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FORUM

The CEHS Presidential Roundtable. Volksdeutsche Beyond German History: Re-Centering "German" Communities in Central Europe and the Americas

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"Volksdeutsche" and "Auslandsdeutsche" are terms used in historical reference to Germans who lived outside of the German state. Often considered a politically loaded topic, much of postwar scholarship has portrayed these ethnic Germans as a problem to be solved. Especially the concept of Volksdeutsche is best known for its association with Nazi Germany's expansionism. In east central Europe, this view provided justification for the ethnic cleansing of German speakers and others at the end of the Second World War. Yet scholars have moved away from a top-down approach that sees the Volksdeutsche largely in the development of German occupation and racial policies.[1] By focusing on the agency and everyday lives of Volksdeutsche as part of the societies they lived in, we can better understand the dynamism of minority-majority relations, the growth of diaspora networks, and how German colonialism functioned on the ground. In short, Volksdeutsche are an integral part of German history but are also too important to be left to historians of Germany alone.

This forum article is based on the CEHS presidential roundtable held at the American Historical Association's Annual Meeting in January 2025. Four invited scholars explore what we can gain from looking at Volksdeutsche beyond German and European contexts. Doris Bergen's work on the Holocaust in occupied Poland and the USSR reveals how Nazi policies for Germanizing eastern Europe contrasted starkly with the reality on the ground and how these contradictions led to ever more radical "solutions." Benjamin Bryce's research on German-descent communities in Ontario and Argentina looks at the limits of using the terminology of Volksdeutsche in non-European contexts, both by the German actors then and by historians now. Gaëlle Fisher's investigation of Germans and Jews from the Bukovina

[1] The large number of innovative works are too many to be listed here, but for excellent insight see: H. Glenn Penny and Stefan Rinke, "Germans Abroad: Respatializing Historical Narrative," *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, Special Issue: Rethinking Germans Abroad (2015): 173–96.

region shows their complicated relationship with each other and with their Romanian and Ukrainian neighbors, and also how German historiography to this day siloes these experiences into national history, "scientific" research, and popular culture. Mirna Zakić provides perspectives on how Volksdeutsche negotiated their Germanness with Serbs and others in the multiethnic Vojvodina in Serbia, and why much of this history was elided in postwar historiographies. The forum is moderated by Winson Chu, who served as CEHS president in 2024–25 and works on German and Polish history.

With a critical examination of the concept of Volksdeutsche, the forum examines German minority communities on two levels: 1) how the historical actors could use Germanness as a resource or see it as a liability; and 2) how historians grapple with the pitfalls in understanding and narrating this history through the lens of "ethnic German." The participants also uncover issues related to national indifference, wartime collaboration, immigration, gender, and diasporas. The forum follows the challenges of writing transatlantic and transnational history, how increasingly authoritarian regimes can threaten this scholarship, and how foreign language learning can impact future research. The lively discussion that followed the roundtable had to be cut short, but many of the impulses and insights are reproduced in the conversation here.

To get things started, tell us a little bit about your own research on Volksdeutsche and where you think trends are going.

Doris Bergen

The invitation to be part of this discussion was especially welcome for me, because I'm returning to a project I began in the 1980s (!), that I call "Defining Germanness during the Holocaust." Back when I was a graduate student researching the German Christian Movement, I discovered that those militantly pro-Nazi Protestants had an outpost in Romania. Researching its leading figure, Wilhelm Staedel, got me interested in the Volksdeutschen, specifically their connections to religion. In the 1990s, I jumped on new possibilities to visit archives and sites in Poland, Russia, and Ukraine, and I used my findings to write a series of articles and book chapters. Later I was part of a related project on European Mennonites and the Holocaust, led by Mark Jantzen and John Thiesen (now a volume published by University of Toronto Press).[2] Now, as I try to chart my course through the mountains of material I've gathered, I have some observations to share.

One point is just about the expansion of scholarship since the late 1980s. In fact, there was actually quite a bit written about the Volksdeutschen of eastern Europe even then, but with a few exceptions, it fell into two categories: a small but intense body of studies produced in what was then known as the East Bloc, depicting ethnic Germans as "fifth columnists" of Hitlerite fascism, and a much larger body of apologetic work produced in the West—in West Germany and also in German diaspora communities—that depicted, often in minute detail, the suffering of the German expellees. Now we have works that are nuanced and integrative, including publications by all of you, as well as Isabel Heinemann, Valdis Lumans, Gerhard Wolf, Eric Steinhart, Tara Zahra, Hugo Service, David Furber, Bradley Nichols, and others.

I want to draw attention to a recent and especially significant contribution, and that's the two-volume work by Alexa Stiller, *Völkische Politik: Praktiken der Exklusion und Inklusion in polnischen, französischen und slowenischen Annexionsgebieten 1939–1945*.[3] Stiller's work is both

[2] Mark Jantzen and John D. Thiesen, eds., *European Mennonites and the Holocaust* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021).

[3] Alexa Stiller, *Völkische Politik: Praktiken der Exklusion und Inklusion in polnischen, französischen und slowenischen Annexionsgebieten 1939–1945* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2022).

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conceptually and empirically rich, and she makes a major innovation by integrating eastern, western, and central Europe, with her investigations of annexed Polish, French, and Slovenian territories.

A second observation is that ethnic Germans show up everywhere—however they are defined, and I know we're going to talk more about definitions and labels. Ethnic Germans are to be found from Paraguay to Kazakhstan, and also in works on the Holocaust. Years ago, I developed a habit of making a note on the inside cover of a book of any pages where Volksdeutschen are mentioned. I now have shelves full of memoirs, monographs, and dissertations bearing those scribbled notations. Ethnic Germans are everywhere because they were central to the Nazi project with its binary of winners and losers, its programs of replacing and erasing Jews, Poles, and "Asiatic Bolsheviks."

