

Ostmitteleuropa /

## I. Nachum: Nationalbesitzstand und „Wiedergutmachung“



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A central demand that Sudeten German expellee organizations have voiced since the expulsion of the German-speaking population from Czechoslovakia concerns *Wiedergutmachung* – that is, redress for the supposed injustices that their community suffered. A less known fact, however, is that the term *Wiedergutmachung* was no novelty for Sudeten German discourses of victimhood and had already since the immediate post-WWI years served the Sudeten German politicians as a “battle concept” (*Kampfbegriff*) aimed against the Czechoslovak state. At the same time, its interwar usage was also closely linked to the concept of Nationalbesitzstand (national property or national property status), known from the context of the Habsburg Austrian *Nationalitätenkampf*. Written by Iris Nachum, the Deputy Director of the Jacob Robinson Institute for the History of Individual and Collective Rights at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, this book explores the less well-known interwar history of both concepts. Combining the approaches of conceptual history and historical discourse analysis and based primarily on newspaper sources, it analyzes the intricate semantic relationship between these terms while tracing the transformations and adaptations that they underwent between the years 1918 and 1941.

Based on Nachum's doctoral work, the book offers considerably more than its title might reveal. Beyond the in-depth analysis of the core subject, it provides a detailed insight into two further closely related topics that have so far been relatively neglected. It has been a commonly held opinion that German liberalism in Bohemian lands had disappeared together with the old monarchy.[1] Showing the opposite, and offering a good overview of its interwar continuities, Nachum's book also devotes considerable attention to the closely linked phenomenon of *Bekenntnisdeutschtum* (Germanness by confession, as opposed to kinship). As many of the prominent liberals were of Jewish faith and/or heritage, they simultaneously acted as the most fervent defenders of the German *Nationalbesitzstand*, through which they proved their loyalty to the German cause – a position that was becoming increasingly difficult in the face of rising Nazism. In addition to charting new, highly relevant fields of research, the book also contains a comprehensive overview of the broader interwar context of German politics in the Bohemian lands, including short discussions of all the key controversies with rich references to the relevant literature.

While Chapter I offers a thorough introduction to the subject matter and methodology, Chapter II focuses on the pre-WWI genesis and development of the concept of *Nationalbesitzstand* and its capacity for mobilizing the public. Having first been used in 1893 and originating from the German Bohemian liberal context, the concept soon became a political catchword that was widely employed by a variety of Austrian political actors of various national backgrounds. In the two decades leading up to WWII, it underwent processes of objectivization and, partially, scientification (*Verwissenschaftlichung*), which resulted in its concretization and semantic expansion. Initially an abstract category, aimed primarily at maintaining the status quo concerning political power relations and linguistic rights, it gradually became concretized by linking numbers of language speakers, their places of settlement, and the entirety of property held by them, successively extending into further spheres of life.

Important to highlight is the very smoothly written Chapter III. Entitled “Die einen *sind* deutsch – die andern *können's*” [The ones *are* German – the others *can be*],” it surveys interwar German liberalism in Bohemian lands, linking the concept of *Nationalbesitzstand* to the problem of German-Jewish relations. As a battle concept, it became the central currency in the German-Jewish *Tauschgeschäft* that underpinned the partnership of convenience between the Jewish German liberals and the anti-Semitic German nationalists. *Nationalbesitzstand* simultaneously acted as proof of loyalty to Germandom and a discursive instrument used to put the German liberal Jews under pressure. Bringing forward several statements by prominent Jewish German liberals published in Sudeten German political press, Nachum persuasively refutes the rather widely accepted theses that the label “Sudeten German” as such excluded the “German-conscious Jews”[2] and that they did not identify as German in the national sense.[3]

