

# THE “EUROPEAN BOUNDARIES” OF THE EAST PRUSSIAN EXPELLEES IN WEST GERMANY, 1948–1955

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**Abstract.** During the final year of the Second World War, and in its immediate aftermath, around two million people fled or were expelled from Germany's then easternmost province, East Prussia. In 1945, East Prussia was divided between Russia and Poland. Especially in the Russian area, the newly-formed Oblast Kaliningrad, the German population continued to suffer long after the war had ended, which – as a result of traditional notions of anti-Slavism that were fully exploited during the Nazi era – these people mainly traced back to the new Russian administration. This paper explores how the East Prussians' perceptions of 'the East' – its people, its culture – came to permeate the West-German political debate during the first post-war decade. It argues that their perceptions of Europe's eastern boundaries were thrust onto the main political stage by the newly-emerging west-German state under Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, even though the National Socialist foundations of these views were recognised early on. In West-Germany's search for Western allies, East Prussians' crude victim narrative (and that of those from other former eastern-German provinces) offered an opportunity. By giving a platform to the East Prussian expellee community and addressing the sentiments of their lost Heimat, West-German politicians could present themselves as guarantors of 'European' values, as such distancing itself from the Slavic East. In doing so, various forms of (national) identity construction occurred that resulted in a greater West-German collective identity as evidenced by East Prussian news-outlets.

**Keywords:** East Prussia, the “other”, post-war, West-Germany, boundaries, expellees, anti-Slavism, National Socialism, lost Heimat.

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## «ЕВРОПЕЙСКИЕ ГРАНИЦЫ» ВОСТОЧНО-ПРУССКИХ ОТДЕЛЕННЫХ В ЗАПАДНОЙ ГЕРМАНИИ В 1948–1955 гг.

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**Аннотация.** В последний год Второй мировой войны и сразу после ее окончания с территории Восточной Пруссии, которая на тот момент являлась самой восточной из провинций Германии, бежало или было выслано около двух миллионов человек. В 1945 г. Восточная Пруссия была поделена между СССР и Польшей. Немецкое население, особенно на советской территории, в новообразованной Калининградской области, продолжало страдать и спустя много лет после окончания войны. Под влиянием теорий антиславянизма, получивших широкое распространение в нацистский период, немецкое население связывало свои лишения с фактом перехода под управление советской власти. В статье рассматривается, как восточнопрусское восприятие «Востока» стало частью западногерманских политических дебатов на протяжении первого послевоенного десятилетия. Авторы высказывают идею о том, что понимание восточных границ Европы было одной из основ формирующегося западногерманского государства во главе с канцлером Конрадом Аденауэром. При этом подобные идеи ранее уже высказывались национал-социалистами. Стремясь обрести поддержку западных союзников, Западная Германия культивировала образ Восточной Пруссии как жертвы, что распространялось и на другие восточногерманские провинции. Создавая платформу для сообщества «отделенных» и формулируя сантименты об «утраченном рае», западногерманские политики полагали себя в качестве гарантов европейских ценностей, дистанцируясь от славянского востока. В этом процессе формировались различные формы идентичности, включая национальную, что в итоге привело к складыванию широкой западногерманской коллективной идентичности.

**Ключевые слова:** Восточная Пруссия, «другой», поствоенный период, Западная Германия, границы, отделенные, антиславянизм, национал-социализм, «утраченный рай».

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In the wake of the Second World War, millions of German refugees and expellees from the former Eastern-German provinces reached West-Germany. These provinces had for centuries been part of Germany, but after 1945 were incorporated in Poland, Russia, Czechoslovakia, and Lithuania. This paper examines the different notions of (national) identity construction found in the news-outlets of one of the most prominent expellee groups, the East Prussians, and as such tries to retrace how Eastern German visions of 'the Slavic East' became part and parcel of the West German collective identity. The negatively charged connection between Slavism and Communism was first explored in the wake of the First World War, and was one of the very few principles, which during the late-1940s transitioned into West German collective identity. More so, a virulent anti-Slavism soon took hold of the bourgeoning state. That tenacious anti-Slavism, this paper argues, emerged as it served the specific purpose as a nation-building tool. In the wake of the Second World War, millions of expellees from Germany's former eastern provinces reached West Germany, and their integration was considered of vital importance. Yet, these people felt – and were treated – as 'others', and the first two governments under Chancellor Konrad Adenauer sought ways to bridge the divides. To make the Eastern Germans feel heard, policy makers allowed them to define the 'eastern borders of Europe', which, given the proximity of their former *Heimat*, they felt particularly well-positioned to do. Men like Adenauer recognised that the many notions of 'the East' put forth by Eastern Germans were heavily influenced by National Socialism, but it was a price they were willing to pay if it meant tying West Germany closer to western-Europe.

Until 1945, East Prussia was the easternmost province of Germany. Cut off from the main body of Germany as a result of the 1919 Versailles Treaty and reconnected to the *Reich* in 1939 after the German campaign into Poland, it was the epitome of Germany's tumultuous relationship with its eastern neighbours. During the Second World War, the province became the springboard for German operations to the east, but it also meant that, when the tide of war turned, the province was the first to be reached by the advancing Red Army. In the autumn of 1944 the first parts of East Prussia fell into Soviet hands, after which the front line temporarily came to a halt. In January 1945 the final offensive into East Prussia began, its capital Königsberg was besieged for over two months, and by late April the province was completely in Soviet hands [Kossert, 2008a, p. 69–74, 128; Lakowski, 2016, p. 89–226]. By the time the offensive began, the fate of East Prussia and its inhabitants had already been sealed. In March 1943, the United States President, Franklin D. Roosevelt, proposed to British Foreign Minister Anthony Eden "to move the Prussians out of East Prussia the same way the Greeks were moved out of Turkey after the last war; while this is a harsh procedure, it is the only way to maintain peace, and in any circumstance the Prussians cannot be trusted" [Krickus, 2002, p. 30–31]. This view echoed Stalin's, who already in 1941 expressed the intention to "give East Prussia back to Slavdom, where it belongs" [Rothwell, 2005, p. 152]. Stalin got his way at the July 1945 Potsdam conference, when representatives of Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union decided that the areas east of the rivers Oder and Neisse would be placed under interim Polish administration. As such, the southern part of East Prussia was handed to Poland, while the northern part of East Prussia came under interim Russian