Mirna Zakić

Rather than focus on my own research, I would like to address the state of the field. This panel reminded me of how I have run up repeatedly at past conferences against a kind of irritated incomprehension from peers in the field: "how is that German history?" That was a real quote, or dismissal of my topic, which is the Volksdeutsche (let's call them that for now) in the Serbian/Western Banat in World War II: "and this matters how?" (also a real quote). In addition, the five scholars in this forum could probably list, if not all, then most other people who work on Volksdeutsche without racking our brains too hard.

I started my PhD in fall of 2005 and had the sense at the time that this was a growing, up-and-coming field with more and more people working in it, and would become more and more relevant to historiography as time went on. Well, it's been twenty years, and the field is no more "accepted" than it was back then. Lest someone object that studying minorities in borderlands is never going to be most people's main interest, this does not explain the dismissal and near-hostility I have encountered on occasion, nor does it match the huge interest in the historical profession in issues of borderlands and ethnic identities over the past 30—40 years.

Doris Bergen mentions the huge expansion of the field since the 1980s and 1990s—I would counter that the sheer volume of material on Volksdeutsche does not in itself center (or recenter) a topic in the broader field of history, and again, it is a fairly contained group of people—larger than in the past but still fairly contained—who work on these themes and routinely review each other's work. German minorities remain a niche topic, and we who work on these themes cannot change that without the broader field's willingness to open up. The field of German history can still tend to take a kind of kleindeutsch attitude and replicate a hierarchy of Germanness, in which the Habsburgs matter, Nazi crimes and presence in the east matter, but ultimately German history is about the various incarnations of the German state. Somewhere in this story and not fitting neatly into it, German minorities in other countries just are not seen as really *really* German, until they are forced to move to Germany after 1945, and then they become *only* German, no need to specify former and enduring minority or regional affiliation, as discussed, among others, in Gaëlle Fisher's book.

Gaëlle Fisher

My contribution to this conversation focuses on the postwar period and attempts to challenge nationalist or nation-state centered frameworks by stressing the importance of comparison and entanglement. I ask about what happened to the Volksdeutsche after 1945. Do they simply become German? How does this unfold? How does this process relate to

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Nazi ideology and plans and compare to and intersect with the experiences of other ethnic groups and postwar migrants?

In my first book, entitled *Resettlers and Survivors: Bukovina and the Politics of Belonging in West Germany and Israel, 1945–1989*, I focused on a group of ethnic Germans from a particular region of Romania (today an area split between Romania and Ukraine)—Bukovina. Specifically, I looked at how self-identifying members of this group fared after World War II. This was after they had almost all left or been forced to leave their native homeland as a result of the war and after most of these ca. 80,000 people had settled in (or, as they saw it, returned to) West Germany (and to a lesser extent East Germany and Austria), their putative national homeland(s).[4]

This group is interesting as an example of a larger phenomenon: how people, in this case, self-identifying Germans or ethnic Germans, processed various experiences of war, displacement, and violence. But I was also interested in how—if at all—identification as ethnic Germans, citizens of the Habsburg Empire, or Central European states more generally continued to matter in the Nazi-successor states after 1945. In that sense, their specific regional experiences—their origins in the famously multiethnic area of Bukovina, their resettlement *Heim ins Reich* ("home to the Reich") in 1940 by the Nazis, and their social position within their home societies also mattered.

Many scholars have shown in their work that the idea of a united, coherent group of Germans before the war, be that in Poland, Romania, Yugoslavia or elsewhere, was a nationalist fantasy and dissipates rapidly as soon as one zooms in more closely to the situation on the ground. Germanness was always situational and contingent. Realizing this in itself is a way of deconstructing the Nazi concept of Volksdeutsche. However, it also raises the question of what happened to these differences and fantasies after 1945 and how they related to various hierarchies of difference and otherness in postwar Germany and beyond.

My work thus focuses on narratives and practices of belonging relating to Bukovina specifically. But it also considers intersections of Bukovinian German activities and narratives with those of another group from the same area, namely with the region's Jews. What makes this exercise especially captivating is that after World War II, Jewish survivors from this area—mostly by then living in Israel—continued to use German and also had a claim to the region's identity and Germanness. This case therefore reminds us that groups are always implicitly defined in opposition to something or somebody else: in terms of boundaries and of what or who they are not. At the same time, it points to the persistence of ethnic thinking and categorization in different countries after the war and the Holocaust—albeit in distinct, vernacular ways.

Benjamin Bryce

I do not know what "Volksdeutsche" means. That is a bold start for a contribution to a discussion about Volksdeutsche, but it is an instructive statement, one that can help this conversation. I have written two books about German speakers in the Americas in the period 1880 to 1930, the majority of whom were not German citizens.[5] New "Germans" arrived in both of these places in the 1920s at a time when the term Volksdeutsche was taking off in Germany. Yet in all the German-language documents produced in Argentina and Canada, as well as those in the Auswärtiges Amt up to 1930, that I have read, I am not sure if I have ever seen the word Volksdeutsche.

[4] Gaëlle Fisher, *Resettlers and Survivors: Bukovina and the Politics of Belonging in West Germany and Israel, 1945–1989* (New York and London: Berghahn Books, 2020).

[5] Benjamin Bryce, *To Belong in Buenos Aires: Germans, Argentines, and the Rise of a Pluralist Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018); Benjamin Bryce, *The Boundaries of Ethnicity: German Immigration and the Language of Belonging in Ontario* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022).

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For a German school association in Buenos Aires, the new kids were Deutsche or Deutsch-Russen or Deutsch-Jugoslawen. For the people coming to the Americas in the 1920s, they might not have ever heard the term Volksdeutsche; it might not have reached the towns from which they were emigrating. For the Canadian-born priest of St. Patrick's Catholic church in Toronto, they were German-speaking Catholics, just like him. For Argentine or Canadian immigration officials, they were Russians, Hungarians, Poles, etc. The term Volksdeutsche did not come up.

