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The German-Soviet Encounter: War, Ideology, and Political Transformation

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In *German Blood, Slavic Soil*, Nicole Eaton tells the story of how war, violence, ideology, regime change, and population transfer transformed the German city Königsberg into Soviet Kaliningrad. Drawing on a wide range of sources and perspectives—German and Soviet, state and non-state perspectives, official documents, memoirs, and interviews—the book analyzes the encounter between two violent revolutionary regimes, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, as reflected in the city's history during and in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War.

The analysis is structured chronologically, taking the reader from the prewar and war years to the immediate postwar period, with a particular focus on the years 1944–48. The first chapter provides an overview of Königsberg's history, from its origins in the medieval period to the eighteenth century, when the city became the capital of the German enlightenment, to the First World War and ultimately up to the Nazi seizure of power in 1933. Until the First World War, the province of East Prussia (of which Königsberg was the regional capital) shared three quarters of its borders with the Russian Empire, and economic and cultural ties were strong. With the First World War, much of that came to an end. The war brought terrible devastation, the end of empire, and the redrawing of borders to Eastern Europe. With the Treaty of Versailles, the newly independent state of Poland was granted a strip of land, the so-called Polish Corridor, which guaranteed Poland's access to the Baltic Sea yet also cut off East Prussia from the rest of Germany. Even though East Prussia's population continued to be multilingual and culturally diverse, in the public imagination and across the political spectrum, East Prussia increasingly came to be seen as a bulwark of Germandom against the allegedly backward and barbaric "East." The Nazi party (NSDAP) successfully capitalized on this rhetoric. During the national elections in May 1928 the NSDAP had won less than 1 percent of the vote in East Prussia. Five years later, at the height of the Great Depression, the situation was dramatically different: in the national elections in March 1933, 56.5 percent of the vote in East Prussia went to Hitler, the highest result in Germany.

The meteoric rise of the Nazi party in East Prussia and the wartime extension of its rule into occupied Eastern Europe is the topic of the second chapter. It centers around one man, Erich Koch,

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who arrived in East Prussia in 1928 and who was subsequently appointed governor of the province. One of the most powerful regional Nazi party leaders in Germany, Koch, along with his inner circle, adhered to all the main tenets of Nazi ideology. However, they were also proponents of an especially anti-capitalist and socialist variant of National Socialism, which, they proclaimed, would end East Prussia's rural agricultural crisis and rectify economic inequality—a program that appealed to many voters. Their vision for the German national community also differed from elsewhere in the Reich, as Koch and his men were forced to grapple with East Prussia's multiethnic and multilingual population. Although Königsberg's Nazis increased their Germanization efforts in East Prussia toward the end of the 1930s, Masurians and Lithuanians could still become German by choosing to assimilate. However, assimilation was no longer available to German Jews, who faced harassment, discrimination, and institutionalized racism. Germany's invasion of Poland in September 1939 then marked the transition toward genocide, both within and outside the borders of the Reich. The invasion eliminated the Polish Corridor and, following the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, transformed East Prussia from a borderland into the center of a new German empire in the East. In August 1941, Koch became chief of the civilian administration of Bezirk Bialystok (Białystok) and, one month later, *Reichskommissar* of Nazi-occupied Ukraine. East Prussia's Nazis thus came to play a seminal role in the German occupation of Eastern Europe, extending East Prussian informal rule into a continuous stretch of territory from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

The third chapter describes the downfall in 1944 and early 1945: the end of Koch's empire in Eastern Europe, the end of Nazi rule in East Prussia, and the end of German Königsberg. The German forces left behind a trail of death and destruction as the Red Army pushed them from Soviet territory: in Nazi-occupied Ukraine alone—one of the main sites of the Holocaust and Koch's empire of violence in the East—nearly 4.1 million civilians died. In East Prussia, though, it was not until the summer of 1944 that the population really got a sense of what total war meant. In August 1944, British bombers engulfed Königsberg in flames; by the fall of 1944, the Red Army had reached the East Prussian border. The Nazi leadership now mobilized the entire population for the defense of Germany's borders. Koch ordered the construction of a massive Eastern Wall (*Ostwall*) against the advancing Red Army. At the same time, he prohibited mass civilian evacuations from the province. When Soviet forces began their invasion of Germany in January 1945, Hitler ordered that Königsberg be turned into a "Fortress City," to be held at all costs. Trying to flee, the majority of Königsberg's inhabitants got caught in the frontlines, while others were trapped inside the city. During these weeks, the Nazis escalated the Final Solution, murdering over seven thousand Jewish prisoners from the Stutthof concentration camp east of Danzig. They also turned wartime violence inward, oppressing German citizens and forced laborers inside the city. After roughly two months under siege, Königsberg was captured by the Red Army on April 9, 1945.

