
Research Article

Homeless at a new home: How German Balts and Latvians found their coping strategies after 1939 and 1945

Geert Franzenburg

University of Muenster

Abstract: Similar to modern analogies, in the years 1939 and 1944 both groups of „homeless home seekers“ had to cope with the lost homeland and with finding a new one, but in a particular way: the German Balts with the traumatic experiences of Bolshevism 1919, the Latvians and Estonians with the trauma of Soviet occupation. Following their experiences, the paper evaluates and compares, how both groups were and are coping with lost relationships by building new ones, how they were coping with displacement, and how they find a new kind of well-being by these coping strategies

Keywords: coping, displacement, Germany, Latvians, Russia, treaty.

Introduction

Background of the following research is the treaty between Germany (Hitler, Ribbentrop) and Russia (Stalin, Molotov) in August and September 1939, particularly the hidden agreement, which allowed the Red Army to occupy not only the Eastern part of Poland, but also the Baltic countries; therefore, this event was discussed in an extensive way (Bruegel, 1978; Buchner, 2010; Fabry, 1971; Feest, 2009; Fleischhauer, 1990; Hass, 1990; Herwarth, 1982; Ilmjärv, 2013; Kaminsky et al., 2011; Kleist 1950, Leonhard 1989; Lipinsky, 2004; Müller, 2011 Oberländer 1989; Rothfels, 1961; Sapper and Weichsel 2009; Seidl, 1949; Snyder, 2011; Troebst, 2009; Visulis, 1990) particularly in the Baltic states, Latvians (Brueggemann, 2011; Wezel, 2011, und Poland (Hoensch, 1989; Kornat, 2009).

While the Germans, after their return home from Latvia and Estonia („Heim ins Reich“), drew benefit from becoming a part of the „Great Germany“, the Latvian and Estonian „Displaced Persons“ found help in building a „little Latvia“ (Rozitis, 2005, Tegeler, 2011; Wyman, 1989).

Literature review

Concerning the interpretation of the return of the German Balts towards Germany 1939, the theory of Loeber (1972; 1974) became widely discussed that the German Balts were mostly influenced by the Nazi-propaganda, and that the treaties of Moscow forced their return (Loeber, 1974; Intelmann, 1984; Lenz 1964). His opinion was contrary to the thankfulness of many German Balts (Hellmann, 1979; Schlau, 1995; Schröder, 2010), who felt rescued by the German government from the Red army (Bosse, 2001); such discussions were made since 1950s (DSHI.140, 437; Filaretow, 1990; Saagpakk, 2006). While these issues are widely discussed, the displacement of the Latvian and Estonian people 1944 – other than of other groups like

German expellees, Jews, Polish or Ukrainian refugees – still needs research (Schröder, 2005), because only few Baltic people became forced laborers in the German Reich (Baltais, 1999; Best, 1991 Kangeris, 1988 and 2010; Schwarze 1999); because of their strong relationship with Germans, they were often stigmatized or accused of being collaborators with them (Dankers, 2011). These circumstances challenged – besides of language problems - research about Baltic DP- experiences (Mühle, 2005).

Therefore, British documents were important sources for such research (Birke and Mayring, 1993; Ruhm von Oppen, 1955). These documents show that the British authorities, similar as the UN-organizations UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) and IRO (International Refugee Organization) were – during their care for the displaced persons – influenced by organizational problems (Jürgensen, 1997), by the need of laborers, and by the balance between good relationships with both partners, Germany and Russia (Rinke, 1987). Concerning the situation of displaced persons (DP) in Germany, the research about the camps in Greven, Münster, Rheine and other towns is important (Schröder 2005; Wermelt, 2002), but also summarizing studies about American camps (Sneiders Spidola, 1992). For reasons of comparison, the research about Polish (Dölger, 2000, Rydel, 2003), Jewish (Becker, 2001; Eder, 1998; Königseder and Wetzell, 1994,) and Ukrainian (Antons, 2007) displaced persons are helpful.

Method

Background of the discourse analysis of this study (Jäger, 2001; Keller, 2007; Landwehr 2001 Sarasin, 2003; Weipert, 2006; Wellmann, 2005) is the life world concept, which emphasizes the interdependence between individuals, political actions and social frameworks (Diaz-Bone, 2002; Haumann,

2003). In this context, stereotypes become a crucial issue, particularly concerning (German) nationalism (Fielitz, 2000). During this research, the main discourses about losing and finding home were divided into the sub-discourses, life-worlds, models of narration, themes and expressions in order to demonstrate the interdependence between a particular situation and its transfer into memory, comment, interpretation, teaching and instrumentation (Assmann, 2006; Erll, 2005; Sandl, 2005).