I think a simple definition of Volksdeutsche is "ethnic Germans," but on deeper reflection, and as I will show, I think it means German speakers in central and eastern Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. It is then a term that has had a long afterlife in West German refugee policies, public memory, research centers, and academic studies. It also had an afterlife in North American migration studies in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s; it was used, and probably still could be used, to talk about eastern European Displaced Persons who came to the United States and Canada after the Second World War.

What are the opportunities for exploring Volksdeutsche outside of a German history narrative that assumes the essential Germanness of these subjects?

Mirna Zakić

Ben Bryce offers a useful perspective shift in looking at Germans (or "Germans") from Latin America as well as insight into the historical careers of terms like Auslandsdeutsche and Volksdeutsche. I, too, would like to stress the extent to which it never made sense to me to study Volksdeutsche from a German or German-centric perspective only. I was born in former Yugoslavia and came to German history through education there and in the US university system—to me, German history has always also been European history and vice versa, transnational experiences were just how people lived rather than an academic buzzword, and growing up during Yugoslavia's breakup did help me develop an acute sense of how complicated *and* complex, how *messy*, ethnic and individual identities can be.

Especially German-language scholarship, but also English-language scholarship, when people mainly read German, or German and English, can still default to studying Volksdeutsche as dangling offshoots of the Volk or as an irrelevance, especially once the Vertriebene/Umsiedler were absorbed into the postwar German polities. Or, in the case of Nazi-affiliated historians like Theodor Schieder, who after 1945 reinvented themselves as propagators of the narrative of expellee suffering, the Volksdeutsche become emblematic only of German suffering, not of German complicity and culpability which preceded and caused that suffering, thus continuing the nationalist projects which shaped the historical profession in Germany going back to the 1800s. This also says something about how minority questions can be studied in a way which privileges the hegemonic perspective, and how living reminders of difficult pasts get talked over (see also many West Germans' attitudes to East Germans' memories since 1989–90). In the implicit and very difficult to eradicate hierarchy of ethnic belonging, a minority never just is—it is either absorbed by or held at arm's length by "its" ethnic majority, which is a flaw in how minorities are studied and discussed.

Gaëlle Fisher

One way of exploring Volksdeutsche without assuming or taking for granted the essential Germanness of these subjects is to submit the terms we use and the terms the actors use to scrutiny. This is a stimulating exercise in itself and it has to include the term Volksdeutsche, of course—even though, as Benjamin has noted, this is not really a term historical actors themselves used. But many other terms deserve attention, too. Regarding my research, the notion of *Bukowinadeutsche* ("Bukovina German"—two nouns;

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or "Bukovinian German" —adjective and noun) is itself an intriguing one, especially in translation. What I traced in my work was the identification of members of this group not just as "Germans" or "Bukovinians" but, in sequence and depending on circumstances, as "resettlers" (*Umsiedler*), "refugees" (*Flüchtlinge*), "expellees (of the homeland)" ([*Heimat*] *Vertriebene*), or "ethnic German migrants" (*Aussiedler* or *Spätaussiedler*—categories used to describe *Vertriebene* who arrived in 1952 or later still). As social constructs assigned different meanings by the authorities, group representatives, and individuals themselves, it is essential to reflect when and why these labels are used as well as when and how. Other noteworthy terms might include those describing space, e.g., "homeland" (*Heimat*), "motherland" (*Mutterland*), "area of expulsion" (*Vertreibungsgebiet*), "German cultural landscape" (*deutsche Kulturlandschaft*), "Christian West" (*Abendland*), or simply "Europe" (*Europa*), as they came to function as tropes—notions carrying a great deal of meaning without needing an explanation.

Benjamin Bryce

In my work on the many meanings of ethnicity in the Americas, I see little value in relying on the categories of nationalists in Germany, and I approach the writing of all self-declared community leaders (or authors of books and articles about *das Deutschtum in Argentinien*) with a critical lens. I have far more evidence about bilingualism, struggling with the German language, or Argentine mothers than I do about an undisturbed *Auslandsdeutschtum in Südamerika*. I read about a remarkably similar phenomenon in the Bohemian borderlands in Tara Zahra's *Kidnapped Souls*.[6] A nationalist in Germany might be worried about national indifference, but bilingual kids and culturally flexible parents did not always see it that way. Hybridity, mixing, and competing identities were the norm.

There is a real value in thinking about the territorial unboundedness of German nationalist thinking. It played a huge role in the Second World War and the Holocaust. It created the structures through which West German politicians created refugee policies. It motivated the actions and spending of the Auswärtiges Amt in consulates in South America around 1910. But that is a study of nationalist thinking and imperialist aspiration. It does not tell us about the histories of German-speaking communities in minority situations. It does not contribute to studies of cultural pluralism, as it played out in New York, Buenos Aires, or rural Romania. German speakers to the East and to the West benefited from, took advantage of, supported, and diverged from what Germans said about them.

Doris Bergen

Certain words recur in many studies of Volksdeutschen and the process of defining them: "arbitrary," "situational," "malleable." These descriptions apply to all sides, from the Nazi leadership to people who identified with the category, their victims, and their neighbors. These same characterizations were clear in a panel I participated in at the Lessons and Legacies conference in November 2024, on new thinking about "race" in Nazi Germany. Sarah Panzer looked at German views of Japan and concluded that Nazis were more "geopolitical than biopolitical." Jonathan Wiesen explored Nazism and anti-Black racism in the United States and found a cynical pragmatism. That inconsistency did not, of course, mitigate the persecution of Jews and Roma. Richard Wetzell found that racial scientists disputed whether there was even such a thing as a "German race," a debate that political leaders

[6] Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1948* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

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resolved, in the negative, because they deemed the concept too divisive. My own research has shown that murky categories were reified and clarified through violence.[7]

Analyzing the process of defining has pitfalls, because it can lead to what I call "defining to distraction." The antidote, I think, is to keep the focus on people. This is my commitment, and often specific experiences illuminate the terrain.