administration. Lithuania was granted a small strip in the very north of the province, known as the Memel area. The British and Americans intended to support these proposals as permanent 'at the forthcoming peace settlement', which meant that, although these areas were already under Polish and Russian administration, they were not yet under *de jure* Polish or Russian rule [Historische Gedenkstätte, 1975, p. 61–62]. Yet, in a domestic radio address on 9 August 1945, Roosevelt's successor, Harry S. Truman, left little doubt that in his mind, the borders of Potsdam were not merely provisory, a line that was pragmatically adhered to at the U.S. State Department from then on [Foschepoth, 1991, p. 76].

Most East Prussians fled their province in fear of the advancing Red Army during the winter of 1944–45, when the temperature often dropped under  $-20^{\circ}$  C. Due to extremely poor evacuation measures, most of them were forced to leave their homes on short notice, so that they often found themselves between the belligerents, or even overtaken and run over by Soviet tanks, often facing the wrath of the attackers, hell-bent on revenge for the prior years of German occupation. [Noble, 2010, p. 198–211; de Zayas, 1994] The area that would eventually fall to Russia, known as *Oblast* Kaliningrad, had been East Prussia's most populous area, being home to its capital Königsberg and most of its other larger cities. Therefore, in the post-war era, the story of the flight from East Prussia very much became the story of this northern part.<sup>1</sup> In years following the war, the remaining Germans were gradually expelled from the area, the last of them leaving in 1948. [Beckherrn and Dubatov, 1994] Those who had initially stayed behind experienced the first three post-war years as a traumatic period marked by hard labour, arbitrary deaths, starvation, and maltreatment by the new authorities. [Kibelka, 2000] Even with their arrival in West Germany their suffering did not come to an end, since they were poorly sheltered and often discriminated against by their compatriots [Kossert, 2008, p. 43–87].

A sense of 'internal otherness' manifested itself among the Eastern Germans, which was aggravated by the awareness that their traditions and values were being suppressed. This 'internal otherness' stemmed from the fact that 'others' and 'otherizing' are at the core of all (social) identities, of which national identity is one. There is an inherent interplay of similarity and difference which creates the process of identification that distinguishes 'us' from 'them.' [Cornell and Hartmann, 2007; Jenkins, 2008] While paradigms of 'otherness' usually focus on the 'us' versus 'them' dichotomy (i.e. inside groups versus outside groups) it is equally important to keep in mind the internal differences that are just as central to groups and their formation [Cornell and Hartmann, 2007, p. 218–219]. The notions of 'nominal' (i.e. the name or categorical label) and 'virtual' (i.e. the lived experience(s)) identity exemplify this: while West German policy makers hoped to label the expelled Eastern Germans as West Germans, the Eastern German experience of West Germany was completely different than that of their 'established' compatriots.

<sup>2</sup> Not only were they expected to assimilate, in 1946 Allied military authorities, fearing

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<sup>1</sup> On the remaining Polish and Masurian-speaking population in the southern part of East Prussia, see: [Kossert, 2007, p. 348–362].

<sup>2</sup> "It is possible for individuals to share the same nominal identity, and for that to mean very different things to

that the refugees' insistence to maintain their own customs would create social (or even political) unrest in the reception areas, went as far as to order a ban on refugee and expellee organisations, known as the *'Koalitionsverbot'* [Süssner, 2004, p. 3; Habbe, 2005, 250–251]. The unfeasibility of this legislation was paramount: refugees and expellees comprised a massive segment of the new West German society. Moreover, the expellees from Eastern Germany who arrived in the west felt they had little reason to assimilate, as they expected their stay to be of a temporary nature. By 1949, a clear majority of 82% expressed the hope to return to their *Heimat* [Kossert, 2008, p. 88]. *Heimat* does not have a direct English equivalent, though it can be described as homeland or hometown. However, what is important for our purposes is that the notion of *Heimat* constitutes a particular mix of German regionalism and nationalism, where the diverse provincial cultures of Germany all supplied the cultural content to nation. In effect, to remain loyal to one's *Heimat* was to remain loyal to the German nation [Applegate, 1990, p. 1–19].



**Map 1: From "Grossdeutschland" to a divided Germany**

Since the international political climate prevented them from returning to their *Heimat*, the refugees had to make do with their 'temporary' situation. Hoping for financial support from the government to meet the costs of displacement, they sought recognition of their plight, and although their hardships were occasionally addressed in national media, they faced 'competition' from other German victim groups (mostly bombed-out urban populations) [Kossert, 2008, p. 51; Schwartz, 2004, p. 22]. This so-called *Opferkonkurrenz*

them in practice, to have different consequences for their lives, for them to 'do' or 'be' it differently." [Jenkins, 2008, p. 44].

had notable side effects. In order to claim governmental aid, the expellee groups were asked to define 'who they were' (who and what belonged to them, and who or what did not), which both increased the feelings of 'internal otherness', and forced them to think of themselves and others in boxes.<sup>1</sup> In the end, *Opferkonkurrenz* ensured that expellees pushed for a crude and rigid victim-narrative, which, as the Nobel-prize laureate Günther Grass pointed out in his 2002 novel *'Im Krebsgang'*, would continue to meet with heavy opposition when challenged [Grass, 2002].