By evaluating published and archival official and private documents and by interviews with eye-witnesses (Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann, 2004), such discourses were analyzed, in order to find out common and particular attitudes, interpretations and values of both groups, German Balts and Latvian refugees.

Following these steps, the socioeconomic background (everyday life), the socialization strategies (patriotism), and the political value systems (coping with collective trauma) of both particular situations of 1939 and 1945 sqq. became obvious by comparing the role of remembrance days, places, symbols and narrations between both groups.

Results

Evaluation of documents and interviews confirmed that the phenomenon of displacement and enculturation, of losing and finding one's home(land) has to do with communication issues of any kind (Mitzscherlich, 1997). Both groups shared their individual and collective experiences, interpretations and attitudes in both ways, internal and external.

For the German Balts, their balancing between being and feeling as both Germans and Balts during centuries, became a core issue for their interpretation of the situation of 1939, when this ambivalent (double) loyalty was discussed (Feldmanis, 2000, Henning, 2000; Jüngerkes, 2010; Schiemann, 1918). Influenced by the traumatic experience of the Versailles and Brest Litovsk treaty (lost of political power) and its political instrumentation (Fechter, 1958), they became open for Nazi-propaganda, which emphasized their German ethnicity.

Although the German-Soviet treaties of August and September 1939 changed the situation in the Baltic states, the German, Latvian and Estonian inhabitants first took no notice of them, but were influenced by Hitler's speech of October 6, 1939 at the Reichstag (Domarus, 1973; Wildt, 2006). It was interpreted as the astonishing and shocking signal: all German had to return to Germany, in order to avoid and prevent disturbances of the „new order“ in Europe. The real danger of the upcoming occupation of the Baltic states by the Red Army – following the hidden agreement between Hitler and Stalin – kept unknown until 1989, when it was opened in Moscow during the age of Perestroika (Besimensky, 2002; Bisovsky et al., 1990; Hilger, 1955). In order to emphasize the new political concept model of a new German mission (in the „Warthegau“), the regime changed the traditional complex

remembrance culture of 700 years into an „official“ version by interpreting the main themes in a particular way: the term „to feel at home“ became „becoming a member of the great German nation“; the „national mission“ of cultural colonialism became the mission of „Germanization“ under the rules of the German „Leader“.

As the evaluation of documents and interviews underlined, the situation of the Latvian and Estonian displaced persons (Purvinskis, 2005), who were cared by UNRRA (1944-46) and IRO officials (1947-50) (Kochavi, 1991; Woodbridge 1950), and later by German officials and church organizations (Kleinknecht, 1996; Krimm, 1974; Maurer, 1954), was characterized by suffering from hunger and by poor housing, by the fear of repatriation, by the wish to immigrate to USA or England, but also by the development of a Latvian cultural identity in exile. After 1950, the „hard core“ of non-resettled people was cured as „heimatlose Ausländer“ by German authorities who divided them into different stages of care (only legal, legal and emigration, or total support (Jacobmeyer, 1985; Jahn, 1950; Overesch, 1979) The aim was to integrate them into German society and economy (Carden, 1979; Tolksdorf, 1990), which became a particular challenge because of millions of German refugees (Pfeil, 1948). By the law about the legal status of the homeless strangers (25.4.1951), they got the same status as the Germans (Bundesministerium, 1951 and 1952; Dietz-Görrig, 1992), but without becoming real German citizens (Spidola, 1992), which they interpreted as an unwanted assimilation. Therefore, during their stay in German camps, they built their own „Little Latvia“, characterized by language, rituals and a particular kind of religiousness and patriotism (Urdze, 1984).

Discussion

Considering the different situations of German Balts returning to the German Reich 1939, and Latvian Displaced Persons as refugees in German camps, the following themes emerged for discussion:

1. Displacement as a kind of waiting station

What the German Balts experienced 1939 in the „Warthegau“, in German occupied Poland, the Latvian refugees did in Germany as a kind of „waiting corridor“ for oversea immigration. While the German Balts experienced a social decline, but without social discrimination or suffering because of the same language, Latvians as foreigners often experienced discrimination (Bumanis, 1984), although depending on external political decisions.

