

Andrii Kudriachenko

Kyiv/Ukraine

The German minority in post-war Czechoslovakia: the tragic page of history

The twentieth century is considered the century when the influx of refugees increased especially strongly and human rights were violated very often, as well as the century of protection of minorities and their rights¹. In this context, scientists very ambiguously assess the plans and post-war policy of Edvard Beneš, the President of Czechoslovakia (1939-1945), especially with regard to minorities and their rights. We consider it important to highlight the situation of the German ethnic minority in Czechoslovakia after the Second World War. It should be emphasized that the post-war Czechoslovak national policy was based on the concept of the Slavization of the country. It was about the implementation of the concept of the Slavization of the state, which was carried out extremely harshly and inhumanly. Experts, scientists and citizens of the Czech Republic, Germany and other states are still arguing about this policy. The implementation of this policy was based on the brutal expulsion of non-Slavic minorities. The largest ethnic majority among national minorities in Czechoslovakia at that time was the German population, which in the post-war years declined significantly in absolute terms.

The components of the policy of President Edvard Beneš included the provisions of the anti-fascist movement and the activities of the London emigration government from 1939 to 1943, which elaborated in detail the measures of the post-war ethnic homogenization of Czechoslovakia. The main method was the evacuation of a part of the German and Hungarian population. This idea was not new; it was based on the practice of resettlement of large ethnic groups after the Balkan Wars in the 1920s under the auspices of the League of Nations.

The plan did not rule out the exchange of territories in the border areas, which were mainly inhabited by the Germans. In this context, it was even a question of the possible receipt of German territories in return with Slavic

¹ JAN M. PISKORSKI: Die Verjagten. Flucht und Vertreibung im Europa des 20. Jahrhunderts. München 2013, S. 26.

peoples, for example, Sorbs, Wends. It was also planned to create territorial autonomy for the Germans of Czechoslovakia in the post-war period – two or three administrative districts. The ideas of Edvard Beneš were based on the principles of the formation of ethnically pure territories of the nation states in all countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The fate of many other mixed peoples had to be decided by international agreements. Among the methods of implementing the plans were the exchange of territories and population between the states. Thus, as Beneš imagined it, it is possible to solve the eternal problem of ethnically mixed peoples and especially border areas.

The Soviet Union supported these approaches of the Czechoslovak side with regard to the post-war resettlement of Germans from the territory of Czechoslovakia². England, America and France were much more restrained in their attitude to these ideas. It is worth mentioning that this plan for Czechoslovakia at the end of 1943 was presented by Edvard Beneš in Moscow to V. Molotov. It clearly laid out the national principle of statehood in post-war Czechoslovakia. Some points of the plan prescribed the accelerated Slavization of all territories of the Czechoslovak state. According to Beneš, schools should only be Czechoslovak and Ukrainian. The only exception could be German rural schools. The official language should be Czechoslovak and Ukrainian. The cultural, educational and linguistic rights of non-Slavic national minorities were ignored³. As a result of the Moscow Agreement, Stalin and Molotov expressed their full support of the Beneš plan, the Czechoslovak leader in London. In other words, behind the vision of the supporters, the plan opened up a historic opportunity to get rid of national minorities. With regard to the German question in liberated Czechoslovakia, Edvard Beneš stated the following: “The future republic will be a state of Czechs, Slovaks and Carpathian Ukrainians. It will become a national Slavic state. Beneš argued that the defeat of Germany in World War II was a unique opportunity to cleanse Czechoslovak territory of “German elements”. They must urgently leave the country – all German

² VIKTORIJA SOLOŠENKO: Spiwrobitnyztwo Federatiwnoii Respubliki Nimeččyny z krainamy Višegradskoi grupy (na prykladi vidnosyn iz Čechieju ta Slowaččynoju) [Die Zusammenarbeit der Bundesrepublik Deutschland mit den Ländern der Visegrád-Gruppe (am Beispiel der Beziehungen mit Tschechien und Slowakei)]. In: Universitet 2011. Nr. 5, S. 41-54.

³ IVAN VOVKANYTSCH: Čehoslowaččyna u 1945-1948 rokah. Narys istorii perehidnogo periodu [Die Tschechoslowakei in den Jahren 1945-1948. Überblick der Geschichte der Übergangsperiode]. Uzhhorod 2000, 208-209.

teachers, members of the SS, Hitler Youth, Gestapo and all rich Germans. German property, sanatoriums, factories, mines and houses must belong to the Czechoslovak people and state. “It will be a national revolution combined with a social revolution”, emphasized Edvard Beneš. He viewed the final solution of the German question in his country in the context of other political and socio-economic changes.

