



THEME 3: Transformation processes

Teaching and learning aids

Internal Transformation

The change in German-Polish relationships as reflected in history books, taking as an example the description of the forced transfer of the German population out of Poland

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The middle of the 90's saw the past in German-Polish relationships becoming a new reality. The return of the topic "expulsion of the Germans" to the discussion of history in the German Federal Republic evoked powerful emotions in Poland and set off intense debate. The project to construct a "centre against expulsion" was often seen as part of a great planned attempt to re-write history in the Federal Republic, to reduce German guilt and to present the Germans above all as victims of the war. The tensions that grew out of this tendency had repercussions on the present politics between both countries.

In the following we present some of the results of a comprehensive analysis of the contents of German and Polish history books¹ that were published between 1956 and 2004 and were used and/or are still used in secondary school classes in both countries².

At the centre of interest is the question of how post-war relationships between Germans and Poles are presented in school books. In particular we intend to examine how moving the German-Polish border after the Second World War and above all the consequence of doing this, in other words the transfer of the German population away from the regions that were assigned to Poland at the Potsdam Conference, are treated in the school books. This problem dominates the most recent history of German-Polish relationships in a way that hardly any other topic of the post-war era does, and it can serve as a basis for the formation of a national identity for young Germans and Poles.

Every page emphasized with the help of key expressions, particularly in its propaganda, a different aspect of these events, which evoked certain configurations of the contents in the minds of the recipients: on the Polish side it was – especially in the era of the People's Republic of Poland – the expression "regained territories"; correspondingly on the German side – especially in the Federal Republic of Germany - the word "expulsion" was used up to the year 1989.

¹ Ewa Nasalska: *Polsko-niemieckie dyskursy edukacyjne: lata 1949-1999*
Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, Warszawa 2004, 376 S.

² A complete list of the Polish and German text-books examined can be found in the relevant collection of materials (T PL/7 and T DE/8). It also contains quotations from some of these text-books.

- **Crucial points of the presentation in Polish history books in the 50's and 60's**

The use of the term „expulsion“ had political connotations in the People's Republic of Poland, because it was connected to the idea of „west German revisionism“ and was in contradiction to the concept of “regained territories”. The expression “regained territories” goes back to the conception according to which Germans living in the “old Piast region” had to leave it in order to fulfill the principle of historical justice. Both “expulsion” and “regained territories” were used as a generalizing stereotype. In public discussion they were used as words to signalize that they contained evaluative-emotional components and strengthened the national identity of the Poles and the Germans.

During the whole of the post-war era, which as we now know ended in 1990 with German reunification and the border treaty between Poland and Germany, these expressions played an important role in Polish-German relationships as a kind of collective symbol.

This holds particularly true for the expression “regained territories”, which in public discussion became a symbol of “historical justice”. The term “expulsion” was not used in public discussion in Poland, because it contained a strongly discriminating element, as judgement of the perpetrators (the Poles) is clearly negative. In Poland the events were either gathered under the term “transfer of population” (*wysiedlenie*) or else the subject was ignored. A fundamental change with regard to the use of the term “expulsion” in public discussion in Poland first appeared at the beginning of the 90's.

The change in public discussion goes back to the fact that in the preamble to the treaty signed between the Polish Republic and the Federal Republic of Germany in 1990 both proceedings were mentioned, using both the term expulsion as well as the term transfer of population.

"... remembering that 45 years have passed since the end of the Second World War, and in the awareness that the great suffering this war brought in its wake, and especially the loss of their home country inflicted on many Germans and Poles through expulsion or population transfer represents a warning or a challenge to create peaceful relationships between the two nations and states,"
(from: German-Polish Border Treaty, 14.11.1990)

Both the term „expulsion“ as well as the concept of „regained territories“ bear reference to moral standards and general human rights in international relations. It is the wrong inflicted by the other side that is always emphasized while one's own side is always seen as the weaker side in the conflict. Differences certainly do arise in the time perspective. In the German text-books reference is made to the drastic events that happened after the war in connection with the transfer of the German population. The Polish side on the other hand presents the events that happened before 1945 and therefore sees itself as the weaker side that later received historical justice.

