

# **Ethnic Germans in Poland and the Czech Republic: A Comparative Evaluation<sup>1</sup>**

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This paper seeks to analyze the nature of the German minorities in the Czech Republic and Poland. In order to achieve this goal, the relationship between Czechoslovakia/the Czech Republic and Poland with the *Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Federal Republic of Germany/FRG), forms an essential intellectual backdrop to our main theme. Reference to the *Deutsche Demokratische Republik* (German Democratic Republic/GDR) will be made as and where appropriate. As we shall see, tensions simmered between the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (Socialist Unity Party of Germany/SED), and the *Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza Zjednoczona* (Polish United Workers' Party /PZPR), and in reality relations between the two sides were poor (Czapliński: 2004). Reference will be made to wartime German occupation policy in both Poland and the Czech lands. Due attention will also be paid to the consequent expulsion of ethnic Germans from Poland and Czechoslovakia. However, due to limitations of space these themes, that have been exhaustively dealt with elsewhere, do not form part of our main focus of study.

As for the minority populations themselves, in many ways, the situation of Germans in Czechoslovakia and Poland between 1945 and the late 1980s was very similar. Both groups suffered as ethnic minorities in states whose ideological premises purportedly placed notions of class above those of ethnic identification. In addition they suffered as Germans as a consequence of the crimes committed by the Nazis during the Second World War against Jews, Poles, Czechs and Slovaks.

Today we find that the remaining German minority in Poland is much larger than in the Czech Republic, both in absolute and percentage terms. However, as we shall see, uncertainty surrounds the exact number of Poland's German minority. In a broad sense, the circumstances under which these populations came to be reduced are relatively well known. During the Second World War, there was cross-party agreement among Polish and Czechoslovak politicians that state and ethnic boundaries should be rendered as far as possible coterminous, and the wartime Allies were in agreement with this principle.

## **Germans in post-war Czechoslovakia**

In the case of Czechoslovakia, in essence the state was restored within its pre Munich borders, although the Soviet Union did help itself to the heavily Ruthene populated eastern tip of the country. However, the wider strategy of rendering state coterminous with nation was predicated upon ridding the country of as many non-Czechs and Slovaks as possible. This necessitated the removal of all but a relatively small

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number of Germans, including in some instances surviving German-speaking Jews, to Germany. It also meant the deportation of large elements of the Hungarian population to Hungary. Incidentally, this hyper-nationalism also caused renewed tension with Poland. Warsaw had annexed disputed Czechoslovak territory in 1938, Prague had re-occupied it in 1945, and subsequently both sides engaged in saber rattling and tit for tat expulsions of several tens of thousands of people. The territorial status quo was affirmed only in 1947 in the wake of sustained Soviet pressure.

After the completion of the expulsion of ethnic Germans in 1948, the strategy with regard to remaining non-Czechs and non-Slovaks was to homogenize as far as possible all remaining elements within society into a single Czechoslovak nation, within which the Czechs would constitute the *Leitkultur*. Although according to the Košice Program of April 1945, Slovaks were recognized as constituting an ethnically distinct nation (Auer 2000: 251), the policy of homogenization was applied to them as well as to Hungarians, Germans, Ruthenes and those who designated themselves as Silesians, Poles or Moravians. It was carried out with the full support of the communists, but it is important to note that they did not instigate it. Rather it was initiated by returning non-communist government politicians, most notably Edvard Beneš and Jan Masaryk and their immediate allies. Their experience of inter-war Czechoslovakia and then Nazi occupation convinced a cross-section of Czech politicians that the first Czechoslovak state had failed because large numbers of its (former) citizens did not in fact have any loyalty to the state. We should also remember that what happened to German civilians in the years 1945-1950, although unique in its scope, was by no means a singular German experience, and was in no small part the direct consequence of the implementation of Nazi racial theory by means of genocide<sup>2</sup>

Despite the German-inspired destruction of Czechoslovakia between September 1938 and March 1939, even after war broke out Beneš was still prepared to cede territory to Germany, and envisaged that a slightly truncated Czechoslovakia could still play host to up to 800,000 Germans. It was not until late 1944 that Beneš finally swung round to the increasingly popular option that the vast majority of Germans be expelled (Lemberg 2001: 200). The solution eventually decided upon was that those from among pre-war Czechoslovakia's ethnic minorities who had not been loyal to the Czechoslovak state should be deported to whichever state they had been loyal, whether it be Germany, Austria Hungary or Poland. The issue at stake here was dual, and is disputed to this day. On the one hand, a decision was taken to render Czechoslovakia ethnically homogenous by all means necessary. On the other hand, the Beneš Decrees were part and parcel of a necessary de-Nazification process (Houžvička: 2004). What separates to this day many Czechs from those Germans who have an interest in this subject is disagreement concerning the extent to which de-Nazification was used as a pretext for straightforward ethnic cleansing.

The circumstances under which ethnic Germans were permitted to stay in Czechoslovakia were strictly defined. In total, around 660,000 Germans are estimated either to have fled, or to have been expelled through unofficial means. A further 2,336,000 were 'officially expelled'. By the time the process was completed in 1948, a little over 200,000 Germans remained in Czechoslovakia. It should be noted that

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<sup>2</sup> The authors are fully aware that in Europe compulsory and forcible population transfer was first established as a legitimate means of creating ethnically homogeneous states as early as 1922 in order to bring the Greek-Turkish conflict to a halt. However, space precludes any wider examination of the wider phenomenon.

the number of those killed among the three million who were either expelled or fled, is disputed to this day. Estimates range from 30,000 to approximately 250,000 having perished through ill-health associated with the conditions in which they found themselves or directly at the hands of vengeful erstwhile compatriots. The higher figure comes from the *Bund der Vertriebenen* (Union of Expellees/BdV), and associated organizations. As much as anything else it appears to be based upon an estimate of the Sudeten German population as of September 1939, and a comparison of that same population at some indeterminate point after the end of the war. It is somewhat vague to say the least. On the other hand, the lower and more recent figure that comes from the Czech-German Historical Commission. It is based primarily upon death certificates issued by the Czechoslovak authorities in concentration camps and elsewhere (Kučera 2001: 231ff).