In the wake of the Second World War, with Germany as aggressor, many foreign officials in Germany considered these victim-narratives as incredibly insincere, but German politicians viewed their plight more pragmatically. Refugees, after all, were a massive voting bloc. There were two million refugees from East Prussia, two million from West-Prussia and Pomerania, over a million from the Posen area, almost three million from the Sudetenland, 3,25 million from Silesia, and over 600,000 from Yugoslavia, Hungary and Romania, amounting to a total of roughly 12 million, or 16,5 % of the population by 1950 [Darnstädt and Wiegrefe, 2005, p. 105; Süssner, 2004, p. 1]. For any political party, the only road to Bonn's newly-formed *Bundestag* was therefore to take their demands seriously.

What the refugees wanted, above all, was to see the so-called *Heimatrecht*, the 'right to one's homeland', acknowledged. Although *Heimatrecht* had its roots in the German legal tradition, by the late 1940s the concept had fallen into disuse and thus the expellees 'reinvented' [Applegate, 1990, p. 8] it to draw attention to "the common responsibility of all European peoples." In the August 1950 '*Charta der deutschen Heimatvertriebenen*' (the Charta of Germans expelled from their *Heimat*) – a 'festive declaration' of the 'duties and rights of the *Heimatvertriebenen*' – they explained that

We lost our *Heimat*. Those without *Heimat* are aliens on this earth. God has placed the people in their *Heimat*. Forcibly separating people from their *Heimat* means killing their spirit. We have suffered and experienced this fate. Therefore, we feel called to demand that the right to the *Heimat* will be recognised and realised as a God-given fundamental right of humanity. ("Charta," 1950, p. 1).

The expellees initially considered the *Heimatrecht* to be so self-evident that they hardly bothered to further elaborate on it.<sup>2</sup> What they *did* do, was to attach *Heimatrecht* to the right of self-determination, [Ahonen, 1998, p. 37] since they did not trust the new authorities to have their best interest at heart. Or, as *Oberkonsistorialrat* Gerhard Gülzow (the Chairman of the Eastern Church Committee) overstatedly proclaimed when advocating the need for the right of self-determination: "We are no candidates for suicide! We choose to live!" ("Die Westpreußen," 1949, p. 10).

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of contextual factors that influence identity formation, such as competition, see: [Cornell and Hartmann, 2007, p. 169–208].

<sup>2</sup> In later years, however, expellee organisations devoted sustained energy to anchor '*Heimatrecht*' in a broader legal tradition, establishing working groups and paying experts to publish articles on the term. See: [Ahonen, 2011, p. 114–15].

These two combined rights meant that the politicians were forced to challenge the *de facto* eastern borders that had come about as a result of Potsdam. In fact, many politicians indeed felt that the Allies' territorial demands were unjustified, or excessive at the very least. The All-German Bloc/League of Expellees and Deprived of Rights (*Gesamtdeutscher Block/Bund der Heimatvertriebenen und Entrechteten*, or GB/BHE), founded in Schleswig-Holstein in early 1950, put the revision of the borders front and centre in their program and promptly received 23,4 per cent of the vote on *Land* level.<sup>1</sup> The traditional political parties also immediately 'courted' the expellee organisations, who considered themselves the lost eastern provinces' 'mandate holders', with Adenauer pledging to promote their *Heimatrecht* "with decisiveness" [Ahonen, 1998, p. 40, 42].

Behind the scenes, however, Adenauer, a former political prisoner in Nazi-Germany, but no less opposed to Communism, saw a road to a united Germany (along its pre-war borders) as unfeasible – as did many other politicians – and rather saw his task to tie Bonn closer to western Europe. Nevertheless, the plight of the expellees shaped West Germany's political landscape: the *Koalitionsverbot* was lifted in 1948, and the Federal Ministry for Displaced Persons, Refugees and War Victims (*Bundesministerium für Vertriebene, Flüchtlinge und Kriegsgeschädigte* or BMVt) was founded in 1949. Legislation such as the 'Equalization of Burdens Act' (*Lastenausgleichsgesetz*, 1952), which recompensed refugees for their lost properties, and the 'Federal Expellee Law' [*Bundesvertriebenengesetz*, 1953], which regulated the refugees' legal situation, followed in Adenauer's second term [Ahonen, 1998, p. 48–49; Wiesemann, 1991, p. 176–177].

With the garnering of political clout and the obtainment of concessions, expellee groups' status began to change, thus so did their boundaries and type of 'internal otherness'. These groups, as it were, transitioned from 'digital otherness' to 'analog otherness.' The anthropologist Thomas Eriksen asserts that analog 'otherness' necessitates ambiguous, blurry boundaries and sees (categories of) others as "almost like ourselves", while digital 'otherness' entails the exact opposite, with hard-line, clear-boundaries of 'us' and 'them' that present the respective others as "extremely different from us" [Eriksen, 2010, p. 79.] On occasion, the expellee groups' 'analogue otherness' was celebrated, and they soon became more interwoven in the wider German society. Dozens of cities offered to become *Patenstädte* (sister-cities, or, more literally: adoptive cities), promising to watch over the cultural heritage of the cities they adopted.<sup>2</sup> Königsberg, for example, was adopted by Duisburg, whose city council expressed the hope that it would "become a lively gathering place for Königsbergers expelled from their *Heimat*" [Patenstadt Duisburg, 2008]. More and more *Tage der Heimat*, or 'days of the *Heimat*' were organised, which further helped to introduce Eastern German culture to West Germany. Perhaps the most noteworthy expellee manifestation was held at Bad Harzburg on 25 June 1950. On a mountain at the

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<sup>1</sup> See: [Habbe, 2005, p. 253] In 1951, during the second Bundestag election, it received 5,9 per cent of the vote, and got two minister positions in the Kabinet Adenauer. After that, they never again breached the 5% electoral threshold.