For this reason usage of the term „expulsion“ for the transfer of the German population was avoided in Poland up to 1989, because the term implied (brutal) violence on the part of the perpetrators. Appeal to moral standards was mainly made by reference to the cruelty of the enemy. The cruel deeds inflicted by the enemies were passed on from generation to generation. Thus they became part of the collective memory and remain firmly established in the memory of the younger generation, too. By reminding of the cruel deeds perpetrated by the enemy side the contrast between national groups is not only rationalized (description of the facts), but it even becomes a moral duty for the individual members of the group.

On both sides the tendency towards a settling of accounts over injustice and blame is to be seen. In the wrong inflicted on them, both the Germans and the Poles have appealed to international standards of justice, which in this case were set out in the Potsdam Agreement. In the treatment of the expulsion in the German text-books there is often a confrontation of Point XIII of the Potsdam Agreement of 1945, where the principles of the transfer of the German population were stipulated, with a bulletin (directly or indirectly) on the violation of this decree by the Polish side. In the same way the Polish text-books bring into play law categories (as understood under international law) in connection with the wrong inflicted on Poland during this period; here, too, appeal is made to the Potsdam Agreement.

In this conflicting situation neither of the two sides brought to bear their superiority or their strength, but both wished to recall the wrong suffered at the hands of the other side. The concept of "regained territories" was used – together with the appeal to "historical justice" and the myth of the Piast past of the territories promised to Poland in Potsdam – to satisfy an elementary sense of justice (an injustice that had gone on for centuries was made amends for). But it was also used to support the feeling of national identification and to strengthen the national sense of community. By referring to inner national similarities and, in a positive sense, to a common political destiny, the special position of the national group was emphasized. The positive national characteristics and the exceptional position of their own nation (in the sense that "we're better than they are") were according to this way of seeing things displayed in the fact that the territories were promised to Poland in agreement with principles of justice and international law.

- **Polish history text-books in the 50's**

In the only text-book for the year 1956 (Historia VII, 1956) the deliberation on the western border of Poland, which was treated with binding validity in public discourse, was expressed in just two sentences; according to this the Soviet Union, the USA and Great Britain agreed to give back to Poland the ancient Piast territories, which had once been snatched from the Poles by the Germans. (T PL/1)

The transfer of the German population was not treated as an independent topic, but it was only mentioned in passing that the Germans had fled along with the retreat of Hitler's army or that they had been moved away. (T PL/2)

The moving of the border and the transfer of the German population away from Poland were presented as national and ideological conflict in the Polish history text-books of the 50's. The extent of the national conflict was expressed in an unequivocal manner in the rhetoric of the conception of the "regained territories". In this case the propaganda contents conveyed by the text-books fully agreed with public sentiment. The position of Poland in the international political system of that time (amongst other things the forced relations between the People's Republic of Poland and the German Democratic Republic) had the effect of producing an interpretation of the events following after the border change that arose out of a class-conscious and ideological perspective.

The problems of Germans living in Poland at the end of the war were only given any consideration in a few instances. The laconic statement that "the German population had been transferred to Germany" seems in this connection to be nothing more than a completion of the conception of historical justice. The real problems involved in the transfer of the German population were given no mention by the authors of text-books for primary schools right up to the end of the 80's.

But there are indeed explicit references to the conception of "historical justice", which was fully developed in the following text-books. Pupils heard nothing about the transfer of the German population, although this was not completed until 1951.

- **German history text-books of the 50's**

Descriptions of the Second World War were dominated by the expulsion of the Germans from the east. In them details of the expulsion were given plenty of space. (T DE/1)

In presenting the new Oder-Neisse border emphasis was placed on its temporary nature, which was not mentioned in the Polish history books of this period. (T DE/2)

In the GDR the subject of „expulsion“ was Taboo, just as in Poland and Czechoslovakia, although the Soviet zone (afterwards GDR) had had to take in the biggest share of refugees and displaced persons. The east German history books reflect the Soviet perspective on the treatment of the question of the transfer of the German population. . (T DE/3)

- **Polish history text-books in the 70's**

At the beginning of the 70's relations between the People's Republic of Poland and the German Federal Republic grew easier. In 1972 the Bundestag ratified the “Warsaw Agreement” of 1970, in which the Federal Republic recognized the Oder-Neisse line as Poland's western border. As soon as June of the same year Pope Paul VI established a new church organization for the western and northern regions. These facts also influenced the portrayal of German-Polish relations in the history books.