In addition, no definitive population records are available. The civilian population was increasingly transient as the war drew to a close, and there is little common agreement concerning who ought to be counted among the ranks of the *Sudetendeutsche* and therefore among the number of *Sudetendeutsche* refugees and dead. Neither are various pre-war Czechoslovak and German censuses of much help as criteria of national classification varied from census to census and between the two countries. As Jaroslav Kučera points out this whole exercise may be rather meaningless. The Czech records on the episode have not been accessed in full, and trying to determine how an individual died is fraught with some rather macabre methodological issues. How for example can you be sure what the motivation for suicide was? Is someone who died at the hands of bandits a victim of the expulsions? (Kučera 2001: 241ff).

Inevitably, the truth regarding the number of deaths lies somewhere in between the two extremes. The BdV's figure is based on one set of premises, and the Czech-German Historical Commission's on another. As a result, the former seek to maximize the number of German civilian deaths at the hands of the Czechs, and the latter seek to minimize them. Whatever the final death toll, the expulsion process was brutal and involved random as well as organized acts of terror against the remaining German population. In the period between arrest and expulsion, ethnic Germans were rounded up and placed into former German concentration camps, which were run according to the principles that the Germans themselves had employed.

By the time the communists had assumed sole power in February 1948, the expulsions were all but complete. Of the approximately 3.2 million Germans living in the country in 1945, the aforementioned 200,000 plus remained after the end of the expulsions, about 10% of whom lived in Slovakia. Precise details with regard to their composition are not readily available. However, we can make some observations. Around 20,000 were proven German anti-fascists. A further 60,000 were classified as essential labor. A further 15,000 German women married to Czechs were exempted from expulsion, as were approximately 30,000 German men who had a Czechoslovak spouse. Their children were similarly spared expulsion, and presumably count for the bulk of the remainder. Incidentally, professed Germans from the Český Těšín and Hlučín areas of Czech Silesia were unilaterally re-classified as Czechs (Staněk 2001: 225).

By 1950, the ethnic German element of the population was down to 165,000. In other words within a total of nineteen years, the (official) German element of the population had fallen from 23.6 % in 1930, to 1.3 %. Ethnic Germans constituted more than 10% of the population only in three small areas of the country (Rouček 1990: 201). This further reduction was partly due to migration, but also because of identity switching. The communists pursued a haphazard process of cultural assimilation that over time proved to be fairly successful. The so-called internal expulsion in the late 1940s and early 1950s all but destroyed the last remnants of the historical settlement structures of the German population. Ethnic Germans were removed from their traditional areas of settlement and re-settled in areas where it was believed they would be of greatest economic benefit, such as in uranium and coal mining centers (Hoffman 1996: 91). German schools and the teaching of German as a native language were banned, and fear of discrimination initiated a trend towards 'voluntary' assimilation among the younger generations.

Yet, in a seemingly contradictory way, the communist authorities also allowed the expression of German culture, and various restrictions that had been placed upon remaining Germans were gradually eased. Under the terms of Decrees 33/45 of 2 August 1945 all ethnic Germans (designated exceptions to one side) were stripped of their Czechoslovak citizenship which in effect none of them had had since, and most had rejected in 1938. In 1948 they were allowed permanent residence, and the possibility of (individually) applying for the return of citizenship. Citizenship was restored en masse by means of the Nationality Law of April 1953 (Rouček 1990: 202/3).

In 1951, with support from the GDR, a German-language newspaper was published and the first cultural groups were formed. In the summer of 1953 parts of the country were hit by a wave of strikes in which ethnic Germans were prominent. Rather than use these events as a pretext to further restrict ethnic Germans, the government reacted by easing remaining restrictions and encouraging German political participation in the (official) political life of the country. For example, ethnic Germans were permitted to stand for election as trades' union officials, and in 1954 three Germans were actually elected to the (admittedly insipid) parliament. In that same year German-language radio broadcasts re-commenced for the first time in almost ten years (Rouček 1990: 202/3).

At the beginning of the 1960s, this policy was abandoned, as it seemed to be counter-productive to the official efforts at total assimilation. In the years that followed, the Czechoslovak authorities were largely successful in their attempt to assimilate the remaining Germans. In 1983, after fairly sustained migration during the years 1966-1969, the total German population had dropped to an estimated 56,000. By this time the death/emigration rates had begun to exceed the birth rate, thus setting into train a decline of the German population that continues to this day.

Another policy change occurred when a more minority-friendly policy was introduced in the wake of the Prague Spring. The German minority was officially recognized as such in January 1969 (Uhl: 2004). In law, mother-tongue education was now guaranteed, along with various other rights such as the right not to be (culturally) assimilated, and to a mother-tongue press. A minority organisation *Das Kulturbund der Bürger deutscher Nationalität* (The Cultural Assembly of Citizens of German Nationality/KdBdN) was established (Auer 2000: 257). It proclaimed that it

had around sixty branches with between seven and 10,000 members, and appears to have produced little of any substance. The KdBdN possessed an official organ the *Die Prager Volkszeitung* (Prague People's Paper). Like the two smaller German language organs, the *Neue Prager Presse* (New Prague Press) and *Das tschechoslowakische Leben* (Czechoslovak Life), it did little other than repeat what could be read in the Czechoslovak language press. The extent to which the communists merely tolerated as opposed to supported the KdBdN is unclear. No German language education was provided on the grounds that the German minority was too small and scattered.

Thus, while the older generation had some limited opportunities to preserve its cultural heritage, including its language, traditions, and customs, the persistent absence of a public commitment to preserve a German cultural tradition across the generations meant that the assimilatory pressure on the younger members of the minority continued unabated. This and the increasing opportunities to migrate to Germany resulted in an almost 80 % decrease in the number of Germans in just four decades.<sup>3</sup> According to the first post-communist census, by 1991 only little more than 50,000 citizens in Czechoslovakia registered as German. The census of 2001 showed a further decline, although there is some suggestion that in both censuses many ethnic Germans have failed to reveal the nature of their true identity for fear of reprisal (Larischová: 2004). Whatever the true figure, given that the majority of Germans in the Czech Republic have reached retirement age, the minority seems destined for oblivion.

What then of the relationship between Germany and the German minority in the Czech Republic during the period of communist rule? We have already seen how early on the GDR played a small role in disseminating German culture. The position of the Federal Republic was complicated by the fact that Bonn and Prague lacked formal diplomatic contacts. As a result, Bonn was unable to play any kind of meaningful role with regard to the German minority. The only exception came during the Brandt years (1969-74), when, as part of the process of rapprochement there was an increase in the number of Germans who were allowed to migrate to the Federal Republic.