<sup>2</sup> Indicative is the brochure of the *Bund der Vertriebenen*, "Mahn- und Gedenkstätten Nordrhein-Westfalen," accessible via: <http://www.ostpreussen-nrw.de/Info/NRW/PDF/Gedenksteine-NRW.pdf> .

border with East-Germany, expellees erected the 'Cross of the German East'. Accompanied with nationalist speeches by officials of the expellee organisations and attended by 20,000 people, it was one of the biggest gatherings of its time. So impressive was the turn-out that it prompted the British Military Governor Sir Brian Robertson to note – with great sense of historical continuity and irony – that it had been “a mass rally of the sorts the Germans have always liked” [Foschepoth, 1991, p. 86–87]. What Robertson observed were the attempts of Bonn to tie the expellees, the ‘analog others’, to West Germany, at the expense of the ‘digital other’ Communist areas further to the east.

Part of the efforts to increase the refugees’ exposure was the establishment of so-called *Landsmannschaften*, ‘home land societies’. These societies represented the pre-1945 provinces and domiciles of their members, and in October 1948 the *Landsmannschaft Ostpreußen* the ‘Homeland Society East Prussia’ was founded. A number of newspapers were established as its mouthpiece: in February 1949, the *Wir Ostpreußen* (‘Newsletter of the Landsmannschaft Ostpreußen’), was founded, which in March 1950 continued as *Das Ostpreußenblatt* (‘Organ of the Landsmannschaft Ostpreußen’). The *Ostpreussen-Warte* (‘Heimat-paper of all East Prussians’) was established in April 1950, and finally, the *Ostpreußische Nachrichten* (‘Publication for the Landsmannschaft Ostpreußen’) was established in August 1952.<sup>1</sup>

They brought a combination between news and human interest, and placed emphasis on stories from their native land, so to make their *Heimat* as visible as possible. What they sought to achieve as such was to convey the notion that they were actively ‘watching over’ their province, even though it was under (temporary) foreign rule. This sense of yearning was not as innocent as it seemed. Expellee newspapers used the full extent of the province’s ‘symbolic repertoire’ and were filled with pictures and articles of an idyllic East Prussia, a province of dark forests, crystal seas, elks, storks, beach resorts, medieval churches, thriving agriculture and prize-cattle. These were cultivated, bred, protected, and built by Germans, and now neglected, underappreciated, or destroyed by the Soviets.<sup>2</sup>

The different refugee newspapers give a good indication what concerned East Prussians and how they intended to ‘sell’ it. These papers show that East Prussians quickly realised that the best way to make their plight heard was by aligning it to the European agenda of men like Adenauer. The first East Prussian representative to forcefully argue in favour of Europe was Dr. Ottomar Schreiber. In a March 1949 interview with the *Wir Ostpreußen*, Schreiber told that “The size and unprecedented nature of the process of expulsion make this question a European problem, and Europe is certainly jointly responsible for the urgent solution” [“Bedeutsamer Auftrag,” 1949, p. 2]. That same publication also encouraged ‘Europeanism’ among its readership. In an article that urged for a ‘scientific quest for truth’ the editors pointed to the work *Deutsches Geistesleben in Ostpreußen* (German intellectual life in East Prussia), which promised to be an ‘intellectual history of the province, which

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<sup>1</sup> The online archives of these newspapers can be found via: <http://archiv.preussische-allgemeine.de/>

<sup>2</sup> Concerning national landscape ideologies and the role of ‘historic land,’ this is in line with: [Edensor, 2002, 39–45; Smith, 1991, p. 9–10].

places it in the context of European development,' as well as a booklet titled *Ostpreußens Geschichte und Kultur in ihrer europäischen Bedeutung* (East Prussia's history and culture in their European meaning) ["Wissenschaftliches Streben," 1949, p. 4]. In August 1950, Schreiber, now State Secretary at the Ministry for Displaced Persons, Refugees and War Victims, returned to his connection between Europe and the Eastern German expellees. In a speech, which the *Wir Ostpreußen* integrally printed, he forcefully argued against the idea of the German East as 'a colonial area on the edge of the European cultural landscape,' further articulating the widely held belief among expellees that the "common European mission can only be solved if the right to the legitimate *Heimat* is recognized as one of the fundamental rights." ["Unser Menschenrecht," 1950, p. 2–3]

Earlier that year, Professor Dr. Gunther Ipsen wrote a piece that covered the first two pages of the *Wir Ostpreußen*. Ipsen, until 1945 a staunch Nazi who had made no secret of his hatred of the Slavs, started his plea by stressing that "The question of the German East is equally different for the various stakeholders. For the expellee it is in the first place a matter of his *Heimatrecht*, for the European it is one of his border", as such immediately tying the expellee question to the European borders [Ipsen, 1950, 1–2]. In a similar vein, dozens of articles were printed that presented East Prussia as part of the Christian Occident, the *Abendland*. The area's conquest by the German Order during the Middle Age was framed as "the grafting of a young Christian branch on the old pagan tree," which turned into God's oak, which "came here to flower and fruit, because we know that East Prussia is a distinctively Christian country. Thus, the old amber country became *Abendland*" ["Ostpreußen gehört uns," 1949, 1–2]. Providing further 'proof' of the Europeanism of their province, the *Wir Ostpreußen* cited a '1922 inter-allied commission', which had allegedly determined that the Memel river (the border between East Prussia and Lithuania) was the border between the European and Asian civilisations ["Ostgrenze Europas," 1949, p. 2]. The combination of yearning and Europeanism constituted a powerful narrative: East Prussia used to possess the values Europe advocated, but with any passing day under foreign rule the area became less European, making East Prussia's plight a test of European strength and sincerity.