For example, I like the story of the Polish woman, defined as volksdeutsch, who was sentenced to jail for having sexual relations with a Polish man. She was able to postpone serving her term while she was pregnant, and once the baby was born, she extended the postponement while nursing. Meanwhile, the Red Army was approaching.[8]

When you focus on people, there are always surprises. The concept of "Germanness" contains multiple possibilities. A few years ago, one of my students told me about her great grandmother, who lived and died in Iraq and was affectionately known in the family as "the German." Indeed, she had been born in Germany, my student learned, to a Jewish family. As a young woman, she and her parents fled to England after Hitler came to power. At some point along the way, they converted to Protestant Christianity. In London, the young woman met and fell in love with a student from Iraq. She converted to Islam, married him, and moved to Iraq. Her Jewish ancestry was not discussed in the family, my student said, and some people denied it. But she hadn't really concealed it herself: her lifelong passion was the poetry of the thirteenth-century Jewish Arab poet, El'azar the Babylonian.

Are there better concepts out there for capturing shifting ideas of Germanness, especially beyond the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? What are some surprising archives or sources that you have found that add to our exploration of these communities?

Gaëlle Fisher

I fully agree with Doris regarding the importance of considering individual cases, stories, and appropriations. This is also why I find it so important to emphasize that some of these terms constituted legal categories and granted people formal rights and privileges. At the same time, depending on the context, some notions could also acquire derogatory or unwanted connotations. This is the case of the term "expellee," for example, and part of my work describes and analyzes some of the contests over this word. Some Jewish Bukovinians even applied for recognition as expellees to obtain German citizenship or reparations from Germany. This resulted in the emergence of the somewhat strange notion of "Jewish expellee" or effectively "Jewish ethnic German" (*jüdischer Aussiedler*).

One of my research's findings in this respect is the extent to which institutional frameworks influenced the identification of the group on the individual level—how people would frame their experience and their history and story in a certain way in accordance with the institutional terms available and especially those they could operationalize administratively. This could be the case of words like *Volkszugehörigkeit* (ethnicity), *Volkstum* (peoplehood), *Deutschtum* (Germanness), or *Kulturkreis* (cultural circle). The subtle distinctions between these concepts and the implicit notions of community and belonging that underpin them is fascinating.

A striking example from my sources was the bureaucratic association of Germanness with victimhood via the notion of *Vertriebeneneigenschaft* (literally: the quality of being an

[7] Doris L. Bergen, The Nazi Concept of "Volksdeutsche" and the Exacerbation of Antisemitism in Eastern Europe 1939–45, *Journal of Contemporary History* (1994): 569–82.

[8] Doris L. Bergen, "Sex, 'Blood' and Vulnerability: Women Outsiders in German-Occupied Europe," in *Social Outsiders in Nazi Germany,* ed. Robert Gellately and Nathan Stoltzfus (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2001), 273–93.

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expellee). This concept continued to be used many years after the expulsions of Germans from central and eastern Europe were effectively over. With this, the notion of "expulsion" was expanded to include the experience of isolation as "Germans among non-Germans" and served to justify emigration from (post-)Soviet or (post-)socialist countries to Germany from the late decades of the Cold War to the early 2000s. This argument overshadowed other possible incentives for leaving—such as political or economic ones—equated Germanness with victimhood, and led aspiring migrants to emphasize their ethnic identity in terms of traditional family ties, language, and religion and downplay other aspects of their biography and experience.

The lack of terms and labels available for people to speak of themselves in terms of hybridity, fluidity, or multiplicities is especially noteworthy. It contributed to the production and fixation of ethnicity.[9] At the same time, my work, among that of others, highlights the profound ambivalence of these processes that had racist or at least ethnicized and conservative premises or undertones but nonetheless sometimes facilitated people's experiences of immigration and "integration" in Germany. So much so that experiences of discrimination and racism, and the scale of this "ethnic" migration as such—the largest since the end of the Second World War—was long overlooked, even by researchers.

Mirna Zakić

I came to this topic from a different linguistic and geographical perspective, and what initially prompted my interest was how socialist-era Yugoslav historiography dismissed Volksdeutsche as just an undifferentiated bunch of Nazis, a flattening out of a different kind. To dig deeper, I did indeed need to use sources in my native language as well as German-language sources. This also meant looking at how Volksdeutsche were seen by others, not just how they saw themselves and how the Germans from Germany saw them (to riff on Cynthia Enloe's concept of "womenandchildren," it interests me how Volksdeutsche see themselves but also how they are seen by their victims, neighbors, "victimneighbors").

In terms of surprising archives and sources, I have found that the most obvious sources will often remain unexplored or under-explored and contain real gems of information. Volksdeutsche newspapers reveal nuances of Volksdeutsche views, in amongst and through the lens of propaganda. Interviews in Serbian and Croatian in the Visual History Archive offer untapped Jewish perspectives. Tendentious postwar expellee narratives as well as testimonies collected from "victims of fascism" in socialist Yugoslavia reveal incidents which become emblematic of and shape people's memories of World War II.

Doris Bergen

I like Mirna's point that we need to look not only at what people defined as Volksdeutschen said about themselves or what German officials said about them, but also what the people around them had to say.

Gaëlle's work so effectively examines entanglements of ethnic Germans and Jews, and I have some examples of this connection, too. Yaffa Eliach recounts the story of a Hasidic rabbi in Poland who regularly greeted his neighbors before the war. In 1942, half dead from hunger and hard labor, he found himself in a selection line, with an SS man about to consign him to the gas chamber. "Good morning, Herr Mueller," the rabbi greeted the SS man, whom

[9] On this, see recent research by Jannis Panagiotidis, among others: *The Unchosen Ones: Diaspora, Nation, and Migration in Israel and Germany* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019).