Prior to the establishment of full diplomatic relations in 1973, consular support was heavily circumscribed, as was material assistance from Bonn. In fact contacts between Czechoslovak Germans and West Germans were maintained mainly as a result of the efforts of the Red Cross, occasional family visits and the international postal services. The fact that the GDR established formal diplomatic relations with Czechoslovakia as early as 1949 and maintained an embassy in Prague as well as several consulates was of little consolation to ethnic Germans in the country, as apart from the discrete measures mentioned earlier in the text, they barely figured on the agenda of the SED.

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<sup>3</sup> In comparison with Poland, emigration from Czechoslovakia to Germany was much smaller in absolute terms. Just over 100,000 ethnic Germans left the country for the Federal Republic between 1950 and 1990, with more than one-third of them leaving between 1967-1969. From the second half of the 1990s, fewer than a hundred ethnic Germans from the Czech Republic migrated annually to Germany.

## Ethnic Germans in the Czech Republic Today

Naturally enough, the contemporary relationship between the Czech Republic's German minority and wider Czech society, is in part governed by the wider pattern of relations between the two peoples during the twentieth century (Kafka: 2004). Yet, despite the difficulties mentioned elsewhere in the text, the situation of the German minority in today's Czech Republic is much changed. Since 1995, the Czech Republic has been a signatory to the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. The German minority is catered for under the terms of this and other international agreements, that are given force of law by the Czech constitution and domestic Czech legislation. Funding to minority organizations is distributed through the Ministry of Culture. A Council of National Minorities is charged with the function of co-coordinating minority related activity. The legislative framework for national minorities<sup>4</sup> in the Czech Republic is very liberal, and at least the equal of Poland's. There is little evidence, if any, to support claims that the minority is discriminated against at the official level as a consequence of its ethnic provenance (Kovanic: 2004).

The minority's small size and the fact that it lives scattered throughout the country account in part for the fact Germans have virtually no chance of achieving collective political representation at any level. The only exception to this lack of political representation occurred at the first post-communist elections in June 1990 when the Prague Citizens Forum elected the Deputy Chairman of the Association of Germans, Walter Piverka, as a candidate. Part of the problem is also that ethnic Germans in the Czech Republic do not have a common platform. Their cultural organizations are deeply divided between the *Vereine des deutschen in Böhmen, Mähren und Schlesien* (Association of Germans in Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia/VdBMS), itself an umbrella organisation for various regional groups, and the various successor organizations of the KdBdN. By 1999, thirty-nine civic organizations within the German minority existed in the Czech Republic (Report: 1999).

In the 2001 census the number of those declaring themselves to be German dropped to 39,000. Interestingly enough, the census also reveals the existence of a total of 11,000 declared Silesians, some of whom have an affinity with German language and culture and could fairly easily effect an identity shift. The German minority remains present in the larger cities and some parts of the Sudetenland, but even there is not of any political significance, because of their small numbers and the fact that the consciously German element of the population is overwhelmingly elderly. The German associations that have been established since 1990 are as much social clubs and advice centers as they are anything else. It has also been observed that the associations are extremely introverted to the extent that not only do they shy away from engagement with Czech society, they keep contacts with the *Sudetendeutsche Landsmannschaft* (SdL) to an absolute necessary minimum (Uhl:

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<sup>4</sup> In January 1991 The 1968 Law on the Status of National Minorities was superseded by the Charter of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms which, in December 1992, became part of the Czech constitution according to Article 3 of the Constitutional Law of the Czech National Council. Apart from general non-discrimination clauses in Articles 3 and 24, the Charter also details specific minority rights: autonomous cultural development; mother-tongue communication and reception of information, the right to form ethnic associations, education in the mother tongue, the use of their mother tongue in public affairs, and participation in the handling of affairs concerning national and ethnic minorities.

2004). The reasons for this state of affairs are complex, but we can identify three causes. First, we have the memory of the expulsions and their aftermath. Secondly we have to acknowledge the fact that the large majority of ethnic Germans who stayed behind regarded themselves as loyal Czechoslovak citizens. Thirdly, the SdL whether it likes it or not, is in effect the modern day representative of ethnic Germans whose loyalty toward Czechoslovakia was at best ambiguous. As an organization, the SdL does attempt to play a constructive role with regard to Czech-German relations. With regard to micro-level projects, such as the restoration of churches, and meso-level ventures, such as workshops, the SdL has met with some success. However, in the area of high politics, the hard line elements within the SdL cloud the picture. To this day demand property restitution, large scale reparations, the collective right of return, and even on occasion query the current border. Unsurprisingly, such demands have a negative impact upon the remaining German minority in the Czech Republic, and feed into popular anti-German resentments among wider Czech society.

Anti-German attitudes still persist in the Czech Republic, and they do so both at popular as well as official level. Some would argue that they manifest themselves, for example, in the law on property restitution which excludes Czech citizens of German descent from either the restitution of property confiscated under the terms of the Beneš Decrees, or receiving compensation for such property. More surprisingly, ethnic Germans with proven anti-fascist records have still not received the same levels of compensation from the Czech government as have their ethnic Czech compatriots (Žák: 2004). This is despite the fact that in August 2003, the foreign minister announced that the Czech government was in principle prepared to pay up to 1.5 million Euros in compensation to up to 1,500 surviving ethnic German Czech citizens who had suffered as a result of the policies of post-war Czech governments (Süddeutscher Zeitung: 2003).

