim was not the recording of German suffering, but rather a provocative challenging of our own assumptions by showing just how much our historical consciousness is dominated by national stereotypes. When we see civilians packed onto cattle trains, we are convinced that they must be our own people.

Despite his tendency to mock, Keder in fact touches on a serious subject. Historians estimate that between 1945-1948, about 9 million people in Europe were resettled. The forced migrations followed similar patterns, but afterwards not everyone was permitted to remember. This seems to be one of the pivotal points in Polish-German relations: the right to full expression and recognition of suffering. For half a century the tragedies of almost all nations attained increasingly greater expression, while the story of German resettlement was suppressed even by the Germans themselves. The exile of Poles features in several dozen books that have appeared in the past twenty years. We thus have stories of resettlement from Belorussia – *Lida* (1990), *God Does Not Hear the Deaf* (1995) and *The Day before the End of the World* (2008), all by Aleksander Jurewicz; from Lithuania – *A Brief Story of a Joke* (1991) by Stefan Chwin, *Seen and Arrested in Time* (2006) by Zbigniew Zakiewicz, *In Another’s Beauty* (1998) by Adam Zagajewski; and from the Ukraine – *The Last Stories* (2004) by Olga Tokarczuk. But until the publication of *Hanemann*, not much was written about the simultaneity of the transfer [13] that was taking place: the Germans were being resettled at the same time as the Poles were being expatriated from the East. But it seems that, seeking to build a complete picture of post-war experience and thus describing in greater volume the stories of forced migration, our literature has made room for the tales of all deported peoples – including the Germans.

One could argue that describing the expatriation of the Germans is a task for German literature. But precisely this belief – that societies are fundamentally national – formed the basis of two world wars, and later worked to suppress the German experience. After all, German resettlement was a historical product of events set in motion by the Germans themselves, so their sufferings and victims were counted among the perpetrators’ costs. And silence became a part of the atonement. Günter Grass attempts to describe the effects of this silence in his novel *Crabwalk* (2002). [14] He depicts three German generations. The first gives its youth to the Nazi cause and pays for it through the loss of the East Prussian *Heimat*. The second commits itself to transforming the will to power into a collective willingness to atone, and works hard to build a democratic, pacifist society free of any claims and ignorant of all memory of resettlement. The third, youngest generation, refuses to accept the sense of guilt, instead searching the past for sources of pride and of injury, discovering heroes, martyrs, victims. Grass seeks to depict a heritage of humiliation experienced by the grandparents, rejected by the parents, and embraced again by the children. But when the youngest generation acts to pay respect to their grandparents, it does so through nationalism and terrorism. The novel thus shows how post-war liberals gave birth to fanatics – not by providing them with solutions, but rather because the liberals subscribed to a generalizing version of the past that condemned anyone linked to the war as guilty. And whoever wants to move from a sense of guilt to a sense of pride, does so through violence.

One of the novel’s characters is Old Man (“the old one”) – Grass’ alter ego. Old Man is a
writer who knows that he has failed in his duty to write a just novel: “This bothers Old
Man. Really, he says, his generation should take on the task of depicting the tragedy of
East Prussian exiles: the caravans heading West in the winter, deaths in heaps of snow,
by the roadsides and in blowholes as soon as ice on the Vistula Lake began to crack
under the weight of wagons and falling bombs, and still more and more people from
Heiligenbeil, terrified of Russian revenge, across unending snowy plains... Escape...
White death... No excuse, he says, to be silent over this massive pain, to eschew this topic
and leave it to the right-wingers, only because one’s own guilt was so immense that
repentance took precedence throughout all these years. It’s an unbelievable oversight.”

It is not just German literature that ought to make up for this lapse. This is because
firstly, this omission denies one’s right to speak about suffering, and as such harms
everyone. Secondly, the story is shared by all in its entirety: the paths of forced migration
ended in Germany, having begun in Czechoslovakia, Poland, Russia, Romania or
Hungary. And thirdly, the task is a general one because the account of German
resettlement forms part of a process that is far more significant than a simple rehashing
of grievances.

Books about deportations help us realize that the cornerstone of post-war European order
was not the end of the War, but rather the resettlement of populations with the goal of
ethnic homogenization of states. There was a need, therefore, for a narrative of the
painful loss of one’s real homeland, of material suffering caused by the forced
abandonment of one’s property, of the hundreds of thousands killed, of countless
tragedies suffered along the journey. This narrative was needed as a prerequisite for new
anthropology, simultaneously universal and rooted in specific historical experience.