2. Displacement as organization of waiting

While the German Balts could feel and present themselves as heroes, the Latvian refugees represented their role as depending victims (Garleff and Lehtma, 2009) which became part of both memory cultures. As a main coping strategy with such traumatization, cultural activities, such as learning music lessons or dancing and music events, publishing texts and paintings, which prevented stereotyping, became crucial, but

also political actions concerning the situation in occupied Latvia (Jaunsudrabins, 2006; Kazakaitis, 2009). Therefore, Latvian (and Estonian) refugee organizations were established in German camps, which coordinated the organization of everyday life, of cultural and political events (Holborn 1956; Holian, 2011). Thus, in Esslingen an association for Latvian organizations was founded with the common aim to fight for a free Latvia, for the human rights of all Latvians, for the community-feeling, and for the cooperation of all Latvian organizations (Latvian Central Committee, Latvian Red Cross, "Daugavas Vanagi", economic organizations). A core instrument for both, cultural and political intentions, was the publication of books and journals by Latvian camp editors (Rozitis, 2005; Lauska, 2011), where the value of materialism for Latvianism was emphasized as one core issue besides of practical and everyday or patriotic topics about Latvian life; all these issues were discussed in Latvian camp newspapers and journals, too („Latvija“, „Grevenes Zinas“, and others).

3. Displacement as integration of past, present and future

While for the German Balts in their memory culture the ideas of anti-Bolshevist barrier and of cultural mission in the East were crucial, the motive of democratic life and intercultural dialogue became important for Germans and refugees after 1945. The Latvian memory culture, however, emphasized the model of suffering victims, which became part of common rituals of cultural identity and heritage as the challenge to maintain Latviasness and to fight for the freedom of their occupied country (Bilmanis, 1944, Grava-Kreituse et al., 1995; Olberg, 1941). While the German Balts became members of the majority society, the Latvian refugees remained a minority, which was challenged by stereotypes of the majority. Although they became similar rights to Germans by the law about the homeless foreigners 1950, they maintained stigmatized by their language and culture.

In both groups, German Balts and Latvian refugees, a difference of experience between the generations can be noticed: While the adults often suffered from the bad situations, children and adolescents enjoyed a kind of adventures or – as children – as a kind of game..

While 1939 the German Balts internalized the propaganda of a new mission in the „Greater Germany“ (Bosse, 1942; Kröger 1967; Nolte, 1979; Peter, 1998; Rexhäuser, 1989; Rimscha 1965), the refugees after 1945 had to find their own models of interpretation by publishing books and crafts concerning their cultural heritage, and by their religiousness. Because they could not draw benefit from official treaties and agreements, they became objects of authorities of any kind and their orders.

4. Displacement as coping with stigmatization

Both groups shared the same challenge of leaving one home(land) and building up a new one by organization and improvisation, by values, communication, and community or networking within the camps; both groups experienced being

not only displaced, but taken like a tree with their roots into a new region (Bosse, 1942). Such networks were facilitated by organizations and associations of both groups, German Balts and Latvian refugees, such as Student associations (Urdze, 1984). Like the Germans in Latvia and Estonia, who felt as German Balts, but became „Baltic Germans“ by the Nazi-regime and propaganda, the Latvians were stigmatized by the Germans as „Russians“ as a collective stereotype for strangers from the East. Thus, the collective memory of the lost and imagined homeland became a core coping strategy with such stigmatization (Jaunsudrabins, 2006; Maurina, 1975). Therefore, love of homeland was a common attitude of both groups, but with different versions. While the German Balts changed from the motherland to the fatherland, where their ancestors came from, the Latvian (and Estonian) refugees kept their „mother Latvia“ by heart as the „Little Latvia“, because they did not find any substitute. Therefore, they had to prevent and avoid any kind of assimilation, while the German Balts emphasized their role as particular kind of Germans; thus, they both played their role for external views, but kept their own identity alive by heart.

Conclusion

In 1944, remembering the occupation of 1940 facilitated the escape of the Latvian displaced persons, while in 1939 the German Balts followed the German anti-Bolshevist propaganda and the „German mission“ In both groups cultural in-habitation or inculturation became a process of integration and new worldview by developing a sense of belonging, a sense of identity by emphasizing particular memory times, places, rituals (songs) and narrations. Particularly concerning the treaties of Moscow of August/September in 1939, and of the conferences of Potsdam and Yalta in 1945, but also the role of the events of 1918/19 for the collective memories of Germans and Latvians, and for their interpretation and reaction, underline the crucial interdependence between such political and historical frameworks and individual and collective experiences and attitudes. Therefore, the evaluation of both together, traces of memory and of discourses, facilitates new insights into historical events and in the impacts on current situations, attitudes and interpretations from a social economical (organization, status, milieu), socialization oriented (generations, relationships, cultural identity), and political- value oriented (collective memory, interpretations) perspective. Such multidimensional approach demonstrates, how both groups in their experiences depended economical interests, ethnic stereotypes and political values. Thus, the attitudes of all participants of the process, became obvious.

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