Existing popular prejudice against Germans and Germany has forced successive Czech governments to take a tough stance on such matters and in bilateral negotiations with Germany. A 1996 public opinion poll revealed that 86% of those Czechs surveyed would not vote for a party that supported the issuing of an apology to the Sudeten Germans for the expulsions in the post-war period. Negative images of Germany as a neighboring state were also uncovered in this survey with about half of all interviewees believing Germany to be an economic threat, 39% seeing it as a political threat, and 25% as a military threat.<sup>5</sup> Such views are understandable among those who actually experienced the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia after the Munich Agreement of 1938 and the subsequent German occupation and atrocities committed against the civilian population. It is rather surprising that such thoughts are fairly widespread among the younger generation. One explanation of this phenomenon may lie in the fact that, despite the wave of democratization, Czech schoolbooks still portray the nation's history as one of continuous struggle between an ethnically defined Czech nation and the German arch-enemy (Report: 1999).<sup>6</sup> Through their consistent and disproportionate coverage of hard-line activists of the Sudeten German expellees, Czech media have also contributed to the persistence of anti-German sentiment. Such sentiments, both real and imagined, have contributed to

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<sup>6</sup> The Report also notes that Czech history text books largely ignore the fact that for centuries the Czech lands had been jointly and peacefully inhabited by large populations of Czechs, Germans, and Jews, and that the contributions of the latter two groups to the development of the area are widely disregarded.

the German minority in keeping its distance from the SdL. In the early 1990s the previously close identification on the part of the remaining German minority with the SdL, resulted in many Czechs coming to regard the minority as being little different in attitude from the SdL itself. Some Czech commentators claim that the more cautious approach on the part of the German minority in the Czech Republic has served to throw them into a more positive light at home (Handl: 2004).

Despite these difficulties, considerable progress has been achieved since 1989. The Czech state budget subsidizes two weekly papers of the German minority with an average of four million Czech Crowns annually, and has not objected to financial aid from Germany channeled into the creation of, thus far, twelve community centers. Having said that, some with an interest in the field claim that the German government by no means does all that it could to aid the remaining Czech-German minority (Stemke: 2003).

Czech Radio has an independent German national minority department, alongside similar departments for the Polish, Slovak, and Roma minorities, and regularly broadcasts programs aimed at the minority. More recently, a school has opened in Prague that provides German-language education to its students who come primarily from the German minority but also include members of other ethnic groups. The state budget covers all operational costs of the school, and additional funds are provided by contributions from private associations in Germany and the Czech Republic. Otherwise, a German-language educational system is rather undeveloped for two reasons. On the one hand, numbers of Germans are often so small that German schools, or even German classes, cannot be opened. The situation is also not helped by the fact that the Czech government does not promote the establishment of bilingual Czech-German schools. On the other hand, it must be recognized that cultural and linguistic assimilation among the younger generation of the German minority has progressed so far that many families do not speak German even at home (Uhl: 2004). Neither do they register their children as German at school and rarely profess to German culture and traditions, partly because of fears of being disadvantaged if they so do.

As we shall see, the German minority in the Czech Republic seems destined tread a different path from that of its counterpart in Poland. The gradual disappearance of the German minority might be seen as unfortunate by some and regrettable from the point of view of cultural diversity. However it should also be welcomed as a development that coincides with the apparent wishes of those few Czech citizens of German extraction who still remain and does not hold any dangers for ethnic peace in the Czech Republic. Consequently, despite the sometimes-strained relations that exist between the two sides concerning former Czechoslovak citizens of German ethnicity, there are few real problems between Prague and Berlin with regard to the ethnic Germans who remain in the Czech Republic. They are too small to be considered to be any kind of a threat to the internal political stability of the country. Similarly, they are much too few in number to act as a so-called bridge between the two states and societies. Germans in general and minority activists as a specific subgroup are almost invisible, alienated from wider Czech society and overwhelmingly elderly (Born 2000: 182-185). The demographic imbalance is neatly illustrated by the fact that the German population has fallen by over a quarter since the census of 1991.

Barring catastrophic changes to the political order and map of Europe, the German minority in the Czech Republic is shortly to enter into the realm of history.

### **The German minority in communist Poland**

The process of post-war expulsion of ethnic Germans from Poland differed from the process in Czechoslovakia in a number of ways. First, it was less comprehensive, with the exception of those who had been entered onto the first grade of the *Deutsche Volksliste*.<sup>7</sup> Skilled workers, (usually *Reichsdeutsche*) in the mining and metallurgical industries were often considered essential for the country's economic recovery and therefore allowed to stay, at least until the late 1950s when Poles were available in sufficient numbers to take over. In addition, from the autumn of 1945 those pre-war Polish citizens (*Volksdeutsche*) who had undergone 'rehabilitation' in forced labor camps and spoke Polish increasingly were offered return of their Polish citizenship. Finally, after the expulsion process was completed in 1950, the Polish authorities claimed that the overwhelming majority of (former) Germans, both *Reichs* and *Volksdeutsche* who had not been expelled, were merely 'Germanized Poles', who were being offered the opportunity to re-discover their true, i.e., Polish, identity.

In some respects the means through which the expulsions were affected parallels the Czechoslovak experience. In both cases, mass expulsion occurred prior to the Potsdam Agreement, and 'it is an open secret' that on occasion the actions of those carrying out the expulsions were clearly criminal in nature (Czapliński: 2004). Concentration camps were quickly re-opened and filled with Germans. The remaining German population was divided into various categories. The first consisted of *Reichsdeutsche* who did not fulfill the necessary criteria for the 'verification' process and were expelled. The second consisted of *Reichsdeutsche* who fulfilled the criteria for expulsion but who, by virtue of their expertise were forced to stay. The third consisted of *Reichsdeutsche* who were considered to be 'Germanized Poles'. The fourth category was formed by the *Volksdeutsche* who underwent a 'rehabilitation' process, at the end of which they were either expelled or offered return of their Polish citizenship, which unsurprisingly most of them rejected in favor of expulsion. These processes of 'verification' and 'rehabilitation' were in fact simple programs of incarceration and slave labor. The end result was that individuals would either be served with expulsion papers or be offered (the return of) Polish citizenship. As with post-war Czechoslovakia, there is no consensus with regard to how many Germans died at this time, any more than there is with regard to ultimate responsibility for the deaths. Recent research indicates that around 400,000 Germans died as a direct consequence of the expulsion process. This figure includes those who died whilst in flight, either directly or indirectly at the hands of Polish civilians, various Polish armed forces, or the Soviet army. About half the number is comprised of those who died in Polish/Soviet concentration camps (Eberhardt 2003: 173).

Examination of the Polish census of 1950 indicates that around 1.1 million residents had possessed German citizenship prior to 1945 (Franzen 2001: 305). Of this number approximately 900,000 were resident in either Upper Silesia or southern

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<sup>7</sup> Just how the Polish authorities could actually differentiate Germans from *Volksliste* 1 from those on *Volksliste* 2 is a matter of conjecture. The corresponding identity card made no mention of grade, and in both cases the identity card was the same shade of blue.

