

# The Specter of German Revanchism

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Last May Minister-President of Bavaria Horst Seehofer stated officially that he would visit the Czech Republic. The seemingly unremarkable announcement in fact made a sensation of regional proportions due to its relation to the theme of World War II. This is going to be the first official visit of such level over the past 65 years, as Bavaria is staking territorial claims against the Czech Republic (formerly Czechoslovakia) over the expulsion of ethnic Germans from the Sudetenland.

Due to its territorial proximity to the Sudetenland, Bavaria hosted the majority of the German expellees who fell victims to the so-called Benes decrees. In August, 1945 the Czechoslovakian president invoked the Potsdam Conference edict sanctioning the expulsion of Germans from Silesia and South East Europe to authorize the deportation of 3 mln Germans and the confiscation of their property. Bavaria, the new homeland of the Germans from the Sudetenland, is demanding to officially annul the decrees.

The problems of the Germans from the Sudetenland still cast a shadow over the relations between the Czech Republic and Germany after the velvet revolution in Czechoslovakia. The Czech Republic renounced the collective guilt concept and apologized for the excesses of the deportation in the 1997 Czech-German bilateral relations treaty. Later then minister-president of Bavaria Edmund Stoiber attempted to set the annulling of the Benes decrees as a prerequisite for the admission of the Czech Republic to the EU, but the Czech parliament confirmed in a special document that the post-war decrees would be regarded as indisputable and untouchable. The Czech Republic is concerned that the abolition of the Benes decrees would pose a serious threat to its national interests. Chances are it is the economic crisis and the lingering financial uncertainty that now force the Czech republic to consider bridging the gap with Bavaria. Notably, Seehofer told about his coming visit to Prague on the Day of the Germans from the Sudetenland organized by the territorial association of the Sudetenland Germans.

These days the territorial associations of Germans expelled from Eastern Europe in the wake of World War II are receiving minimal media coverage, and the Russian media tend to altogether pretend that revanchism in Germany is nonexistent. Most of the time, the rather caricature groups were led by Bavaria's minister-president Franz Josef Strauss, a renown veteran of German politics. Formally, Seehofer is a successor to Strauss as the leader of Bavaria and its Christian Social Union (CSU), though as politicians they belong to completely different epochs. Strauss who fought in the German army in the Battle of Stalingrad became the CSU chairman in 1949, the year Seehofer was born.

The territorial association of Germans from Silesia has largely melted down since the times of Strauss. These days, the membership of all likewise associations in Germany is within the

2 mln bracket, but it would be a mistake to assume that the groups uniting Germans from Prussia, Silesia, and the Sudetenland no longer play any role on the German political scene.

The tide of debates over the German government's decision to create in Berlin a museum dedicated to German expellees swept across the German border and even reached Russia.

The controversial plan to establish a center studying the expulsion history was built into the 2005 Grand Coalition agreement at the request made by its major partner – the CDU/CSU conservative bloc traditionally linked to the Federation of German expellees. Other parties in the German parliament – from liberal democrats who are members of the current ruling coalition to the opposition comprising social democrats, leftists, and the green – are to various extents critical about the alliance, charging it with World War II revisionism. The thrust of the expellees' ideology is that the deportations carried out by the countries which won the war were crimes against humanity. Their 1950 declaration reads: "We therefore feel called upon to demand that the right to our native land be recognized and realized as one of the basic rights of man, granted to him by God". The Prussian society for oversight was formed in Germany in 2000 to provide legal support to land owners whose property had been confiscated. So far, the suits it filed in European courts from the names of individual expellees have been invariably unsuccessful. Czech president Václav Klaus must be credited with far-sightedness – employing the tactic of delaying the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, he forced Brussels to limit the scope of the Charter of Fundamental Rights so as to shield his country from property claims filed by the Germans from the Sudetenland. Nevertheless, the creed of the territorial association of the Germans from the Sudetenland remains the same. The group states openly that since 1919 the Sudetenland had been occupied by Czechoslovakia which never had any right to the territory. They cite as evidence of the West's regarding the Sudetenland as a part of Germany the fact that – in contrast to the originally Czech Karlovy Vary (Carlsbad), Ústí nad Labem (Aussig), Litvínov (Leutensdorf), Opava (Troppau), and Liberec (Reichenberg) – the Sudetenland suffered massive bombing during World War II. The association regards Germans from the Sudetenland as a particular ethnic group (Volksgruppe) unjustly denied the right to self-determination. On May 9, 2007 Bavaria featured the exposition titled Germans from the Sudetenland – a people of Europe, whose organizers laid out their allegedly unbiased vision of the past and the present of the population group. The press release of the event actually reflected a different agenda – it said the exposition served to name the crimes of the past regardless of who perpetrated them and to avoid silencing the disagreements of today

Germany is evidently making efforts aimed at presenting German expellees as victims of a humanitarian disaster on par with the nations which survived the Nazi occupation. This is absolutely unacceptable to the Czech republic. Czech historian K. Kaiserova describes the strategy as an attempt to dismiss the political and historical context underlying the deportations. This March she and her Polish and German colleagues T. Sirota and H. Hirsch quit their center board membership in protest. The rather scandalous result is that the move left only one non-German – a Hungarian historian – on the board.

The broader issue of deportation deserve closer examination. For example, the Czech, Polish, and German opponents of the view do not invite Romania and Russia to join their ranks, though Germans were also expelled from Transylvania (a territory now partially within Romania and Hungary) and East Prussia (a third of which currently belongs to Russia's Kaliningrad enclave). The charter of the expellees is posted in English, Polish, Romanian, Czech, and Russian. The position of the Czech and Polish historians reflects, among other factors, the persistent tensions between their countries and Russia over the

not-so-distant past. Normally an unbiased study of the expulsions history should have been a pan-European project. The broader format would make it possible to rethink the pages of Europe's modern history in a way that would strengthen the cooperation across Europe – and would rid it of the specter of German revanchism.

*Translated from Russian by the Strategic Culture Foundation*

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