In the portrayal of the alteration of Poland's western border and the transfer of the German population in the text-books of the 70's reference was made to international legal rulings, i.e. to the Potsdam Decrees and at the same time to generally valid moral standards and principles of justice, whereby the concept of “restoration of the old Piast territories” which was intuitively accepted in Poland was felt to be a compensatory act of justice. (T PL/3)

- **German history text-books of the 70's**

In the West German history books the statements on the subject of the compulsory transfer of the German population became milder. In the texts describing the cruelty of the banishment, the perpetrators as a rule were given a very general mention or were mentioned together with other nations, in particular with the Czechs. There are signs of a tendency to avoid portrayals of German-Polish conflict. (T DE/4)

In the German Democratic Republic textbooks there are virtually no differences from the schoolbooks of the 50's to be found with regard to the expulsion of the Germans. (T DE/5)

- **Polish history text-books of the 90's and the beginning of the 21st. century**

It is noticeable that since the 90's Polish history books have shown a tendency (this tendency will also be continued in the coming years) to give more attention to the injustice suffered by German civilians during the resettlement.

Since the beginning of the 90's a distinction has been made between two components in the portrayal of these events: on the one hand it is shown that the Poles' procedure was in accordance with the principle of justice – which can be seen in the fact that it occurred with the approval of the great powers , on the other hand it is emphasized that the necessity of this procedure was historically motivated. The resettlement is described as just and necessary in all the Polish text-books of the 90's that were examined. (T PL/4)

In another school book the resettlement of the Germans is looked at from a new perspective. It is closely associated with the forced resettlement of the Polish population from the eastern regions of the country that had been conceded to the Soviet Union. (T PL/5)

From the beginning of the 21st. century the Polish history books further contain hints at the point of view and feelings of the Germans who had been driven out. (T PL/6)

- **German history text-books at the turn of the 20th.to 21st. centuries**

Here, too, a slight change is to be seen. The reasons for the transfer of the German population are indeed more frequently stressed than in the 50's, but all the same they are ignored in about 50% of the text-books examined. In the 70's this was the case in only about 33% of the text-books examined.

In contrast the problem of the forced transfer of the Germans away from Poland is expressly mentioned in German history books of the 90's, but the reasons leading up to it are only clearly emphasized in every other text-book examined. . (T DE/6)

In the German history books that were officially approved for use in schools at the beginning of the 21st. century there are in comparison with those used at the beginning of the 90's practically no differences in the way the expulsion of the Germans is portrayed. (T DE/7)

There can be no doubt that the German nation has the right to describe the sufferings of the people driven out of their homeland in their history books. When, however, the reasons for the expulsion are not equally expressly given, there is the danger that they will be fall into oblivion in the awareness of the younger generation and that a change in attitude will thus be prevented.

Summary

There can be no doubt that life, freedom, security, homeland and housing belong to the highest values that human beings possess. Wars of aggression, murder and expulsion hurt these values deeply and can destroy the peace between whole nations for generations if dialogue is not attempted to produce unity on the cause and effect and on the question: Who were the perpetrators or victims and why?

The answers to these questions both for understanding oneself and for understanding the others in conflicts involving groups or states are so important that they should be provided in school lessons as preparation for young people approaching adulthood.

Analysis of the German and Polish history books of the last 50 years has shown that both countries have expressed points of view and judgements that at first were very far apart. In the course of general political developments in Europe ways of portraying and evaluating things have undergone a transformation process which has laid a stable foundation for peaceful co-existence.

A culture of remembering in dialogue with neighbouring countries is the necessary prerequisite for a European sense of "we belong together", without which there cannot exist a common identity and solidarity in Europe.

In connection with this, European projects in education to strengthen awareness of common values are of great importance for peaceful co-existence among Europeans. Teachers and external multipliers have their proper platform here for eliminating misunderstandings, prejudices and animosities for the wellbeing and advantage of the generations approaching adulthood.