Masuria. Polish officials continued to make a distinction between the between the autochthonous or ‘Germanized Poles’ primarily of Upper Silesia, southern Masuria and eastern Pomerania and the much smaller ‘designated German minority’ that resided primarily in Lower Silesia.<sup>8</sup> The former group was treated as having been originally of Polish or Slavic origin. It was argued that due to centuries of Germanization, their true Polishness had become submerged beneath a German veneer. A policy of re-Polonization was pursued throughout the country, with special emphasis being placed upon the ‘Germanized Poles’.

Although church and state were at loggerheads on most issues, in the late 1940s they were united in the belief that ‘re-Polonization’ of certain groups of people was the correct strategy. In southern Masuria the situation was particularly acute for the locals. Not only was their loyalty to the state open to question, they were overwhelmingly Protestant. The religious cleavage re-enforced the effective ethnic cleavage between the overwhelming majority of (often Polish-speaking) German-oriented Masurians and the incoming Polish authorities. The fact that the policy of re-Polonization met with only limited success, particularly among the Masurians, can be measured in rates of emigration to Germany between the early 1950s and 1990s.

As for the small post-war ‘designated German minority’ restrictions placed upon them were gradually eased, so that by 1956, they enjoyed the same rights as all other minorities indigenous to Poland. Thus, in 1951 the Germans of Lower Silesia were recognized as a national minority. With the support of the GDR a German-language weekly, the *Die Arbeiter Stimme* (Workers’ Voice) and several German primary schools were established. A number of libraries with German-language books existed in the area as well. In April 1957, a German Social-Cultural Association was established in Wrocław, which had around 7,000 members (Neubach, 1998: 26). Having said that, as in Czechoslovakia, the majority of Germans eligible to join such organizations stayed well away, and preferred either inner or physical migration.

During this period, as it did in Czechoslovakia, the GDR played a prominent if low-key role with regard to the designated German minority and recently available archives demonstrate that rarely acknowledged tensions between Warsaw and East Berlin existed concerning their fate. Above all what governed (official) Polish attitudes toward this minority was fear of Germany. As such they were wary of a new fifth column and initially, at any rate sought to eject them from Poland just as soon as they could be replaced with newly trained Polish labor (Ihme-Tuchel 1997: 12). In turn, the SED was not particularly keen on encouraging emigration to the GDR, on the part of people who according to SED propaganda did not actually exist. Another difficulty that faced the SED was the inability of their Polish counterparts to supply them with exact numbers. Put simply, Polish estimates varied from year to year, and in such a way that cannot be accounted for either in terms of birth and death rates or by migration to Germany. The main explanation seems to lie in the fact that individuals were subject to continuous administrative re-classification as Poles or ‘Germanized Poles’, and that the Polish authorities either could or would not supply any data concerning children aged under fifteen (Ihme-Tuchel 1997: 15ff). Moreover the Polish Nationality Law of 1951 arbitrarily imposed Polish citizenship upon tens of

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<sup>8</sup> Smaller numbers of designated Germans lived elsewhere in Poland, primarily in and around the Pomeranian city of Koszalin.

thousands of Germans who had previously survived deportation and refused to take out Polish papers.

With the onset of de-Stalinization, the GDR and Polish authorities sought for once and for all to resolve the issue. A joint commission was established in order to determine how many People in Poland could prove their entitlement to German citizenship.<sup>9</sup> Once again the results were incomplete, as the commission was not allowed to operate in areas in which large numbers of 'Germanized Poles' were present. Despite that, over 40,000 individuals were found to be German under German law (Ihme-Tuchel 1997: 42ff). By the early 1960s the large majority had left, allowing the rest to be assimilated into wider Polish society. In 1963, the two governments declared the issue to be closed.

Indeed, the SED and PZPR did not see eye to eye on the issue of the 'Germanized Poles' any more than they did with regard to the 'designated Germans'. The problem for the SED was that it had no more room for freedom of expression on this matter, than did this group of persons itself. For many 'Germanized Poles', a form of passive resistance became the norm. In the early years this took the shape of non co-operation with the authorities in such matters as refusing formally to apply for Polish papers following the promulgation of the 1951 Nationality Law. The most obvious and safest form of resistance for these communities was in fact simply to cut themselves off as far as possible from the wider world. In 1956, we do, however, see a manifestation of their political presence. Some individuals sought to use the brief thaw to obtain official recognition from the courts for the establishment of German societies, but to no avail. Throughout the 1960s, Polonization crept on slowly but surely. The net result of this process was that today it is common to speak of a 'lost generation' among the Germans of Poland.

Emigration to Germany always remained on the agenda in some form or the other, and in the later 1950s the overwhelming majority of Germans who became eligible to leave in the late 1950s, after Red Cross mediation between Poland and West Germany, did so. The fact that about 55,000 Germans from Lower Silesia left virtually destroyed the basis of the cultural life of the German-speaking population there. In addition, approximately 120,000 Germans from Upper Silesia also emigrated. As a consequence, the assimilation pressure on the remaining Germans in both areas grew, again resulting in even greater rate of emigration, so that, as a result of several inter-governmental agreements between Poland and the Federal Republic, by 1990 about 1.1 million people of German descent had left Poland.<sup>10</sup> With almost all of the 'designated Germans' having emigrated, until 1989 Polish assimilationists could comfortably deny the existence of a German minority. In areas of German residence what this meant was that until the 1970s German was not offered in the schools system at any level, and neither was it available in institutes of higher education. There was also discrimination against members of the minority in terms of public sector employment. At the political level, organizations of the German minority, which gradually emerged from the early 1980s, were denied official

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<sup>9</sup> At the time both German states employed the 1913 Reichs Citizenship Act

<sup>10</sup> Between 1950 and 1956, fewer than 60,000 ethnic Germans had been allowed to leave Poland, but in 1957, 98,290 emigrated, and in 1958 117,550 did so. During the following two decades until 1979, over 300,000 ethnic Germans left, and by 1990, another more than 800,000 came to Germany, almost two-thirds of them between 1988-1990.

recognition, and their members were subjected to various forms of discrimination (Rogall 1993: 33ff.).