The refugees' construction of a 'scientific' argument that sought to link the German East to Europe, however, has some troubling deeper implications. Men like Ipsen were not exception to the rule, and their anti-Slavic opinions were widely accepted among the East Prussians. In the four years separating 1949 from 1945 the research in this field had not advanced, while during the National Socialist era it had been considered of top priority. East Prussia's history was centred round a 'struggle with the East': 'The history of East Prussia', East Prussia's Nazi-Gauleiter Erich Koch wrote in a guide about the province, 'is one of struggle. Struggle shaped the East Prussian people, it created their spiritual attitude [Kossert, 2008a, p. 104]. Königsberg's Albertus University became a centrum for *Ostforschung*, the research on Eastern Europe and beyond, and the region's relation to the German people, which effectively served to 'prove' racist notions, as such providing the foundation for German questions about ethnicity, resettlement, or population control [Burleigh, 2001]. In this respect, the *Koalitionsverbot* worked counterproductive: since there was no platform to address the

concerns of expellees in West Germany, the traditional views could linger unchecked. The necessity of a valve becomes particularly clear when we look at the poor situation in the refugee accommodations. "When at the moment the so-called democracy cannot overcome such ills, how can those crowds believe in democracy?", a refugee rhetorically asked. "It should therefore come as no surprise, if those people again long to a dictatorship, like 1932/33" [Wiesemann, 1991, p. 173].

The last expellees arrived in West Germany from *Oblast* Kaliningrad only in 1948, by which time they had lived three years under the Russian 'yoke'. Between 1945 and 1948 the remaining Germans made few attempts to bridge the divide between themselves and the arriving Russian settlers. A clear majority was unwilling to learn Russian (as a form of passive resistance), while the Russian administration was accused of deliberately starving them [Fisch, 2002, p. 389–415; Kibelka, 2000, p. 188–195]. These preconceived anti-Slavic notions had their roots in National Socialism, and some Germans made no secret of them:

One day my father was walking down the street with a Jewish physician, who spoke good German. An old German lady is sitting on a bench, with her a little boy aged about ten years old. She says to the boy: 'Remember, one of them killed your father,' after which the physician said 'I am a Jew from Kiev. I had fifteen relatives, I was the only one to survive, so does it mean that his father killed all of mine? Should I tell him that?' [Matthes, 1999, p. 343]

The dismissal of Slavs was not always this hostile and overt, but it was clearly a part of the East Prussian mind set, if only because many didn't know otherwise.

During the Nazi-era, East Prussians were taught to see their province as *Grenzland*, or borderland (with Königsberg's Albertus University presented as a *Grenzland*-university), and the language of 1950 showed that it was near-impossible to develop a 'scientific' argument without resorting to similar Nazi-infused language. These ideas, it should be stressed, had for centuries shaped German thinking of the East, and Eastern Germans had long lived between angst, defiance, and adjustment. [Thum, 2013] Nazi theorists, however, pushed the idea of the embattled *Grenzland* to its very limits. They presented '*Festung Europa*', or fortress Europe, as the highwater mark of culture, but would always attach the threat of its overrunning by 'Asia' to it [Klemperer, 2000, p. 152, 212]. "Europe's peculiarity and independent existence have not come about naturally", the first lines of the 'Europa-Handbook' read, "time and again they had to be fought for in heavy battles and great spiritual clashes" [Berber, 1943, p. 7]. When Königsberg was besieged by Soviet forces in the first months of 1945, Ipsen, at the time the National Socialist Leadership Officer of *Festung* Königsberg, proclaimed that "Stalin believes that the time has arrived to complete his Bolshevist plans of conquest from Vladivostok to Gibraltar. (...) We should be ashamed, if we were to flinch from this enemy. There will come a day when we rise again from our defensive positions and repel the red hordes in its steppes, who wanted to destroy our home and our family" [Festung Königsberg, 1945, p. 1].

It proved hard to shake off this sort of language. During the celebration of the thirtieth birthday of the 1920 *Volksabstimmung* (the plebiscite in which the inhabitants of Allenstein voted in favour of staying part of East Prussia – in itself already a questionable cause for celebration), Dr. Schreiber told an audience in Lübeck that “Europe either has to cease [to oppose] the ever-growing aggression of the East and thus renounce its future, or it has to make the decision to increase the defence in the East” [“Einigkeit,” 1950, p. 203]. A year later, in the November 1951 *Ostpreußenblatt* article “Martyrs on the ramparts of Europe”, East Prussians were “ordered to awaken [Europe’s] conscience.” “We call out to you: sixteen million have been driven out, and every fourth has been murdered, and you, Europe, have been robbed of your *Grenzland!*” [“Märtyrer,” 1951, p. 1]. Dr. Eugen Sauvant, who during Königsberg’s siege worked closely together with Ipsen, also had trouble leaving behind the martial tone that so dominated the Nazi rhetoric. In a 1955 speech on the ‘importance of the East’, he told an East Prussian audience that “the whole German people must fight together for the recovery of their *Heimat*,” since “the West would not be able to exist (*existenzfähig*) without the East” [Das Ostpreußenblatt, 1955, p. 17]. These sentiments closely resembled the Nazi ideas that connected ‘culture’ to a ‘life-and-death-struggle’, yet, counter-arguments urging for caution in this regard were notably absent in the newspapers.

