
WWII expulsions spectre lives on

By Clare Murphy
BBC News Online

"Expulsion is the method which, in so far as we have been able to see, will be the most satisfactory and lasting. There will be no mixture of populations to cause endless trouble," declared British Prime minister Winston Churchill. "A clean sweep will be made."

This clean sweep, or the forced removal of millions of ethnic Germans from the liberated countries of eastern Europe in the immediate aftermath of war, was meant to spell the end of strife.

German nationalists had historically used the existence of German minorities in other countries to make territorial claims; Adolf Hitler used them to bolster his case for aggressive expansion.

But the row over the brutality, which accompanied the expulsion of these people, many of whom were raped, beaten and killed, has yet to be tidily resolved. All of them lost their homes.

Decrees authorizing the confiscation of property belonging to some of the 3 million ethnic Germans expelled from Czechoslovakia have soured relations with the Czech Republic several times, and the subject recently bubbled to the surface in Poland, where a similar process unfolded.

A fringe German group, the Prussian Trust, has begun a series of lawsuits against Poland to recover property seized after the war - a move, which has prompted near national hysteria as Warsaw remembers the 200,000 Poles slaughtered by the Nazis in the 1944 uprising.

Recognition

Speaking at the 60th anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising at the weekend, Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder firmly distanced himself from claims for compensation by the group, which has filed for reparations for some 30,000 former German properties in Poland at the European Court of Human Rights.

Expulsion estimates

Poland: 2-3 million

Czechoslovakia: 2-3 million

Soviet Union: 2 million

Hungary: 400,000

Romania: 300,000

But short of the German government constructing a legal settlement under which Germany would itself meet the compensation claims of the group, they cannot be stopped from pursuing their demands.

Germany's principal organisation representing the expelled and their families, the League of Expelled Germans, which has long demanded the Polish and Czech governments acknowledge crimes and human rights violations committed against the expelled, has also disassociated itself from the group.

But it believes Germany must go some way to addressing the demands - if only to give Poles legal certainty that the matter is closed and their property safe from the prospect of future lawsuits.

But for most of the expelled the issue was not one of property, but of "sympathy and reconciliation" between the people of both Germany and Poland, said the League's president, CDU politician Erika Steinbach.

The main aim of the League is the establishment of a centre dedicated to remembering those expelled across Europe, which would house a permanent exhibition on the fate of the ethnic Germans. They want it in Berlin.

Mr. Schroeder does not want it built in Berlin - or anywhere in Germany for that matter, arguing that millions were expelled from their homelands during the 20th Century and that a German location would give undue prominence to the fate of the expelled Germans.

He has implied such a place could blur the historical issues behind the expulsions - a charge Ms Steinbach strenuously denies.

"The centre against expulsion would be a place dedicated to truth, not to the perversion of history and the corruption of facts," she said, noting that the centre would finally endow the expelled and their families with a sense of identity.

Everyone's a victim

Germans' own suffering, long a taboo, is increasingly a legitimate grounds for open discussion.

It was confronted most prominently by left-wing literary doyen Guenther Grass in *Crabwalk*, a novel which focused on the plight of the more than 8,000 German refugees who died when their boat was torpedoed by the Russians in 1945.

The book became an instant bestseller when it was published in 2002. A year later, the liberal German historian Joerg Friedrich published *Places of Fire*, a book of photographs featuring the burnt and mutilated corpses of the civilians who died during the Allied bombing of German cities.

It was controversial, but it reached the bookshops.

Besides the concerns about moral equivalency, some observers have hit out at what they see as a general scramble for victimhood status.

But while Mr. Grass may have qualms about establishing a centre for the expelled in Berlin, he believes an open discussion is essential if German suffering during those years is not to become the preserve of the nationalist right.

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