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he suddenly recognized as a Volksdeutscher from his hometown. "Good morning, Rabbi," answered the man, sending his former neighbor to the side of life.[10]

I'm not sure if I have new concepts to add, but some key themes can expand the frame. One theme I think is important is religion. It's part of what John Swanson calls "tangible belonging," a fluid concept that is not an end point but the beginning of an analysis.[11]

Here I have a personal example. During World War II, Mennonites in southern Ukraine identified as Germans. Many of them welcomed the Nazis, who claimed to be returning to them the "gift of Christianity," and they interpreted their experiences under Soviet rule as martyrdom. After the war, those who remained in the Soviet Union mostly became Baptists or stopped identifying as religious. Mennonites who moved to Canada also changed. My father's family left Soviet Ukraine in the mid-1920s and ended up in western Saskatchewan, where they were surrounded by German Catholic immigrants. They mostly avoided these neighbors, perhaps because during World War II, associating with Germans was a liability. "They beat their wives," Mennonites said of the German Catholics.

My mother's family also left Soviet Ukraine in the 1920s. They settled in northern Saskatchewan in an area with a large Indigenous population. Yet their stories and memories of the early years in Canada almost never mention the Indigenous people around them. They don't fit a narrative modeled after the Book of Job, of the Mennonites' hardships, faith, and endurance. The displacement of Indigenous communities, removal of Indigenous children, and suffering of parents and grandparents would upend that story.

Benjamin Bryce

This Google Ngram (Figure 1) offers some revealing insights into the term. The chart is made based on the frequency of usage of a given word as a percentage of all words in a given year in the corpus of digitized materials in Google Books. It is imperfect to be sure, but it seems to cast light on the evolution of this term. Volksdeutsche hardly existed before the First World War, surged in the late 1920s, exploded in the 1930s, and declined after the Second World War.

The timing of the rise of the term suggests that Volksdeutsche is a right-wing idea that emerged in the aftermath of the First World War to talk about German speakers living beyond the borders of the new republic and that National Socialists really embraced it. It does beg a question about whether we should do more to recognize the baggage of the term. It is not just the term to describe German speakers in central and eastern Europe during the Second World War and its aftermath. Instead, it is a term infused with *völkisch* ideas. Another quick Ngram search shows that *Volksfest* and *Volkskunde* emerged around the 1860s, ditto for *Volksgenossen* and *Volksfreund*. Even *Volksgemeinschaft* follows this pattern of proliferating terms with *Volk* of the mid-nineteenth century. Volksdeutsche stands out for its 1920s and 1930s origins.

I think Volksdeutsche is fundamentally a nationalist term; a nationalist term that tells us something about Germany. It is a term that was probably sometimes used by self-declared community leaders in various parts of central and eastern Europe, especially when they sent letters to Germany or published books in Germany. According to these nationalists (in Germany or the small group of pro-Germany interlocutors to the

[10] Yaffa Eliach, *Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust* (New York: Vintage, 1988), 109–10.

[11] John C. Swanson, *Tangible Belonging: Negotiating Germanness in Twentieth-Century Hungary* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017).

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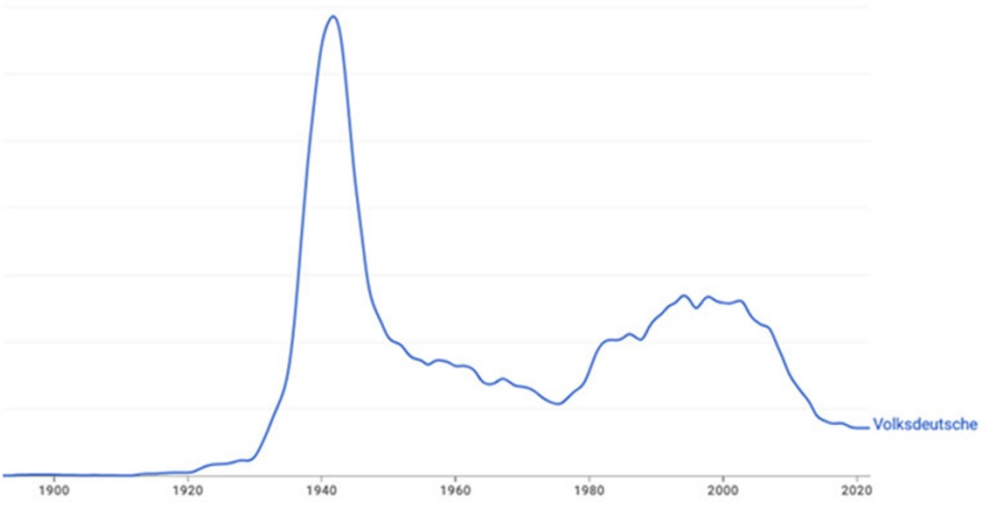

Figure 1. Usage of Term Volksdeutsche, 1895–Present. Ngram courtesy of Google. Accessed on February 4, 2025.

East), there were millions of Volksdeutsche in Europe, but that provides us with little evidence of what these millions of people thought. If our evidence of Volksdeutsche buy-in are letters sent by pastors and teachers to the German Foreign Office or to the German military, then that is not convincing evidence. Volksdeutsche might have been a word that *Donauschwaben* and Volga Germans embraced, but we would do well to create our own Ngram (based on oral conversations and handwritten letters not recorded in Google Books) about the self-labels they used in a variety of aspects of their everyday life (Figure 2).