The rhetoric and discourse surrounding *Heimat* and *Grenzland* brings to light the importance of boundaries and borders with regard to identity construction and ‘otherizing,’ on top of being particular to the notion of *Heimat* itself. First and foremost, it is widely accepted that the nation (-state) is a defined territorial unit with concrete borders, demarcating it from other nations; whether a historical territory or one of recent construction, it is clear where the nation begins and ends [Anderson, 1991; Gellner, 1983; Giddens, 1994]. Whether these borders are in dispute or not is a different story. While borders may describe a political boundary, it is important to note that boundaries are also cultural, social, and symbolic. Social boundaries, which tend to encompass cultural and symbolic boundaries, are based on interaction amongst different groups, which may or may not involve competition, known as “boundary maintenance” [Barth, 1969, “Introduction”]. This boundary maintenance reinforced the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ binary.

Even though West Germany did not directly share its boundaries with ‘Slavdom’, boundary maintenance, and therefore a strengthening of cultural, social, and symbolic boundaries, was in full effect. This should almost entirely be traced back to the efforts of the different *Landmannschaften*, which by 1950 claimed to have comprised of over 2,2 million members [Süssner, 2004, p. 1]. For them the ‘Soviet-Slavs’ represented the ‘significant other,’ in which their identity was influenced by the (perceived) ‘threatening’ presence of the Soviets both territorially and culturally, and ultimately in terms of national sovereignty [Triandafyllidou, 1998, p. 600]. Anti-Bolshevism, a corner stone in Nazi thinking, became a trope of the expellee organisations. Sir Brian Robertson felt that “Hatred against Russia and Communism is among these unfortunate people a far stronger emotional power than *Heimweh*” [Foschepoth, 1991, p. 90]. Robertson’s sentiment is certainly correct, but one important distinction shows that the refugees’ language was still firmly grounded

in National Socialism. The 'significant other' was not the (Cold-War) 'Communist', it was the (Interwar) 'Bolshevik'. At a meeting at Gelsenkirchen in December 1953, the Federal Minister for Displaced Persons, Refugees and War Victims, Theodor Oberländer (who had been one of the most prominent Nazi *Ostforschung* scholars), declared that "a people on the suture line of Bolshevism should not be sacrificed in order to achieve a healthy social structure" ["Existenzkampf der Heimatvertriebenen," 1953, p. 4]. As early as December 1950, Hans-Ludwig Loeffke, the first chairman of the Lüneburg group of the *Landsmannschaft Ostpreußen* told an audience that 'We have to stay what we are and were: East Prussians conscious of their values and East Prussian peculiarities, not least for the sake of Germany, of Europe, and the Western world. Resistance to Bolshevism is today the vital issue of the West. [Loeffke, 1950, p. 2]. They accused Stalin of trying to make them Trojan horses that would destabilise the West, but, they assured "We could never become what we were meant to serve as; as explosives that would rip open the strongholds of the Western world for the storm from the East. The opposite occurred: the flock of expellees has become a strong bulwark against Bolshevism" [Brock, 1954, p. 1]. It was a widely-shared sentiment among the expellee organisations: Federal Minister of Transport Hans-Christoph Seebohm, the spokesperson for the *Sudetendeutsche Landsmannschaft*, a sister organisation of the *Landsmannschaft Ostpreußen*, felt that 'The expulsion of the Germans from their ancient settlements has immensely promoted Asia's wishes,' claiming that it allowed "Asian Bolshevism to push its borders into the green heart of Germany" [Sudetendeutsche Zeitung, 1953, p. 2].

The ease with which these men reverted to anti-Bolshevik language corresponds with the thinly veiled racist line the newspapers' editors also employed. 'Slavism', 'Bolshevism', and 'Communism' were near-interchangeable terms: there should be little doubt that most Germans considered the latter two mere offshoots of the former. The detestation of the Slavs was shoehorned in every possible article and became the main ingredient of the expellees' regular diet. In an article celebrating the 600-year history of Zinten (by then Kornevo in the Kaliningrad Oblast), for example, the author pointed to 1414, when the city was "destroyed by our Polish hereditary enemy (*Erbfeind*) "with bestial cruelty": women and girls were "attacked" in the church, its crucifix "trampled on" [Lenz, 1953, p. 6]. This, obviously, had a resonance in the expellees' collective memory, combining the new victim narrative with 'age-old' expertise.

Although East Prussians (and the same holds true for other Eastern German expellee groups) positioned themselves as experts of a problem that plagued post-war Germany, they seemingly 'forgot' where their presumed expertise came from. Many of them might have sincerely considered 'Asiatic Communism' to simply be a different 'jacket' of an enemy they had fought for centuries, but ignored that the main reason they thought so in the first place was because the National Socialist regime actively opposed any positive reading of the Slavic-German history. This dismissal continued virtually undiminished in the expellee newspapers. They shunned reporting on any past links of friendship between East Prussia and its neighbours, and completely ignored that, although these bonds had certainly often been tumultuous, most of the time they had been fairly amicable and

beneficial to all parties involved [Manthey, 2005]. The *Deutsche Ostmesse Königsberg*, a point of absolute interwar pride that had allowed Königsberg to be recognised 'for its role as mediator in the trade to eastern Europe', was ignored throughout the 1950s, and it took until 1963 for an article to be dedicated to it [Kühn, 1963, p. 5].<sup>1</sup>

Another way in which the newspaper editors 'presented their case' was to draw constant attention to the fact that under Soviet rule, the state of the agriculture had dropped significantly. Although many farms had indeed fallen in a state of disrepair after the war, by tracing this back to a presumed 'Slavic-Communist' inferiority contributors not only adhered a simplified reading, their portrayal was a deliberately false one. Every East Prussian farmer was well aware that the province's agriculture had long been under enormous pressure. They knew that all other Eastern German provinces were also preponderantly agricultural, and thus in direct competition with East Prussia. Given that these other provinces lay further to the west and thus closer to the rest of Germany, shipping from East Prussia was much more expensive – especially after the province was cut off from the rest of Germany after 1919. Different German governments had sought to keep the province's agriculture artificially afloat, but the massive migration of its population to the Ruhr area from 1871 onwards – almost one million by 1939 – revealed that East Prussians themselves had little faith in their prospects [Schivelbusch, 2007, p. 224–225]. Particularly under National Socialism the province's agricultural enterprises were given vast financial support, but the 'perks' of the new regime did not end there. That the much-revered agriculture could only thrive due to a constant influx of slave labourers from Poland and Russia, was – unsurprisingly – completely ignored [Clark, 2007, p. 151–153, 655–665; Carsten, 1989, p. 178].

