Review
Andrew Demshuk, *The Lost German East: Forced Migration and the Politics of Memory, 1945-1970*
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It is perhaps a sign of how mainstream the study of Germans in east-central Europe has become that new titles on the German East are now commonplace. A decade ago such publications may have still elicited an excited response with an often-repeated truism that the field was ‘under-explored’. Today, it seems, the first question we must ask is what, if any, fresh new insights new studies on the German East bring with them. In German-language scholarship on the German East, the overabundance of studies is even more apparent. Not only is memory, quite prophetically, everywhere, but studies on the German East have tended to mark out the contested Polish Lands as the pièce de résistance for such an undertaking. Andrew Demshuk’s *The Lost German East: Forced Migration and the Politics of Memory, 1945-1970*, published with Cambridge University Press, follows a number of studies concerned with the legacy of former German settlements in Europe, most prominently in West Germany, since 1945.

Demshuk’s monograph leads readers into the post-war period through the lens of the expelled Germans from Silesia. Intriguingly, the title of his book makes no mention of the precise geography. Yet it is clearly one of the strengths of the book that Demshuk focuses on a case study rather than providing yet another grand overview of disparate groups. Instead, he offers a fascinating study of Silesian Germans (if we can call them that) in West Germany and (to a lesser extent) Poland after 1945. It is pleasing to see his expertise on the region brought together in a monograph, which is also a very accessible piece of work. What follows is less designed as a criticism of this book, but rather as a commentary on where the study of the German East and memory (as well as the combination of the two) ought to be going in the future.

Demshuk’s book is structured both thematically and chronologically. He introduces his topic with a helpful introduction laying out the conceptual framework and the remit of the book. Demshuk embeds his work in the field of memory studies – a field awash with a plethora of studies. His comments on Nora’s views on the effects of the processes modernity on memory are particularly welcome (p. 17), as it is commonplace for writings on memory to simply reference Nora without explaining (or indeed understanding) the main thrust of Nora’s argument. Nevertheless, the conceptual background on memory studies remains rather brief. He expends merely one and a half pages on the concept of memory and the short digest offers a rather basic menu: Halbwachs, Nora, Assmann as well as Svetlana Boym on nostalgia. A more comprehensive engagement with conceptual material on memory would have added depth to the introduction of Demshuk’s study.

The historical background to the subject remains (maybe necessarily so) rather cursory, too. In light of the audience and the fact that numerous studies have now been written on Germans in and from east-central Europe – and specifically
also in and from Silesia — a different historical background might have been preferable (pp. 33-52). As this book is on the politics of memory, the history prior to 1945 could have been integrated into a more concerted engagement with identity formation and memory culture(s). Instead, one might be left with the impression that memory only really happens after World War II. Furthermore, the glossary at the beginning of the book seems slightly redundant given the fact that most readers will have a working background knowledge of the meaning of basic terms such as Aussiedler and Volk (pp. xi-xiii). Some claims in the introduction and first chapter remain underdeveloped. For instance, Demshuk claims that ‘[o]nly in the context of the Nazi racial atrocities executed across East-Central Europe is the subsequent mass expulsion of Germans comprehensible’ (p. 51). He continues to quote a Jewish survivor from Wrocław/Breslau as evidence for the link between Reichskristallnacht and the devastation of the city of Breslau in 1945. Yet the link between the anti-Semitic violence of the 1930s and 1940s and the subsequent expulsion of Germans at the end of the war remains rather opaque and questionable. Moreover, current literature on violent societies may have nuanced Demshuk’s claim and given it more depth.\(^1\) Equally, scholarly discussion of the German expulsions has become so mainstream that it need not be prefaced with a nod to a ‘they started first’ argument. Studies on the expulsions of Germans no longer belong in the realm of right-wing relativism, and the quality of Demshuk’s work should make that point on its own.