Before German nationalists started talking about Volksdeutsche, they spilled a lot of ink writing about Auslandsdeutsche (also spelled Auslanddeutsche). The very fact that around 1910 the Verein für das Deutschtum im Ausland and the Gustav-Adolf-Verein took interest in German speakers not only in Romania, Russia, and Bohemia but also in Argentina and Brazil and that National Socialists took an interest in Volksdeutsche in the areas east of Germany and Austria tells us something about the evolving interests in people, nation, language, and territory in Central European nationalist thinking. According to this Ngram, Auslandsdeutsche was the word of choice in Germany in an era of *Weltpolitik*. It became more mainstream around 1910 and surged in the 1920s. It seems that Volksdeutsche overtook and then eliminated Auslandsdeutsche between 1936 and 1945. That tells us something about the concept of Volksdeutsche and how very loaded the concept is.

What can the study of Volksdeutsche add to German, European, and global history, especially in regard to recent research in national indifference, transnational history, immigration, diaspora research, and (post-)colonialism?

Gaëlle Fisher

Aside from the many "source terms" I mention above, reflecting on analytical concepts that might help us productively connect this research to other empirical contexts is undoubtedly beneficial. These might include "settlers," "colonists," "migrants," "refugees," "minorities/majorities," "host societies," "co-ethnics," or "diaspora." Using these terms

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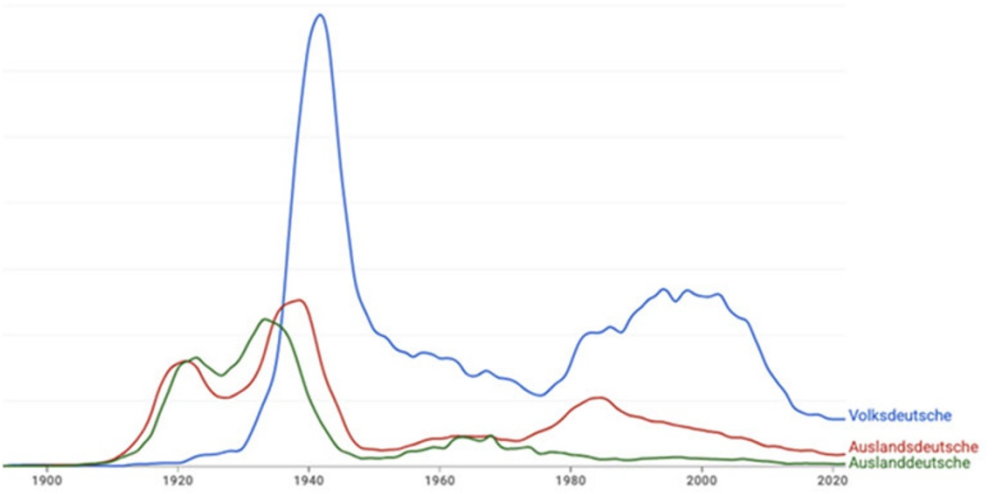

Figure 2. Usage of the Terms Volksdeutsche, Auslandsdeutsche, and Auslanddeutsche in German-language Published Materials, 1895–Present Ngram courtesy of Google. Accessed on February 4, 2025.

challenges us to rethink Volksdeutsche history—if there is such a thing—in more generic but also theoretical ways and to draw comparisons to other cases well beyond Germany and German history. On the one hand, it is then obvious that similar processes unfolded elsewhere or among other groups; on the other, it makes it possible to show how parochial, self-referential, and politically loaded this research long remained, not least because of the specific terminology and particular framings that were, and sometimes still are being, used.

One of my concerns has been to avoid the "bridge" metaphor—simplistically conceiving of this topic or these people as being able to help "bridge" cultures, spaces, or fields of historical inquiry. Such an image reproduces reified and bounded conceptions of both Volksdeutsche themselves and the societies in which they lived. But at the same time, as Mirna has noted, a better integration of the topic of ethnic Germans in mainstream German, European—mainly Central European—history and global history is essential and still largely missing. These people, groups, and their experiences often continue to be sidelined or studied separately, not least because of historically entrenched institutional divisions and beliefs about the fact that it is tricky to talk about Germanness in ethnic, let alone racial terms outside of the frame of Nazi ideology. The challenge remains how to represent these histories in a balanced way, without leaning toward absolutes of innocence and guilt or simplistic generalizations.[12]

Benjamin Bryce

The questions that historians employing transnational, comparative, or global perspectives ask often draw from one national historiography more than others. From the perspective of migration history or the debates that interest the historians of the United States,

[12] For an analysis of the challenge of placing the expulsions of Germans in a broader context, see Winson Chu's review in this journal of the relatively new Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion and Reconciliation in Berlin: Winson Chu, "From Expellee to Refugee: Absolute Victimhood and the Dokumentationszentrum Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung," *Central European History* 55:4 (2022): 587–95. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938922001005.

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Canada, Argentina, Brazil, or other societies in the Americas, Volksdeutsche is a concept for German historiography. And while it could be neat to have a specific foreign word like Volksdeutsche, just as scholars of Japanese migration in the Americas use Nisei, Issei, and Nikkei to describe nuances that you, the reader, might not know about, our research questions take us in different directions.

Historians of migration are likely more interested in categories such as first-generation immigrants or the children of immigrants; speakers of a given language, bilinguals, or heritage speakers; workers of a common ethnic background or workers of many ethnic backgrounds; settlers on Indigenous lands or the hierarchies of white supremacy. Talking about Volksdeutsche to a historian of migration or a historian of a specific country in the Americas seems less promising than the concepts I just listed. If you factor in the origin of the term Volksdeutsche in the radical politics of the Weimar Republic and Nazi Germany, it might be better to talk about "German-speaking immigrants to the United States who had been expelled from Poland."

I think we should be cautious with global history, and in particular we should be cognizant of whose voices we are quoting. Much was written in Imperial, Weimar, and Nazi Germany about German speakers elsewhere. There is also a corpus of material saved in the archives of the German state (the Auswärtiges Amt in particular) as well as research centers like the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen in Stuttgart (created in 1917 as the Deutsches Ausland-Institut) that show the dialogue between self-proclaimed community leaders abroad and the German state or nationalist organizations.