Even more troublesome were the efforts to construct a narrative in which Slavs were presented as aggressors and Germans as victims. In an article published in April 1950 the Expellee Press Service claimed to have unearthed a Polish propaganda card from the spring of 1939, on which 'the Oder-Neisse line was indicated the historical western border of Poland'. Since, as a result of the Potsdam Conference, the Oder-Neisse line had indeed become the *de facto* border between Poland and East-Germany, it now became 'clear' what the Poles had been after all along. The map, a certain Dr. Laubert, audaciously claimed, "is no surprise to experts of Polish history and the psyche of its people" [Laubert, 1950, 2]. By implying that the Poles had been lying in wait for the opportunity to annex the territory east of the Oder-Neisse line because of their historic 'greed for conquest' and their *Drang nach Westen* – their 'desire to push west' – Laubert overtly portrayed the Second World War both as a just war and as part of a larger history of Slavic aggression.

There was, on the side of the expellees, no attempt to come to terms with the decade and a half earlier. It is therefore perhaps of little surprise that former Nazis were overrepresented in the refugee organisations. Of the 30 signatories of the '*Charta der deutschen Heimatvertriebenen*', 20 had belonged to the NSDAP or the SS, and – all throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s – a third of all 200 expellee functionaries had a

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<sup>1</sup> See also: [Gause, 1971, p. 48].

NSDAP-past, compared to one fifth domestically [Pötzl, 2013, p. 241]. National Socialism had long argued that the Germans were the victims of the tide of events in Europe, and the expellees held on to this line [Wirsching, 2014, p. 151]. The newspapers notably lacked expressions of guilt and were spectacularly tone-deaf: the mental acrobatics of their editors was nothing short of astonishing. That the Holocaust was absent in the newspapers, while the expulsions featured in nearly every edition these papers printed, could easily be explained: like most other Germans during these years, they maintained that there was no wider knowledge of the Holocaust, while the expulsion had happened in the open. Instead, they drew direct parallels between the Holocaust and their expulsion from Eastern Germany.

Every person who knew the truth in 1945, has risen against the voices that wanted to morally condemn a whole people. How many Germans really knew something about what had happened in the concentration camps? (...) What do we know today about how millions of Poles or Russians were thinking about what their militia or their authorities were doing against the defenceless Germans? ["Keine Kollektivschuld," 1954, p. 5]

This article, it should be stressed, presented a moderate voice, if only because it gave some limited agency to the Poles and Russians. Many would never venture that far. Alison Owings, when conducting an interview with an East Prussian expellee for her Oral History project, observed that she "simply was not forthcoming about the first eleven and a half years of the Third Reich. Then the chronology got to the point when Soviet troops were moving forward to [her former hometown] Tolnicken. And [she] became a different witness" [Owings, 2011, p. 143]. The criminality of the Nazi-regime towards the millions of its victims was downplayed for the simple reason that drawing attention to it meant having to share the role of victims.

Although Eastern Germans presented themselves as victims of Nazism, they did not consider themselves as lacking agency in the post-war climate. In Germany's political climate, there certainly seemed to be room for their demands. Adenauer believed that the surest way to once again become a respected member of the international community was to seek closer ties to the West, which meant steering clear of a normalisation of the relations with countries in Eastern Europe. Unsurprisingly, expellee organisations expressed interest in shaping the political discourse in this matter, and by and large politicians gave them leeway to articulate their opinions, and often incorporated these viewpoints into their own platforms. Expressing the need to restore Germany's eastern borders both distanced a politician from the Communist East, and appealed to a broad voter base, and thus made much political sense. At the same time, few politicians gave the matter of a restoration of Germany's eastern borders sustained thought as it was not considered a priority. Expellee organisations, on the other hand, wanted the matter on the agenda sooner rather than later, and proposed a line for the government's eastern policy (*Ostpolitik*), which Bonn readily adopted [Ahonen, 1998, p. 34, 41–44]. Maintaining that Germany still existed along its 1937 borders, and that the areas East of the rivers Oder and Neisse were merely under interim Polish and Russian administration – as determined in Potsdam – the 1949 government declaration read that "under no circumstances can

we reconcile ourselves with the separation of these territories, as unilaterally proposed by Soviet Russia and Poland" ["Unsere Fragen," 1949, p. 2]. Adenauer's government thus essentially included verbatim the demands of the expellee groups.