Chapter IV turns to the concept of *Wiedergutmachung*, not losing sight of its discursive entanglements with *Nationalbesitzstand*. The initial credit for popularizing the word in the discourse of Sudeten German politics goes to the nationalist leader Rudolf Lodgmann von Auen. Continuing the “nationality struggle in the old Austrian style” (p. 196), he took an originally legal term that had emerged in the context of the peace conference and transformed it into a “political motto of the anti-Czech language regulation” (pp. 188–189). Through the course of the 1920s, the range of use and the semantic breadth of the concept expanded “horizontally and vertically” (p. 212), as did the possible range of demands associated with it. Its users included both moderate politicians, aiming at

cooperation with the Czechoslovak state, and their critics, who came to use it as a “rhetorical boomerang” (p. 235). As the author points out, the terms *Wiedergutmachung* and *Nationalbesitzstand* tended to “push each other up.” The more vulnerable the Sudeten German “national property” appeared to be, the more Germans felt that they were morally entitled to some kind of “redress” (p. 239).

After 1929, *Wiedergutmachung* temporarily retreated from the language of party politics, nevertheless continuing its life within the sphere of nationalist associations. It was reintroduced in 1937 by the Sudeten German Party (SdP) leader Konrad Henlein, who in turn made the formula “Wiedergutmachung für das Unrecht” into a “fixed point of the SdP language regulation” (p. 280). Also offering a thorough overview of the development of that party, Chapter V concentrates on further semantic change. Particularly notable is the comprehensive discussion of the 1937 SdP autonomist demands known as the *Volksschutzgesetze*, which were presented and propagated as a means for achieving *Wiedergutmachung*. The author rightly stresses that “Nationalbesitzstand,” for the first time in history, acquired the status of a legal category in these proposals. Simultaneously, however, she persistently labels them as demands for territorial autonomy, which is not entirely correct, as their basic tenet was the personality principle.<sup>[4]</sup> After Henlein subordinated his party to Hitler, *Nationalbesitzstand* was turned into a “rhetorical Trojan horse” (pp. 272–273) and contributed to the escalation during the bogus negotiations of 1938 that paved the way for annexation to Germany.

Also briefly examining the afterlife of the concept *Wiedergutmachung* after the Munich agreement in the Sudetengau and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Nachum concludes that either the *Nationalbesitzstand* or *Wiedergutmachung*, or both of them together, acted “as the rhetorical pivot of the political discourse” throughout the period under scrutiny. Their meanings were being “constantly reconfigured and adapted to the changing historical circumstances,” always however expressing the “self-positioning of the Sudeten German collective as the underdog” (p. 331). Masterfully weaving together an in-depth historical semantical analysis of two distinct but strongly interrelated concepts with further topics of broader relevance, Nachum’s book offers an original and insightful treatment of a thus far neglected subject. It should be of great interest to scholars on the interwar history of Bohemian lands, as well as all those researching the post-Habsburg continuities or interested in the history of German liberalism, particularly the German-Jewish relations within and beyond the Bohemian framework. Offering a good general overview of interwar Sudeten German politics, it can also be useful to those less familiar with the context.

#### Notes:

[1]. See for instance Marsha Rozenblit, *Jews, German Culture, and the Dilemma of National Identity. The Case of Moravia, 1848–1938*, in: *Jewish Social Studies* 20 (2013) 1, p. 77–120.

[2]. Stefanie Mayer, “Totes Unrecht”? Die “Beneš-Dekrete”. Eine geschichtspolitische Debatte in Österreich, Frankfurt am Main 2009, p. 19.

[3]. Marsha Rozenblit, *Reconstructing a National Identity. The Jews of Habsburg Austria during World War I*, New York 2001, p. 23; Kateřina Čapková, *Czechs, Germans, Jews? National Identity and the Jews of Bohemia*, New York 2012, p. 73.

[4] For the basically non-territorial nature of the 1937 SdP autonomist bills see Oskar Mulej, Territorial and Non-territorial Aspects in the Autonomist Proposals of the Sudeten German Party, 1937–38, in: Nationalities Papers 50 (2022) 5, p. 942–962.

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