The fourth chapter examines the ways in which Red Army soldiers experienced the invasion of Germany. Soviet soldiers saw themselves as defenders of their motherland and liberators of Europe from the crimes of fascism—but they also came to punish. East Prussia was the first German territory that the Red Army conquered during the war, and its soldiers exacted revenge for the massive death and destruction that the Germans had inflicted on the population of the Soviet Union (an estimated 26 to 27 million Soviet citizens died as a result of the war). Throughout the province, Soviet soldiers looted and pillaged villages, and raped and murdered tens of thousands of German civilians. The military command turned a mostly blind eye to the first wave of violence, effectively permitting it to continue. Drawing on diaries, memoirs, and military correspondence from behind the front, the chapter traces how Red Army soldiers—both those who perpetrated violence against civilians and those who witnessed it—sought to justify, rationalize, or condemn the violence. In that, they could draw on two overlapping views in Soviet wartime propaganda: the internationalist view, which portrayed Nazism in Marxist-Leninist terms as the product of capitalism, imperialism, and a small minority of fascist thugs, the so-called Hitler clique; and the nationalist view, which portrayed Germans as eternally war-mongering Teutonic raiders, irreparably corrupted. During the war, the nationalist view became predominant in the Soviet press. To Red Army soldiers, East Prussia in particular seemed to

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display the linkages between ancient Teutonic and contemporary fascist suppression. Punishment of its population, then, seemed justified – and many Red Army soldiers felt that they deserved to reward themselves through any means of their choosing, including loot and rape.

Chapters 5–7 focus on the crucial years of transition, 1945–48, as German Königsberg became Soviet Kaliningrad. At the war's end, the northern third of East Prussia, including Königsberg, came under direct Soviet control. Chapter 5 reconstructs the nature of Soviet rule over Königsberg in 1945. Although the capture of Königsberg was of high symbolic importance to the Soviet leadership, the local Red Army administration received little guidance from the political center about how to make Königsberg Soviet. Unlike other territories entering the Soviet sphere of occupation, there were also no local émigré communists who could run the lower levels of the administration. The first stage of Königsberg's transformation was thus carried out by the Red Army's local administration in conditions of isolation, with little funding or direction from Moscow, except for unrealistic orders concerning construction and economic output. Among the many challenges that the city's military administration faced was the material destruction of the city (over 90 percent of the historic center was destroyed and much of the city was uninhabitable), coupled with the fact that a sizable German population, between 150,000 to 200,000 civilians, mostly women, children, and the elderly, still lived in Soviet East Prussia. Compared to Germans living in the Soviet Zone of Occupation in East Germany, the Königsberg Germans' experience under Soviet rule was even more violent: not only were the NKVD's filtrations more severe, extensive, and long-lasting, but sexual violence, looting, and theft remained widespread for several months. Mortality rates from hunger and disease were higher than elsewhere in postwar Europe. The local Soviet authorities, who also depended on the German work force for economic reconstruction, enjoyed only limited success in trying to contain outbreaks of disease. All the while, the legal status of the German population remained unclear: would they be deported or expelled, or could they eventually become Soviet citizens? The prolonged uncertainty, coupled with dramatic food shortages and scarce resources, meant in practice that the military administration first looked after its own, thereby creating a de facto ethnic hierarchy.