In essence, the (re-) Polonization campaign involved the Polish authorities in an attempt not only to change the everyday orientations of these people by rendering Germany redundant and by imposing sanctions upon recalcitrants, but also in altering the physical landscape and re-inventing the past. By the 1970s Polish had become the lingua franca throughout all parts of Upper Silesia and the education system was the transmission belt through which the younger generation was inducted into the wider Polish nation. Having said that the educational achievements on the part of the children of 'Germanized Poles' remained poor in comparison to those of the wider population.

The policy of (re)-Polonization was an overall failure. This was particularly the case in southern Masuria where by the late 1960s almost all of those who had been exempted from the expulsions had migrated. For the most part, despite the absence of any real links with Germany, levels of identification with Germany on the part of 'Germanized Poles' seem to have grown. This phenomenon is doubly curious given the way that in Germany these groups are often considered to be less than fully German, and in fact are often been Polish-speaking, bilingual, or indeed simply the speakers of Germanic-Polish dialects. The poor economic performance of Poland in comparison to that of either German state was certainly a factor, but the causes of this growing identification with Germany can also be very firmly located in the nature of and reaction to Polish governmental policies towards the group itself.

With regard to the wider role of the German governments in this area although the GDR authorities assumed responsibility for the designated German minority, as we have seen, it remained ambivalent with regard to the 'Germanized Poles'. For its part, the Federal Republic was powerless to act. Until the early 1960s, it lacked even a trading mission in Poland, and diplomatic relations were not established until 1970. In the intervening years, all that West German politicians could do was berate their Polish counterparts over the treatment of the minority, and lobby the Red Cross and other charitable agencies. There were also those who stimulated wishful thinking on the part of their constituents concerning the possibility that Poland's western border might be subject to future change. This 'belief' seems to have also influenced the actions of many Germans still living in Poland as became apparent in the late 1980s.

Contact with Germany was maintained through family visits, usually from west to east, and migration that invariably followed the reverse route. When Willy Brandt traveled to Warsaw in 1970, it was felt that unless it was dealt with in a sufficiently sensitive manner, the issue of the German minority was seen as likely to interfere with the greater prize of establishing diplomatic relations. Having said that, the issue was discreetly discussed and following the establishment of diplomatic relations, the Polish government did permit an increase in emigration to the Federal Republic on the basis of 'family re-unification'. Indeed, the 1970s did see a steady rise in Polish (German) migration to Germany, and as with the 'jumbo credits' of 1975/6, money was sometimes explicitly linked to the issue of emigration.

The situation began to alter somewhat in the late 1970s, as BdV activists began to penetrate Poland under the guise of regular tourism or as visitors to family and

friends. These efforts bore fruit in 1990, when the courts in Katowice finally allowed a delegation of German activists to register their society as such. This action in turn led to an explosion of political and other activity on the part of 'Germanized Poles' and their descendants. A nation-wide network of *Deutsche Freundschaftskreise* (German Friendship Circles/DFKs) was established, and German activists in Poland began to lobby just about anyone who would listen.

Of particular interest here is the response of the (West) German government to this burst of activity. Given the relative isolation on the part of Upper Silesian (and other Polish) Germans from the Federal Republic, and the rather limited means of through which the image of West Germany could be mediated, the demands of the activists and their constituents were somewhat unrealistic (Sakson: 2004). Some, fuelled by conservative elements within the *Landsmannschaften* hoped for the achievement of a special administrative status for part of Silesia. Even more bizarre was the belief that the collapse of the GDR and 'really existing socialism' would lead to a revision of the Polish-German border. The fact that ethnic Germans living outside of Germany could entertain such hopes; and also believe that the German government shared them, points to the huge problem in perception that existed between the two sides.

Needless to say, it was made clear to the German minority that the German government was not about to act as their champion with regard to either scheme. What Bonn/Berlin did offer was to support the minority, and to request of the Polish government that it recognize by treaty the existence of a German minority that was many times larger than the official propaganda allowed. In addition, the German authorities, together with the support of the Polish government and a younger generation of BdV activists offered an alternative to earlier unrealistic expectations. They put forward the idea that (the Germans of) Silesia should develop a bridging function between Germany and Poland and in that way play a pivotal role in promoting economic recovery and reconciliation. Reluctantly, the German community leaders agreed. The extent to which the German minority has been able to act as a bridge is debatable. The vast majority of well-educated Germans fled, was expelled or was killed in the period 1945-1949. During the intervening years, the remaining intellectual elite opted for Germany. Of those who are left, it is extremely rare to find a member of the German minority born before 1980 who has received a university education (Ociepka: 2004). On top of that, at national level the German minority is not numerically significant, and neither is Opole Silesia of any great economic importance. In addition, as the results of the Polish census of 2002 show, another process of consciousness shift, this time toward a Silesian identity may be under way in the area (Stadtmüller: 2004).

Further, there has never been any clarity over what is meant by Silesia or by the term 'Silesian identity'. All too often the term 'Silesia' is incorrectly and misleadingly used as a synonym for Opole Silesia. Aside from its German and Czech fragments Silesia lies today almost wholly within Poland. Importantly, it is divided administratively, and to a great extent culturally between Lower, Opole and Upper Silesia. It is only in the second of these three provinces, and more specifically within three of the counties that make up the *Opolskie* voivodship (province), that substantial numbers of Germans are to be found. There are negligible numbers of Germans in Lower Silesia, and in the neighboring *Ślaskie* voivodship numbers are dwindling

rapidly. Certainly in terms of inter-personal family contacts, the Germans of the *Opolskie* voivodship continue to perform a bridging role. However, given their lack of domestic political and economic capital, the grander plans for Silesia, no matter how vaguely defined, have not been realized.

### **The German minority in post-communist Poland**

In general, the situation of the German minority in Poland has significantly improved since the end of communism. They enjoy full minority rights in accordance with the norms of the Copenhagen criteria and other international agreements (Góralski: 2004). Unfortunately, confusion reigns concerning the total number of Poland's German minority. The umbrella organisation of the German minority the *Verband der deutsche Gesellschaften* (Association of German Societies/VdG) currently estimates the total to be in the region of 400,000, although most Polish academics believe that figure to be too high. The VdG also claims that a total membership of some 180,000 individuals. However, the results of the Polish census of September 2002 failed to clarify the issue. This census was important because it was the first since the 1930s at which respondents were asked whether or not they were ethnic Poles.

