

Theodora Dragostinova on Ségolène Plyer, “A Village Divided: Integration of Sudeten Germans in Eastern and Western Germany 1945-1989.”

Ségolène Plyer’s paper discusses the intersection of national assimilation and social integration in the case of the Sudeten Germans in Eastern and Western Germany after World War Two. She pays special attention to the differences and similarities of the integrative process in the two Germanies as the Iron Curtain became less and less permeable. The Allies as well as the two German governments assumed that the “Germanness” of the new citizens would make the assimilation relatively easy. As a result, the GDR and the FRG dealt with the expellees’ problems as internal, administrative matters that required mostly economic support. In effect, there was no questioning of the nationality of the new inhabitants who were considered ethnically German according to the flexible definition of a wider German identity based on language and culture. Subsequently, by the early 1960s the integrative process was largely completed according to the two administrative apparatuses. However, the fact that after 1989 the Sudeten Germans reconstituted their organizations and demanded financial compensations for lost property in the Czech Republic shows that an idiosyncratic identity has developed among this group. Implementing oral history methods and archival research, Plyer explores the way these identities worked and transformed in the period under study.

In Plyer’s analysis, both East and West Germany tried to improve the economic standing of the expellees. In the East this was done in the framework of the socialist agrarian reform that meant to restructure the whole society while in the West the refugees were allotted compensations according to their social status and the property they had lost in Czechoslovakia. This trend was characteristic of the ways the East and the West German states envisioned the functioning of their societies, and the paper could benefit from a more systematic analysis of the differences in terms of state ideology. Plyer seems to imply that the West “integrated” while the

East “assimilated” the population but it is indicative that many Sudeten Germans in the East were willing to stay there and not immigrate to the West exactly because of socialist initiatives that provided them with land in the GDR. Indeed, Plyer analyzes the process of integration on many levels, that of socio-economic standing, cultural identity, and political motivations, and a more methodical discussion of the conflicting ideological tendencies in the two countries would help to emphasize the peculiarities of integration in both Germanies.

Despite the perceived successful integration of the expellees, there existed an awareness of a specific “Sudeten identity” that people would identify with long after resettlement. In both Germanies, the Sudetens were encouraged to forget their origins and identify with their wider, German loyalty. In the FRG the Sudeten identity was reserved for the free time and people justified their existence with the contribution to the general wealth. In the GDR, however, the Sudeten origins became a taboo after the normalization of the relations with Czechoslovakia. In addition, the closing of the borders in 1961 affected the way people were allowed to communicate with their relatives in the West, and thus the silence about the Sudeten Germans was perpetuated.

It seems to me that there is a marked change in policies and perception before and after 1961, and I would like to see an emphasis on this change in the broader historical context of the Cold War. Plyer concludes that the adjustment of the Sudeten Germans in the West was due to economic growth while in the East it was a result of the sealed frontiers yet the available information in the paper does not fully support such a supposition. This might be true for the period following 1961 but economic integration was crucial and quite successful in the East before the 1960s. A clear discussion of the chronology of the developments would definitely illuminate how the dynamics of the integration changed according to the political climate. The

link to the broader context seems quite evident in the period after 1989 when the different organization mentioned in the paper emerged, and I also wonder how much the prospect for restitution or financial compensation could have triggered the identification with a Sudeten identity. Finally, the paper title suggests that the topic would be analyzed until 1989 but there is very little information on the events after the middle 1960s.

As far as the nationality of the Sudeten Germans goes, I am particularly interested to learn more how these Germans differed from the old Germans in terms of their “cross-pollination” with the Czechs. It is especially interesting to see how they considered themselves Czechoslovakian citizens before World War Two yet with the end of the Nazi regime their stay in Czechoslovakia became more and more problematic. I wonder if the “feeling of belonging” with the German state was not created so quickly after 1945 largely as a result of their forced migration that left them with no real choices. I would suspect that many might have been ready to make compromises with their national identity had they been allowed to stay in Czechoslovakia. These are all questions that are clearly not the focus of this paper but they could be interesting issues for discussion.