They tried to make their plight heard abroad as well, which, given their 'new-found' Europeanism should be no surprise. What they genuinely did not seem to understand was how insincere their complaints were considered, and why they found so few foreign supporters for their cause [Habbe, 2005, p. 250]. During their first year of international lobbying, 1949, a mere 10,000 Americans proved willing to sign a petition to U.S. President Truman in favour of a return of the German Eastern provinces ["Eine Petition," 1949, p. 6]. In March the *Wir Ostpreußen* boldly cited the *Manchester Guardian Weekly*: "If the issue [of expellees] will not be mastered, not only Germany, but entire western-Europe will suffer. It will prove to be a time-bomb in the western-European house" ["Schreiber vor Politikern," 1949, p. 2]. But none of their arguments made any traction, so their zeal eventually turned into frustration. In a September 1952 edition of the *Das Ostpreußenblatt*, the new U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower was depicted as a fat Indian chief, who 'smokes peace pipe and simultaneously blows wind in two directions': to the Polish Americans to guarantee Poland's western borders and to the German Americans to restore the old eastern borders [Das Ostpreußenblatt, 1952, p. 1]. When nine members of the French National Assembly, among them the former Minister-President Daladier, visited the Oder-Neisse-Line to examine the question of the "border of peace" [Ostpreußische Nachrichten, 1954, p. 2], Wilhelm Strüvy, the Deputy Speaker of *Landsmannschaft Ostpreußen*, felt compelled to write an open letter to Daladier. Only weeks earlier Daladier had been described as "the well-known German-hater" ["Woche zu Woche," 1953, p. 2], but now had to be courted. Strüvy asked Daladier, as a way of parallel with the Soviet occupation of Eastern Germany, to imagine that

1. Southern France: occupied and administered by an African people, the French who live there [are being] murdered, abducted, or expelled.

2. Central France: French Democratic Republic, governed by Communists, occupied by African Soviets.

3. Northern France: French Federal Republic, Federally structured.

As the argument managed to combine racist prejudice with unheard-of tone-deafness, it did, of course, little to advance their case [Strüvy, 1954, p. 2]. It showed how poorly they understood their plight within the international context; they were unable to see that to the rest of Europe and the world, they were not victims, but part of the German people, who had instigated a world war.

Thus, whichever opinions expellees may have held of Adenauer, they realised that on an international stage there was absolutely no one else to turn to defend their interests. On this stage, Adenauer, Germany's quintessential *Realpolitiker*, played his role as guarantor of expellees' interests well, although it was, in the end, indeed little more than a 'role'. Adenauer was famously distrustful of people outside his immediate circle – a

character trait developed during the years of Nazi-captivity – and the expellees' close ties to National Socialism certainly did not warm him to their cause. Moreover, given the rigid stance of the expellee organisations, which effectively served as a 'thought police' that prevented any constructive discussion that might deviate from their view points, it is hardly surprising that Adenauer kept them at bay at diplomatic talks concerning Germany's *Ostpolitik* [Ahonen, 1998, p. 44, 53].

On the other hand, the radical language of expellees, with its clear racist, Nazi-inspired, undertones, gave Adenauer an important trump card. By pointing to the language of the expellees, he showed that he had little room for manoeuvre at home, and thus he could present himself as a moderate voice at the international table. Eastern Germans were presented as 'loose cannons' who had every intention to hold the Western powers to their Potsdam promise that the areas east of the Oder and Neisse were only under interim administration. On occasion, Adenauer, one of the most skilled politicians of his time, pushed the expellee agenda to the extreme as a 'bargaining chip' [Ahonen, 1998, p. 50]. When in late 1950 a 400,000-man German contingent was requested as part of a European defence community – a clear step in the direction of NATO membership and national sovereignty, two of Adenauer's main political goals – he insisted that he would only make it available 'when the Allies indicate that [the contingent] would keep freedom of action in the area beyond the Oder-Neisse line' in case of territorial gain. The prospect of active battle on Polish territory was so outlandish that it thoroughly shocked his French and British partners, who felt that the mere suggestion of a German 'war of revenge' would cause a public outcry. When, a week later, Adenauer returned to the matter of the contingent without bringing Germany's eastern territories into the discussion, he garnered goodwill – perhaps the most valuable political currency – without having made any actual concessions [Foschepoth, 1991, p. 88–89]. For this approach to have the largest impact, Eastern Germans' search for identity needed to be as visible as possible.

That last point – the visibility of their search for identity – was not merely the result of Eastern Germans' attempts to reorient themselves in a post-war world: it was a vital part of West Germany's nation-building. Not only did expellee organisations receive government funding, their plight was officially acknowledged, and they were given considerable rein to shape the political discourse. Therefore, the perpetuation of anti-Slavic sentiments in the different expellee newspapers should not be considered as resulting from oversight or carelessness on behalf of the ruling establishment. Allowing Eastern Germans to establish news outlets made them feel heard, but more important was that their knee-jerk, unapologetic, and revisionist language was needed in the public debate.

Herein lies the most important connection between West German domestic and foreign policy – and thus the purpose of this paper. Its purpose has not been to answer how the expellee newspapers influenced political discourse, it rather examined why their language was allowed to filter into the public debate, and how. The expellees were found to be willing advocates of Bonn's anti-Communist line, and their 'expertise' was soon put to good use. Their idea of European borders, and the 'significant other' Slavic peoples living

beyond them, presented a 'traditional' dichotomy, which gave the current anti-Communist sentiments an air of legitimacy. East Prussian newspapers presented a post-war language that on the surface was not directly rooted in National Socialism, but was based on 'post-war' experiences, and 'age-old' truisms. Although Adenauer knew that this was not the case, he also knew that his proposed western partners were not out to argue semantics. Expellees' pained language of the missing *Heimat* served as a reminder that the victorious Allies had been particularly careless in matters of post-war German (and by extension European) security, thereby allowing its encroachment by the Soviet bloc. At the same time, the Eastern German expellee was set up as the 'fall-guy'. Adenauer could always present expellees as 'virtual others', unwilling to see the new political realities of the burgeoning West German state. Put differently, at the international level Adenauer used expellees' plight as leverage, all the while setting a political course that had no intention to heed their demands. Although the 'boundaries' that East Prussians brought with them to West Germany sought to closely link Eastern German culture to physical borders, perceptions of 'otherness' – both their own and that of their compatriots – ensured that, during a time of West Germany's nation-building, these were never appreciated beyond their ideological value.

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