Prior to the census, by common consent it was commonly held that between 96 and 97% of the total population was ethnically Polish. Indeed, the result showed that 96.74% of respondents declared themselves to be Polish citizens of Polish ethnicity. The results also showed that there were in fact only 152,900 Germans, a figure that simply does not square with either the VdG's figures or those of most Polish researchers. Then again, a further 173,200 people, overwhelmingly from the *Opolskie* voivodship replied that they were in fact neither German nor Polish, but Silesian. This combined figure of 326,100 although not corresponding to the VdG's estimate of the total number of Germans in Poland does at least come close to many Polish estimates and makes the VdG's membership figures more comprehensible. However, it does so, only if you work on the assumption that the overwhelming majority of declared Silesians have a German orientation.

Yet we must further qualify the preceding paragraph. The census results also showed that a total of 279,600 Polish citizens resident in Poland have dual Polish-German citizenship. In order for a Polish citizen, native to Poland to qualify for a German passport, certain strict criteria must be filled. Possession of German citizenship prior to May 1945 is one obvious criterion, but is one that affects fewer and fewer people. In all other cases, applicants born before 1 January 1994 must prove either that both parents, or an applicant's father either possessed a German passport or was entitled to one according to contemporaneous German nationality law. Descent through the matrilineal line alone is not sufficient. On top of that, no one born in Poland after 1 January 1994 is entitled to a German passport on grounds of descent.

The result of this *mélange* of qualifications is that a large number of people in Poland who consider themselves to be partly or wholly German are not entitled to German passports. This provides further grounds for treating the census figures with caution. Then again, for decades many Poles have held the view that many of those who claim to be German emphasize their rather tenuous connections with Germany as

an economic re-insurance policy. Given the huge discrepancy between the total number of declared Germans in the census and declared German passport holders, this hypothesis may possibly have been born out by the results themselves.

Unfortunately, we need a further major caveat. A total of 774,900 people are missing from the statistics on ethnic background. They either refused to answer the question or gave ambiguous answers that could not be classified according to the set criteria. Given the total number of Poles weighed-in at the predicted figure and persistent problems since 1918 between the host Polish population and its minorities, it is not unreasonable to assume that members of the various minority groups are over-represented in the above-cited figure. Neither is it unreasonable to assume that Germans (and Silesians) are among their number. In sum, no one knows how many Germans live in Poland. For some German observers the official figures are far too low. They point to the fact that older people in particular may have been worried that in telling the truth they might have been inviting discrimination. They also claim more controversially, that the term Silesian should be taken in the same way that a Saxon or Bavarian would use the analogous terms, and not as a marker of a non-German identity (Rossmannith: 2004). Whatever the case, the census of 2002 could have important ramifications for the VdG, as funding is in part contingent upon numbers. Not unreasonably governments need a reliable base upon which to calculate financial provision for cultural and other programs. The official figures show there to be far fewer Germans than was previously thought. It is not unreasonable to assume that both the German and Polish governments will now further cut support for ethnic Germans according to the findings of the census results.

Regardless of just how many Germans there are in Poland, the minority is relatively well organized at the national level, even though the focus of its activities is on the *Opolskie* voivodship. The minority has benefited from financial, material, and human resources made available to them by the German government. These have enabled the minority, with the consent and support of Polish authorities, to restore in part the German-language education system that existed in areas that were German before 1945, to revive a German cultural life for ethnic Germans, and to participate actively in the economic reconstruction of their homeland.

Today, Poland's minorities' policy, like that of the Czech Republic, is governed by the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. The ministries of the interior and culture have a dedicated staff that deals with minority questions and, among other things, co-ordinate the activities of other government departments in this particular field. There are over 600 *Deutsche Freundschaftskreise* (German Friendship Circles/DFKs), in Poland. They in turn combine to form ten regional organizations. In turn these organizations, alongside a further seven functional societies are federated to the VdG that in turn possesses a small full-time bureaucracy. Immense strides have been made in recent years in a variety of fields. The German (and Polish) governments have contributed toward infrastructural projects, the revival of German language education, initiatives aimed at combating stereotypes and toward renovating German cultural monuments. Bilingual signage in areas of German residence is also becoming more common, although one hears occasional complaints from the German side, that Poles are sometimes unduly sensitive with regard to the issue (Rossmannith: 2004). A large number of schools, particularly in the *Opolskie* voivodship, provide a German-language curriculum,

except for the core subjects of Polish, History and Mathematics. There is a weekly newspaper, two monthly, and one quarterly magazine all of which are bilingual. In addition, one television station and five radio stations in Opole and Upper Silesia have some German language output. As with political representation, in terms of media representation the contrast with the Czech Republic is clear.

Parallel to the improvement of relationships at the local level, the relationship between the minority and the Polish state also became more constructive. A sincere effort has been made by Polish authorities to implement also those aspects of the Treaty on Good Neighborliness and Friendly Co-operation of 1991 that were aimed specifically at the German minority. Other measures include the setting-up of a joint German-Polish educational textbook commission. Its aim is to achieve consensus on the interpretation of disputed parts of the two countries' history, the enacting of regulations that make minority radio and TV broadcasts as well as the publication of minority print media possible, and the co-sponsorship of the scholarly Eichendorff journal. Despite that a number of problems remain. They include an insufficient number of well qualified teachers of German and of a curriculum for the teaching of German (Paweltziki and Kirstein 1998: 16). The result of this lack of teachers when combined with earlier lack of opportunity and utility is that German-language knowledge among the minority is somewhat patchy (Sulek: 2004). Never the less, improvements in the overall situation of the minority have been significant, which is also evident from the fact that since 1992, rates of immigration have declined considerably.<sup>11</sup>