On April 9, 1946, one year after the Red Army conquered Königsberg, Soviet East Prussia was turned into an administrative oblast of Soviet Russia, and in July of that year both the city and oblast were renamed Kaliningrad. With the administrative integration into the Soviet Union also came a transition to civilian rule. Over the course of 1946 and 1947 a new civilian administration gradually wrested control from the military and sought to transform Kaliningrad into a genuine Soviet city. What that meant for the German population and the newly arriving Soviet settlers—technical workers, officials, collective farmers, and others—is the topic of the sixth chapter. Many new settlers were surprised to still find so many Germans living in the oblast. Although the Soviet settlers stood in the hierarchy above the German population, they, too, faced economic hardship in a destroyed city. (German) women remained vulnerable to exploitation or assault at the hands of (Soviet) men. At the same time, the workplace led to human encounters between Soviet and German citizens that made it possible to relate to each other as individuals. Although the legal status of the German population remained unclear (they were not Soviet citizens), the new civilian administration assumed that, with the right intervention, Germans could eventually become a part of Soviet society. The administration ended the forced labor-regime and introduced standardized wages and food rations for workers regardless of citizenship or nationality. Throughout 1946 and well into 1947 it expanded efforts to rehabilitate Germans through education, which included creating schools with instruction in German, established a German-language newspaper and hosted educational and cultural programming in an official Antifascist Club. Yet these integration and rehabilitation efforts came to a halt on October 11, 1947, when the Soviet Council of Ministers issued a resolution dictating the resettlement of East Prussia's German population to East Germany.

How such a political reversal—from trying to integrate Germans to fully excluding them—became possible within such a short timeframe is explained in chapter 7. As the chapter shows, ultimately, it was a combination of different factors that led to the expulsion of the German population. For one, in practice, the civilian administration's integration efforts could not eradicate the ethnic hierarchy,

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which persisted thanks to ongoing economic shortages and the indeterminate status of the German population. Soviet East Prussia had not been converted into a Russian oblast in time to be included in the first postwar Five-Year-Plan, which meant that the oblast remained heavily underfunded. Most of the city had no consistent water and electricity supply well into 1948. As more and more Soviet settlers arrived, they began to put pressure on the administration to improve living conditions for Soviet citizens. Others simply packed up and left. A severe famine in the winter of 1946–47 dramatically worsened living conditions in the city, especially for the Germans, who starved disproportionally. (Overall, between 30 to 50 percent of the Germans still living in Soviet East Prussia at the end of the war died between 1944 and 1948.) When material and demographic pressures converged toward the end of 1946, Kaliningrad's party leadership began to change course, and increasingly cast the city's Germans as enemies within. Petty theft, black market trading, and prostitution (widespread throughout the war-ravaged western regions of the Soviet Union) were interpreted as opposition to the Soviet state. In the spring of 1947, local party leaders' anti-German rhetoric caught Moscow's attention, and with the center's expulsion announcement of October 1947, the long-standing ambiguity over the status of the German population came to an end. Deemed irredeemable, they were to be excluded from Soviet Kaliningrad altogether. The first transports began that month; the final transport of remaining Germans took place in November 1948. While the expulsion order came from Moscow, the drive to expel thus had begun locally.

German Blood, Slavic Soil is a very important book. Written in clear, accessible prose, it forms part of recent research that has examined similarly radical transformations of East European cities during and in the aftermath of the Second World War.[1] It is not the first book to analyze the immediate postwar years in Soviet East Prussia: works by Per Brodersen, Bert Hoppe, and Ruth Kibelka come to mind here, as well as Iurii V. Kostiashov's study of postwar Soviet settlers and their encounters with Königsberg's remaining German population.[2] Yet *German Blood, Slavic Soil* differs from existing studies in that it treats the city's transformation from Königsberg into Kaliningrad explicitly as both reflection and outcome of the two regime's political entanglement. As the only city that was ruled first by Germany and then by the Soviet Union, Königsberg/Kaliningrad serves as a microcosm for analyzing how Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union "were in constant dialogue, reacting and responding to each other over time […] not only in the world of ideas—imagining the fascist or Judeo-Bolshevik enemy—but also in the world of real-life encounters." The city's history also shows "how the ideologies of Nazism and Stalinism responded and adapted to local context" (p. 6). In other words, entanglement is understood rather broadly in the book to mean both a more direct political engagement between the two regimes, and the (chronologically mostly distinct, because successive) encounter with a local context that was, except for the battle for Königsberg in early 1945, ruled incontestably by first Germany, later the Soviet Union. Depending on its analytical lens and the issue examined in each chapter, entanglement thus also takes on different forms in the different chapters. While the first chapter provides the historical background, in the second chapter (which, unlike the following chapters with their clear micro-historical focus, takes more of a macro-historical view), entanglement shows itself mostly in the form of the Nazis' political imagination and propaganda (the "Judeo-Bolshevik enemy") that drives the German war in the east. In the third and fourth chapters, entanglement takes the form of real-life encounters, physically and concomitantly, as the two militaries fought each other and as Red Army soldiers encountered German civilians during and immediately after the battle for East Prussia. In chapters 5–7, Soviet-German entanglement is at its most varied, combining ideas, perceptions, and