But there are other ways of getting at the voices of German-speaking minorities. Records of their institutions in the Americas reveal very different narratives than those found in archives in Germany. In addition to community records (such as newspapers or the annual reports of clubs and institutions), one could also examine the dialogue that emerged between self-proclaimed community leaders and the state officials in the countries they lived (documents in English, Spanish, Portuguese, or French in public archives in the Americas).

In the case of globalizing Germany and more broadly global history, I think not enough attention is paid to locally-produced sources nor the possibility that the dialogue with the imperial center are not in fact very trustworthy sources. They are not a noteworthy part of the Ngram that an average German-speaking migrant would create, if we had access to every word and thought they produced. If we rely on German-language documents sent back to Germany (or produced in Germany about other parts of the world), we could write global histories that are very unrepresentative. It also risks telling some stories that speak to the questions and prerogatives of German or global history, narratives that mask the real story at the core of the history of the Americas. German-language documents in Buenos Aires, São Paulo, rural Venezuela, Nebraska, and Saskatchewan (or English, Spanish, and Portuguese documents written by Germans) would help answer many questions. In 2025, those questions, it seems to me, are about colonialism, race, and north-south relations, and not so much about diasporic identity or ethnic networks.

Doris Bergen

Another theme or cluster of themes I'd like to mention is gender. Issues of family and marriage constitute some of the most intimate forms of entanglement. In Nazi Germany, Heinrich Himmler presided over the "Highest Court of Examination for Questions of National Belonging" (Oberste Prüfungshof für Volkszugehörigkeitsfragen), which ruled on complex cases of contested categorization. In 1944, the Highest Court decided the case of a man from a wealthy, "purely German" family in occupied Poland. He had married a woman

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whose mother was German and father South Asian. The man was allowed to remain married to her as long as there were "no more children." The Court's decision said the woman and children showed "strong evidence of foreign—in fact, Negro blood," but allowed them to remain in Category 2 of the Volksliste out of political considerations.[13] I told this story to my student Soumyaditya Saha, who works on transnational entanglements between India and Nazi Germany, and he was not surprised. He had already seen evidence in the archives of quite a few South Asian men who married German women, most famously, the nationalist and fascist Subhas Bose, who married his Austrian secretary, Emilie Schenkl. The lesson: we need to talk with our colleagues outside German history!

Let me mention one more surprise from the archives. In the Ost-Doc materials held at the Bundesarchiv Bayreuth, I found an account from a Romanian ethnic German woman who "passed" as Jewish after the war to try to avoid forced labor. That was a first for me! I'm excited to write about that case.

Mirna Zakić

I will be the provocateur and say that we who work on minorities or hybrid identities can insist almost too much on the fluidity and constant negotiating and ambiguity of identities. The work of Tara Zahra[14] and other scholars working on national indifference is well established, and at this point is really the starting premise rather than a sole conclusion we need to keep coming back to. Of course, it is necessary to define our terms and explain their nuances, but it is not realistic to pause for a 300-word sidebar every time one must call people something in an article or a book. Each of us must decide what name for groups of people to use, explain it, and stand behind that choice, without necessarily having to make it be all things to all readers and preempt every possible objection or different opinion.

How do I know the people I study were German or saw themselves as Volksdeutsche? Because they said so—in their Nazified/Nazi-era writings. As I wrote in my book, and Doris Bergen and others have written elsewhere, the Volksdeutsche in the east and southeast could prove their Germanness the most easily by acting like and in aid of the Nazis. The Volksdeutsche's Nazism flattened out some but not nearly all of their identity. Nazification did not make them *not* German or *not* quite German *enough*. In other words, the way "Nazi" could drown out and swallow up "German" does not automatically extend to saying that the name "German" or "ethnic German" does not apply. If anything, studying Volksdeutsche complicity with Nazism opens up the question about why it was appealing, as opposed to merely useful or necessary, to proclaim an identity both adjacent to and yet distinguished and separate from (by dint of regionalism, historical experience, sometimes religion) the one emanating from the Third Reich.

What are the political entanglements (think of charges of "fifth column" or "collaboration") and language challenges associated with finding a new generation of scholars to follow this kind of research?

Gaëlle Fisher

In Germany, skepticism toward this topic still exists but I would argue that institutionally, a process of integration and normalization is underway, and this is important as it has

[13] Case of Flemming and Schöbler, in Entscheidungen des Obersten Prüfungshofes, 4. u. 5. Sitzung des Obersten Prüfungshofes, Bestand 299/1121, p. 155–56, Archiwum Państwowe w Poznaniu (State Archive in Poznań). For discussion, see Doris L. Bergen, "The *Volksdeutschen* of Eastern Europe and the Collapse of the Nazi Empire 1944–45," in *The Impact of Nazism: New Perspectives on the Third Reich and Its Legacy*, ed. Alan E. Steinweis and Daniel E. Rogers (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 2003), 105.

[14] Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls*.

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implications for this topic's visibility as well as jobs and funding opportunities. Histories of Volksdeutsche or of *Vertriebene* are increasingly framed as projects about central and eastern Europe as a multiethnic space or histories of migration overseas or immigration to Germany. The institutions with this specific focus are broadening their scopes and remits, and the kind of projects they fund or pursue are diversifying. A new generation, mostly without personal or familial ties to the topic but an intellectual interest in it, has entered the field, and this has led to professionalization, new competencies (especially linguistic ones), and a shift in (political) priorities.

To give a concrete example, I recently received funding for the publication of a translation from Yiddish into German through a scheme based on Paragraph 96 of the Federal Expellee Law, which commits the German state to supporting the preservation of the heritage and memory of ethnic Germans expelled from eastern Europe. This book, Shlojme Bickel's *Romania: History, Literary Criticism and Memories*, originally published in Buenos Aires in 1961, deals with regions in which many ethnic Germans once lived (Transylvania, Banat, Bessarabia, and Bukovina) but does not discuss ethnic Germans or expellees at all. Rather, it is a book about the region's (Romanian) Jewish inhabitants and the destruction of prewar Yiddish-speaking eastern Europe. One could therefore say this decision testifies to a new kind of openness.