In the early 1990s, through a combination of fortuitous circumstances, the German minority achieved a remarkable degree of success in the political sphere. This was particularly true of the first post-communist general election of 1990. The German minority succeeded in having seven MPs and one senator elected to parliament. Since then, their political fortunes have ebbed somewhat. Their representation at national level has fallen at each general election. They now only have two MPs in the *Sejm* and no senators. Similarly, in terms of representation at the regional and local level, after similar early successes they have effectively retreated to their heartlands in the *Opolskie* voivodship. Here they have a total of 304 councilors sitting in various local authorities and actually control thirty-four of the seventy-one communal councils. Within the voivodship, they control three out of twelve district/county councils, and are the largest fraction in a further four. Curiously enough, in Poland today German political representation is in fact greater than it was before 1939, despite the minority's reduction in size in both relative and absolute terms (Tomala: 2004). Yet, since the early 1990s, there has in fact been a decline in electoral support for the VdG, impressive though these figures may sound. The reasons for this are not difficult to identify. First of all, there was a further massive wave of migration to Germany in the early 1990s just as the wave of democratization was getting into full swing. Second, successive reforms to the Polish electoral system have been designed to promote consolidation and put an end to party political fragmentation. One consequence has been that smaller parties have been disadvantaged. Third, the ageing process has taken its toll. As older activists die or retire, so it becomes more difficult to fill vacancies. The younger generation is less numerous and indeed less alienated from wider Polish society. Finally, some are

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<sup>11</sup> After emigration peaked between 1988-1990 with more than half a million ethnic Germans leaving in just three years, numbers went down to around 1,000 emigrants per year for the second half of the 1990s.

disappointed at the lack of support received from the German government, and at the fact that they are not a major item of interest in Germany. Taken together, all of the above-mentioned factors have combined to reduce support for VdG candidates at election times.

Relations between the various *Landsmannschaften* that claim to represent the interests of ethnic German migrants and refugees from Poland, and the VdG are generally good. This is particularly the case with regard the *Landsmannschaft Schlesien*, and the German population of Opole Silesia. The *Landsmannschaft Schlesien* has long pursued a moderate line with regard to claims for property restitution and compensation, and argues that Polish accession to the EU will solve all residual questions relating to the period 1939-1949. This position can be contrasted with the attitude of others, especially the *Ostpreußisches Landsmannschaft*, elements of who relentlessly demand the collective right of return, financial compensation and property restitution. The difference in attitudes can be located in the fact that the large majority of migrants from Poland to Germany since 1950, have in fact come from Upper Silesia. Many of these migrants are in fact of mixed descent, and have ethnic Polish spouses. As a result, the *Landsmannschaft Schlesien* is more in tune with Polish realities, and more sensitive to Polish concerns.

We must also consider the attitude of the German population at large together with that of the German government. For most Germans born and raised in post-war Germany, *Spätaussiedler* (late re-settlers to Germany), together with the minority in Poland are not considered to be German. Rather, they are viewed as Poles who by virtue of some tenuous family or ancestral link have simply taken advantage of the special migration regimes that existed for ethnic Germans from former communist Europe to migrate to Germany. The fact that when these people arrive in Germany, Polish tends to be the lingua franca simply serves to re-enforce that belief. Such attitudes come as a great disappointment to Germans from Poland, who increasingly view themselves as people who exist between two worlds, and who are not fully at home in either.

As for the German government itself, VdG activists are disappointed with the level of priority they are accorded. Berlin is characterized as being parsimonious, disinterested and much more interested in preserving good relations with Warsaw at their expense. There is probably some truth in this. In the early 1990s expectations of Germany were far too high. For instance German community activists in Poland spurred on by the BdV sought to persuade the German government to persuade Poland into accepting the South Tyrol package as a model for Opole Silesia (Hajnicz 1995: 114). Given prior German involvement in internal Polish politics from the 1770s until 1945, and the recently achieved freedom from Soviet tutelage, such ideas were unsustainable.

Memory, family ties and the BdV, none of which proved to be particularly useful prisms, mediated knowledge of German political realities. However, difficulties in the relationship are not simply due to these factors. They apply more to the current government more than to its right of centre predecessor. Primarily they do not result from the clash between the cosmopolitanism of the Greens and the Social Democrats, with the narrow parochialism of the Germans of Upper and Opole Silesia. In fact, as much as anything else, the current divide is the latest manifestation of a rift

between the German political and cultural centre and its south-eastern periphery that has been apparent for at least 250 years.

### **A comparative assessment**

If we assess the situation today we find that in terms of bilateral Czech-German relations, the remaining German minority is not an issue. It is too small to have any political weight in either country. In addition, the Czech government's attitude towards this minority does not fuel controversy over the wider 'Sudetenland question'. As we have seen, by virtue of its size and contested provenance, the role and place of Poland's German minority has been more of an issue in Polish-German relations, than has that of its Czech counterpart in dealings between Berlin and Prague. Having said that, we have also seen how since 1990 successive German and Polish governments have sought to accommodate the minority without letting it dominate the political agenda. Although many minority activists are disappointed with this stance, the fact of the matter is that much has been achieved since 1990, and less would have been achieved, had Poland's German minority been allowed to dictate to either Warsaw or Berlin. Whether the much vaunted 'bridging function', has brought all the benefits envisaged or promised in the early 1990s is another question. In fact, it is fair to say that in the 1990s both expectations and fears of where this bridging function would lead were misplaced. It is not the case that any part of Silesia became the centre of gravity either in terms of German-Polish relations, or Poland's EU integration strategy. Nor has it led to Poland's territorial integrity being put in question (Starr 1993: 243), except in the minds of those who failed to come to terms with the post Second World War order, let alone the post Cold War order. While there has been positive change, difficulties do still exist. Rather than the minorities *in situ* they centre upon the activities and attitudes of the *Landsmannschaften* (Sulek: 2004). In Poland the government and the expellees/refugees have attempted to understand and come to terms with one another's respective positions. The extent to which such an understanding has been reached is a matter of debate. Attempts by their Czech counterparts to replicate even this limited success continually stumble on the rock of intransigence concerning the years 1938-1948.

Since 1989, the situation of German minorities in Poland and the Czech Republic has evolved in dramatically different ways. The minority in Poland has been reconstituted as a conscious entity and now plays an important part in regional political, social, and economic life. On the other hand, there are far fewer Germans in the Czech Republic and they lack the capacity to become any kind of meaningful factor as have their counterparts in Poland. In addition their future prospects have been heavily determined by events outside their control and not always to their advantage. From this perspective, the German minority in the Czech Republic has become caught between Germany, the Czech Republic, and the Sudeten German expellees. Whereas an almost identical constellation has worked to the advantage of the minority in Poland, historical and current events have prevented ethnic Germans in the Czech Republic from achieving similar acceptance in society. As of the time of writing (summer 2004), there is little reason to assume that for either minority radical change is on the horizon.

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