[1] See, for example, Gregor Thum, *Uprooted. How Breslau Became Wroclaw during the Century of Expulsions* (Princeton, 2011); Tarik Cyril Amar, *The Paradox of Ukrainian Lviv. A Borderland City between Stalinists, Nazis, and Nationalists* (Ithaca, 2015); and Felix Ackermann, *Palimpsest Grodno. Nationalisierung, Nivellierung und Sowjetisierung einer mitteleuropäischen Stadt 1919–1991* (Wiesbaden, 2011).

[2] Per Brodersen, *Die Stadt im Westen. Wie Königsberg Kaliningrad wurde* (Göttingen, 2008); Bert Hoppe, *Auf den Trümmern von Königsberg. Kaliningrad 1946–1970* (Munich, 2000); Ruth Kibelka (Leiserowitz), *Ostpreußens Schicksalsjahre 1944–1948* (Berlin, 2016); Iurii V. Kostiashov, ed., *Vostochnaia Prussiia glazami sovetskikh pereselentsev. Pervye gody Kaliningradskoi oblasti v vospominaniiakh i dokumentakh*, 3rd ed. (Kaliningrad, 2018); Iurii V. Kostiashov, *Izgnanie prusskogo dukha. Kak formirovalos' istoricheskoe soznanie naseleniia Kaliningradskoi oblasti v poslevoennye gody* (Kaliningrad, 2003).

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encounters between state and non-state actors, soldiers and civilians, Soviet citizens and Germans. These chapters also represent the most original contributions to the scholarly literature, demonstrating the extent to which the local context, in confluence with shifting domestic and international factors, influenced postwar regime transformation.

German Blood, Slavic Soil is very nuanced in its analysis and presentation of the historical evidence, yet also forceful in its arguments. This becomes particularly evident when discussing questions of atrocities, violence, and guilt. As the book makes clear, the (abundant) East Prussian memoir literature usually focuses only on German victimhood, omitting the suffering and plight of others, especially the mass murder of Jews or the mistreatment of forced laborers. East Prussians who experienced violence in 1945 (and beyond) emerge in these memoirs as double victims of fanatical Nazis and the Red Army/"Bolsheviks." Yet what their own role in and responsibility for violence might have been is usually not addressed by the memoirists. Something quite similar can also be said about the Red Army memoir literature. As the book shows, the great majority of veterans' recollections (as well as Soviet and post-Soviet Russian official narratives of the war) either pass over in silence the sexual violence committed by Red Army soldiers, refer to it as isolated incidents, or deny it altogether—although Soviet archival records testify to its scope and scale. The few Red Army veterans who did write about it were usually highly educated officers, many of them Jewish, who later in life came to oppose the Soviet regime.

In finding these similarities between the two memoir literatures, I do not mean to equate the violence that either side, Nazi/German and Soviet, committed. However, what the book suggests is that admitting to, or at least reflecting on, personal guilt and moral responsibility (for perpetrating violence, for witnessing it without trying to prevent it, or for being implicated in it in other ways) is something that human beings find very difficult. It is one of the many strengths of *German Blood, Slavic Soil* that it navigates the historical complexities of the German-Soviet encounter (and the contentious questions that it still raises today) so carefully—and it also demonstrates the importance of multilingual, multiperspective research.

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