Still, I am only cautiously optimistic because any such change is always a balancing act. A risk attendant in this process is that the sense of the importance of studying German minorities both critically and specifically gets lost. This could lead to this funding scheme being abolished altogether. The existential question institutions with this focus now face is how they can expand the field and do state of the art research without losing their *raison d'être*. This requires a constant redefinition of the topic and rethinking of its historical implications and relevant contexts. This conversation, in that sense, is by no means over.

Mirna Zakić

Linguistic challenges can be a real obstacle. If an ambitious student expresses an interest in the topic of Volksdeutsche, it is not necessarily practical or realistic to instruct that person to take a few years to learn Polish/Serbian/Russian/Romanian/other in addition to German. One possible solution is to look to scholars from and working in the countries of central, east, and southeast Europe, who bring those language abilities to the table and often get overlooked due to the inward-looking tendencies and cultural arrogance of German- and English-language academia.

East European and Balkan scholarship and academia are often subject to significant political pressures and revisionist manipulation, and not every scholar will remain immune to those—but some do. Some publish also in English and/or German, travel to conferences, research in archives, and take guest lectureships or permanent teaching positions in German-, English-, and other-speaking countries. As a profession and a scholarly field, we only do ourselves a disservice and continue exclusionary patterns of past history-writing and past scholarship if we do not consider those scholars' perspectives, expertise, abilities, and local knowledge.

Benjamin Bryce

I think there are many avenues for future research, including how we think less about the term Volksdeutsche and more about the ethnicity and specific national origins of immigrant groups in the Americas. What did German speakers in the United States say about slavery, Indigenous Peoples, or Asian immigrants in their newspapers? How could paying attention to what German speakers, alongside many other European groups, make us

rethink how white supremacy was constructed in the United States? How did settlement schemes organized between the Argentine Ministry of Agriculture and various colonization associations in Europe play a role in the expanding frontier and genocidal violence in the 1870s and 1880s? How could documents produced by organizations in Europe and written in languages like German, French, and Italian help us understand the role of specific immigrant groups in advancing the Argentine dispossession of Indigenous Peoples from Misiones to Chubut?

Doris Bergen

One challenge in working on the Volksdeutschen is: "Who cares?!" We encountered this problem with the Mennonites project. It could so easily devolve into an insider conversation, and even many people inside the group want to avoid it because it can seem parochial. To people outside the group it can seem unimportant. Yet, as Ben noted in one of our exchanges, precisely having both perspectives—insiders and outsiders—is so valuable.

What can the study of Volksdeutsche add? As an exploration of processes of movement, it raises multiple points. One concept I've been thinking about is Anna Wylegała's term, "void communities."[15] Wylegała is a sociologist working on Galicia, and she developed that concept to analyze what happens to places defined by absence: Jews killed, Germans expelled—what does it do to the people who remain to live surrounded by those absences? Right now I'm reading the draft dissertation of our PhD student Michał Młynarz, which deals with the post-World War II history of Jelenia Góra and Drohobych.[16] The former became a Polish city, the latter Ukrainian, although before the war both were home to many different groups of people, Jews, Poles, Ukrainians, Germans. Volksdeutsche were part of the story of void communities, too.

Our topic has immense significance because it is a way to study systems of expulsion, "ethnic cleansing," and what I call genocidal cultures, that is, systems that operate to sort people into categories of "wanted" and "unwanted" and to conceal the destruction they wreak even as it seeps through the entire society.

Political entanglements can be manipulated and also tempered. Some years ago, when the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg was being built, a German Canadian advocacy group started lobbying for inclusion of postwar expulsions of Volksdeutschen as a case of genocide. Their publicity materials were blatantly anti-Polish and antisemitic, and the German Consul General in Toronto at the time, Sabine Sparwasser, was having none of it. She called the head of the group and told him in no uncertain terms to stop it. The government of Germany does not support you, she said, and if you persist, we will say so publicly. The group stopped.

Winson Chu

Thank you all for these valuable insights into your own work and experience doing research on Volksdeutsche and Auslandsdeutsche. It is clear that the politicization of ethnic German history and the postwar deportations will continue to evolve as popular understandings of forced migration and ethnic cleansing themselves change.

[15] Anna Wylegała, "The Void Communities: Towards a New Approach to the Early Post-War in Poland and Ukraine," *East European Politics & Society and Cultures* (2021): 407–36; see also Anna Wylegała, Sabine Rutar, and Małgorzata Łukianow, eds., *No Neighbors' Lands in Postwar Europe: Vanishing Others* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

[16] Michał Młynarz, "National Memories of Ethnic Cleansing in Jelenia Góra and Drohobych: Conflicting Nationalization Processes in Poland and Ukraine," PhD Dissertation, University of Toronto, expected 2025.

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While the concept of Volksdeutsche is fraught, our discussion suggests that it cannot be discarded simply as vocabulary instrumentalized by the Nazis. While despised by some as a marker of difference from Reich Germans, the life advantages and emotional need of being recognized as Volksdeutsche was sought by many more people.

Our discussion touched on whether the study of Volksdeutsche has become more mainstream and whether it has been accepted as "German" history. Including Volksdeutsche in their global, transnational, and migration contexts might not be German history in its *kleindeutsch* sense, but it belongsnonetheless. The very fact that our topic is "on the margins" is actually its strength, for it allows us to explore how Volksdeutsche could claim their interests from below and often in conflict with the German state's interests. Finally, the very contested and constructed nature of Volksdeutsche reminds us how thin the unity of Gemanness was even among those who claimed to be Germans outside of Germany.

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