Unlike Pertti Ahonen’s pioneering work on post-expulsion memory cultures in the Federal Republic of Germany,\(^2\) Demshuk’s focus on Germans from Silesia enables him to develop his research in considerable depth. In this way, we are introduced both to known ‘superstars’ such as Herbert Hupka (p. 63), the erstwhile chairman of the Silesian Landsmannschaft, and more eclectic Heimwehtouristen to Silesia during the early Cold War period (pp. 185-230). The latter aspect is a truly fascinating survey, though the somewhat uncritical reading of Larry Wolff (p.188) seems out of place in an otherwise superb section. What makes Demshuk’s study particularly interesting is precisely the continued relationship that many Silesian Germans maintained with their former homeland after 1945. These links included more restorative and revisionist claims to the land as well as the aforementioned travels to Poland. Yet their former homeland lived on separately in the imagination and transformed into a place of longing which was both complex and varied.

On the one hand – and this part of Demshuk’s analysis is already known to some extent – the luminaries and leading figures within the expellee community articulated a more forceful rendition of the ‘Right to the Homeland’. Demshuk nuances this, however, by showing that private memories and claims to the Heimat were (at least initially) bound up with mourning and less so with overt revanchist tendencies (pp. 122-128). It was only after a decade or so that private memories began to mimic the official Landsmannschaft discourse. Conversely, this then helped sever Silesian German ties to their former homeland. Their homeland had been occupied and destroyed by ‘Russians and Poles’ (p. 126); a return to their homeland was thus no longer possible, as it no longer existed.

Instead, so-called ‘surrogate Heimat spaces’ emerged (p. 163), constructed through homeland gatherings and Traditionspflege. Demshuk identifies three variations of the surrogate Heimat: The ‘human Heimat’ consisting of well-known faces from yesteryear; the slideshow Heimat made up of pre- and post-war images

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(most prominently in the form of slide shows, hence the name); the reconstructed Heimat in the form of street names, memorials, and other material culture (pp. 163, 164). It is this final surrogate Heimat, which makes for the most interesting reading. Demshuk introduces the reader to the curious case of the Brieg Tower restored some 500 kilometres westwards in the town of Goslar in Lower Saxony (pp. 177-183). This process of reconstruction also helped bring about the end of the Heimat in Poland, as Silesian Germans rebuilt an invented Heimat in West Germany. Though this section is quite brief, we might hope that Demshuk will return to this topic of the surrogate Heimat inscribed onto (West) German topography at a later date.

The final chapter returns to a better-known territory of studies on Germans in and from east-central Europe, namely to the diplomatic history of Ostpolitik. It is perhaps a little disappointing that the only truly audible Polish voices in the book appear in the final chapter as Demshuk incorporates representatives of the Communist government of Poland and their coverage in the media (p. 237). It would have been interesting to explore the manner in which German spaces and heritage were understood and treated by the inhabitants of post-World War II Silesia, as this is undoubtedly an integral facet of the ‘politics of memory’ of this transnational case study. Of course Demshuk is right to point to the Polonization of space by the Communist regime, but such a simple claim belies his own (justified) observation of often one-dimensional views of expellees in (West) Germany as simply revanchist. Yet post-1945 Silesia is portrayed as simply communist with little room for memory conflict and contestation. This is certainly one avenue that ought to be explored in greater depth in studies on the German East. Western Poland’s inhabitants after 1945 lived with two expulsions, namely those of the Germans and those of the new Poles from what was once Eastern Poland. If one adds in the third element of the Holocaust, then surely the memory cultures in communist (and post-communist) Poland cannot be reduced to the talking heads of the communist apparatus. In other words, the situation in Poland was complex, too.

Andrew Demshuk’s study is a welcome and insightful addition to the burgeoning field of studies on the ‘German East’. It offers a very accessible and well-researched study of Silesian Germans in the aftermath of their expulsions. It therefore adds depth to existing studies on German victims. Any monograph based on a thesis can and will elicit a range of criticisms such as the ones mentioned above. Nonetheless, Demshuk is successful in his undertaking to cast a studious light on Silesian German memory studies. What we are left wondering by the end is ‘what next’. The absence of Polish voices from this book is becoming a typical problem in studies on the ‘German East’. It was not for Demshuk’s monograph to revise this, but it should certainly draw attention to a growing chasm in this field of scholarship: while the onetime paucity of scholarship on the ‘German East’ continues to be addressed and rectified, the post-1945 societies of the former ‘German East’ are being reduced to monolithic and rather wooden Cold War diplomatic history. The ‘German East’ with all its communities in past and present is indeed a transnational region and it is time to treat it accordingly.