It should be emphasized that after the defeat of Germany in May 1945, the uncontrolled, “wild” expulsion of the Germans from Czechoslovakia began. The so-called partisans or self-proclaimed patriots took advantage of this. And, as a result, there were many examples of revenge against the German population, not only in the zone controlled by the Soviet army – in Moravia and in the northwest of the Czech Republic, but also in the zone controlled by the American troops. Modern Czech historians argue that anti-German radicalism also prevailed in the territories liberated by the Americans and there were brutal mass expulsions. In the Soviet zone, numerous crimes and frequent cases of harm to German families were recorded. The criminal authorities in Moscow acted on the model of “Big Brother”, they carried out excesses and carried out mass arrests. The inhabitants were mainly responsible for the crimes of Nazism – with their lives, property and exile. The Prague weekly “Týden” featured a series of stories about wild exile and crimes against the German population on Czech soil. For example, Czechoslovak soldiers seized houses left by the Germans on June 24, 1945 in the town of Teplice. Head Captain Václav Svoboda moved to the house of German Wilhelm Juptner. By order of the captain, Juptner was first arrested and then shot. The same commander ordered the execution of a group of 21 people on the Silesian-Polish border in the village of Vysoká Srbská. A little later, he wrote that this group of German residents had been deported to Poland. The rampant exile of the Germans began in Moravia as well.

It is important to bear in mind that after the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II, a massive expulsion of Germans began from Czechoslovakia. On May 30 and 31, 1945, events took place in Brno that went down in history as the Brunn “death march”, from the German name of the city – Brunn. The German-speaking population fell under the rink of collective guilt, including anti-fascists and Jews returning from concentration camps. According to historians, over 20,000 people were deported from Brno within two days. About 1,700 of them died on the way to Austria, but the exact number has not yet been established. Therefore, this expulsion of

the Germans from Brno and its surroundings to Austria was rightfully called the “death march”. In the following days, the violence continued and hundreds of other simple and defenseless inhabitants of German nationality were killed. Anti-German demonstrations by Brno residents continued – the wave of nationalism and anti-German hatred intensified. So, on June 1, 1945, the Czechoslovak government of Zdeněk Fierlinger promised to expel all Germans from Brno to Austria.

The fate of the German population in the previously liberated Slovakia was different than in Bohemia and Moravia. As one of the contemporary Slovak historians D. Kovacs notes, the overwhelming majority of Germans – more than 120,000 people who lived in Slovakia, managed to emigrate in an organized manner from October to February 1945. Some Slovak Germans fled to Austria in the spring of 1945. During 1946, the Germans were transferred from the Slovak camps of Petržalka, Nováky, Poprad and partly from Košice as part of organized internment in Germany. From spring to the end of October 1946, more than 32,000 Germans were deported from Slovakia. More than 100 camps were set up throughout Czechoslovakia, where the German population lived. Even in Prague there were 14 special institutions for German internees. As in Moravia, all Sudeten Germans had to wear white armbands with the letter “D” – German.

It is important to emphasize that the same marches of German columns as from Brno to Austria were carried out in the direction of the Czech-German border. One Soviet general noted the following: “Large German groups expelled from the Czech Republic crossed the Czech-Polish border near Dresden”. The Czech authorities forced the Germans to be ready within fifteen minutes to relocate to Germany. The Soviet general also drew attention to the fact that “the Germans were strictly forbidden to bring clothes and food with them, that about 5 thousand of Germans were sent to Germany every day, who were exhausted and had absolutely no prospects for the future. Masses of repatriates committed suicide, Germans from mixed marriages often changed their nationality, moved to other places and lost their national identity”.

Thus, during the deportation of the German minority from Czechoslovakia, many of them died, mostly during their first wild period. The number of victims of the 1945 ethnic terror against the German minority in Czechoslovakia was over 45,000, but according to the repatriates and the German side, this number exceeded 250,000 or even reached 450,000. Much later, the Czech-German Historical Commission established that in 1945, 250

thousand people were evacuated. As the Polish historian Jan M. Piskorski correctly argued, Europe alone in the 20th century numbered no less than eighty million refugees, which is incomparable with economic migrants to the countries of the New World. It should be noted that the Czechoslovak policy was strongly deformed and in relation to the German part of the population led to consequences that had an aggravating effect on the subsequent history of the country. The ethnical politics of Czechoslovakia was determined by the events of World War II, it was based on the concept of the Slavization of the state, and it was carried out brutally and inhumanly⁴. To this day, experts, scientists, politicians and ordinary citizens of states are discussing these tragic events of post-war Czechoslovakia.

Contacts:

Andrii Kudriachenko, Doctor of Historical Sciences
Professor, Director of the State Institution «Institute of World History of
the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine»

Leontovich str. 5, off. 301

01054 Kyiv, Ukraine

E-Mail: kudani@ukr.net

Web: <http://ivinas.gov.ua/uk/>

⁴ ANDRII KUDRIACHENKO: Ukraine and the Visegrad Four: Current Status and Prospects for the Cooperation. 20. Münchner Bohemisten-Treffen (2016). Forum für Tschechien- und Slowakeiforschung. Exposé Nr. 18.