

Genocide of the Ethnic Germans in Yugoslavia 1944 – 1948

This book was published in Munich in 2003 by the Board of Directors of Donaueschinger Kulturstiftung – Stiftung des bürgerlichen Rechts. Described as a “contribution to Danube Swabian Heritage and Home Country Research,” 2,500 copies were reportedly printed.

Prior to World War II, there were a reported 540,000 Germans in Yugoslavia, of whom 95,000 were drafted into the German, Hungarian, or Croatian armies, and 245,000 of whom were evacuated to Germany. Of the remaining 200,000, the book purports to document that 64,000 were, in one way or another, “mortal victims” of premeditated genocide. This alleged genocide occurred between 1944 and 1948 under the direction of Tito.

Many ethnic German civilians who had lived in the area for generations were tortured and slain by partisan fighters in raids of reprisal by Yugoslave forces. According to the authors, about 51,000 ethnic Germans were systematically killed in civilian death camps by starvation and intentionally controlled epidemics. The remainder were believed killed in less organized ways, mostly partisan raids.

The makers of the book appear to be the “Documentation Project Committee,” and generally speaking, use a somewhat sophomoric writing style. While there is much documentation following each chapter, the text includes highly charged language, such as “killed bestially” and “cruelly murdered,” sometimes even appearing in bold print.

The primary purpose of this book seems to be to document that, while on a much smaller scale than the Nazi atrocities, the injustices heaped on ethnic Germans in Yugoslavia and other nearby Slavic countries do constitute a genocide. To further this point, the book includes the 19 articles comprising the “United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.”

In the years shortly following World War II, a total of 15 million ethnic Germans were reportedly expelled from their homelands in eastern and central Europe, including the Danube Swabians of Yugoslavia. While the murders of a small percentage of the victims were described in great detail in the book, its principal focus was to document that these organized efforts constituted a largely unrecognized and hidden genocide. According to definitions created by the United Nations, the practices in Yugoslavia should be considered “genocide,” “war crimes,” and “crimes against humanity.”

The Forward to the book contrasted the post war expulsions of Germans with the earlier expulsion of one million Poles from Warthegaw, as well as the expulsion of 105,000 Frenchmen from Alsace in 1940. The Nürnberg judgment determined that these previous expulsions were crimes.

The book blames the Potsdam Protocol for throwing “a mantle of legality” over the expulsions carried out immediately following the war. It describes the agreement reached by Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin at the Yalta Conference as a “particularly heinous crime” in that it led to hundreds of thousands of deaths during the post war “reparations in kind,” which was reportedly forced on about 2 million persons of German ethnic origin.

In short, the whole intent of the book is to focus attention on the much overlooked and repressed discussion of the Germans *as victims* in the years following World War II. Indeed, the reprisal in the former Yugoslavia seems very much to be a precursor to the eastern European crimes against humanity in the 1990s.

Vast numbers of Germans migrated to Yugoslavia following the expulsion of the Ottoman Turks. In the early 1700’s, after a century and a half of Turkish rule, hundreds of thousands of Germans were *recruited* to settle throughout the Danube region, much of which had been depopulated by the Turks. This vast area then became a major European breadbasket and mining center until the dismantling of Austria Hungary in 1918. At that point, as a result of the way the area was broken up, the Germans were a distinct minority in several completely separate countries. Their persecution went on for decades prior to World War II.

On October 2, 1944, partisans and the Red Army captured the community of Gross Betschevek, the main city of Western Banat. What started as cautious retributions against a minority of the German community leadership became mass murders on October 5, 1944 when 250 German heritage men were reportedly stripped down and murdered with machine guns on a side street of the main marketplace in Gross Betschevek.

The book details the subsequent horrendous treatment of inmates at dozens of extermination camps throughout Communist Yugoslavia, revealing bestial and often fatal whippings and dismemberments of German natives, mostly for the sadistic entertainment of the partisans. It describes many very similar rituals of victims digging their own mass graves and then stripping, only to be shot and pushed into the graves by the partisans and outside communist leaders. The majority of the detailed, apparently well-documented, reports are from survivors at the many camps.

According to the book, hundreds of Germans from town after town were tortured and then shot. Other Germans in nearby camps were reportedly herded and eventually murdered in very similar systematic ways or were effectively starved to death. Presumably, it is the great similarities in the killings all over Yugoslavia that caused them to be classified as genocide. Another key element was the forced evacuation of the more than 2 million Germans from all surrounding countries back to the Fatherland.

This highly documented publication is not always easy to absorb for a reader not already familiar with some of the proper names, but the book seems to contain a huge amount of otherwise obscure information.