Situated at the heart of this anthropology is the exile. [15] He takes the place of the
settled, sedentary man. The latter’s story ended at the time of the deportations,
regardless of whether he had been shown as a tolerant and friendly neighbour,
welcoming the new arrivals, or as a sombre landlord, the gatekeeper of identities. When
exile becomes an integral feature of the human condition, rather than a mere accident of
history, rootedness in turn becomes incidental. Viewed from this angle, history turns out
to be a series of deportations, now halted, now resumed; our rootedness emerges as but a
brief sojourn, our legal status – as but a card in the hands of the rulers. The new
anthropology, built around the resettled, is the ethnography of forced migration, whose
beginnings were unplanned by the migrants themselves and whose end they do not know.

Why we need the German

A lot can be learned from the past quarter of a century of Polish writing about Germany
and German-ness. First we witnessed a significant shift in perspective – from the
experience of war to the experience of occupation, and later of exile and resettlement.
Resettlement emerges in this literature as one of the most crucial experiences of the
twentieth century. It becomes a prism through which any nationalistic discourse of
sacrifice – whether Polish or German – becomes distorted, forcing the development of
new categories. A new anthropology is proposed, one in which the human being is
deefined by his defencelessness in the face of exile, and who defines himself in reference
to a relocated homeland. In other words, while it is easy to establish who started the War,
it is impossible to decree who does or does not have the right to suffer.
The hybrid identity of the inhabitant and the multi-layered identities of the territories we inhabit emerge in literature because they offer new ways of unlocking history. One of these leads us, through archives and memoirs, to new knowledge about the past. The issue of deportation and concentration camps for German civilians shows us that while there was a time when “the Germans did this to the Poles”, it was followed by a time when “the Poles did it to the Germans” – perhaps in smaller measure but with equal cruelty. But even such retrospective reopening of injured memory is ultimately an act of projection, since the essence of the reading that I have proposed here is based on the belief that any depiction of the Germans is aimed at imagining a different Poland. The less nationalism appears in the portrait of the German, the more likely it is to disappear also from our own worldview. A change in Polish identity is impossible without a previous change in how we think about identities of others. Any representation of others ends up projected onto our own identity.

So what do we gain from reading about Germans in Polish literature? The answer is, we can learn how to be free – free in the first place of the category “the Germans”, which, by being a collective category, not only imprisons those whom it subsumes, but limits the worldview of those who use it. Secondly, we can free ourselves from the category “German”, which as a national category confines the multifarious human subjectivity to ethnic and historical characteristics. By freeing a particular group of people from the application of the stereotype “the Germans”, and by freeing the human being from the identity trap known as “German”, we can free ourselves – free ourselves to think about people, rather than about Poles or Germans.

By freeing ourselves of our own national identity, or even by relaxing its parameters, we can see that a different history is possible. Even the impossible history, which follows the slaughter of millions in the form of normal coexistence. We thus need Germany as a challenge to a different historiography.

* Taken from a special English language edition of Res Publica Nowa, published with the support of the International Visegrad Fund

**Footnotes**


2. We should note that Russian identity -- alongside German and central European identities -- is one of the fundamental geopolitical categories. New narratives of Polish belonging to Europe were formed through the operation of these categories.

3. An "internal" Other could be, for example, the Woman, the Sexual Deviant, the Jew. And "external" Other is a representative of nationalities bordering a given society -- for example, for the Germans it is the Frenchman, for the Poles it is the German.


6. The majority of Germans found themselves in Polish territories as a result of being settled there as part of the occupation process. During the War the Polish population was subject to the same restrictions and cruel regulations, as the German population was after the War. The section devoted here to the post-war context neither questions German crimes, nor the right to a reclaiming of lands occupied by the Germans. Describing "Germanus sacer" I am simply trying to recall the causes and effects of this phenomenon, as well as to refer it to the forming of a new collective identity in Poland. This is because I assume that a reconstruction of Polish consciousness -- its Europeanization, modernization or universalization, whether in the spirit of Christianity or any other -- is not possible without including the post-war story of the German civilian population into Polish collective narratives.


10. See e.g. Michal Komar, *Nadzieja* (“Hope”) in *Trzy* (“Three”), WAB Publishers, Warsaw 2000. The author describes a tragic episode in East Prussian history: in the winter 1945 the inhabitants of a Kashubian village come out to greet Soviet tanks and end up crushed by them.


13. I use this term to refer to the play *Transfer* by Jan Klata (2006). In it, the director invites Polish and German re-settlers, who take turns appearing on stage and telling of their wartime lives and of the time of resettlement. This was the first symmetrical account in Polish cultural history, in which the experiences of the two civilian populations were equated.


**Published 23 October 2009**

Original in **Polish**
Translation by **Dominika M. Baran**
First published in **Res Publica Nowa V4**
Downloaded from eurozine.com (https://www.eurozine.com/deutschland-the-image-of-germans-in-polish-literature/)
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