

**Eric C. Steinhart.** *The Holocaust and Germanization of Ukraine*. Published in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and German Historical Institute. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 276 pp. \$102.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-06123-1.

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This highly readable, well-researched study examines the mobilization of ethnic Germans—*Volksdeutsche*, in the terminology of the National Socialist regime—as the “Third Reich’s demographic vanguard” and as perpetrators of genocide (p. 2). Eric C. Steinhart focuses on the region of Transnistria in southwestern Ukraine, home to 130,000 ethnic Germans and placed under Romanian control by Germany in return for Romania’s support in the wartime Axis. The targets of a Nazi-fication program after the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, this community of “Black Sea Germans” played a key role in the murder of 50,000 local Jews between December 1941 and April 1942.

Steinhart uses declassified British intelligence intercepts, sources from the Odessa oblast archive, and, above all, Soviet and postwar West German judicial investigations as sources for his research. Drawing on the insights of Christopher R. Browning, not least *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (1992)—his seminal study of Police Battalion 101, the Hamburg policemen turned perpetrators of genocide in Poland—Steinhart examines the motivations of the Black Sea German *Selbstschutz* militias in participating in mass murder despite mere months of Nazi rule. Like Browning, Stein-

hart reconstructs his subjects’ motivations largely on the basis of postwar testimonies, given in a post-1945 context in which the incentive to disavow Nazi racism for self-exculpatory reasons was a powerful one. Accordingly, ideological conviction plays a secondary role in Steinhart’s account, too; within the realm of ideology, anti-Semitism is revealed as of secondary importance compared to anti-Soviet feeling. Indeed, anti-Soviet sentiment is found to have been surprisingly discriminating, the locals using denunciation to settle scores arising from genuine, specific grievances. Material motivations also played a part once the killing was underway in an impoverished region whose locals, not least the poorly educated agricultural workers who dominated the militias, had cause for economic resentments, having lost out heavily from Soviet collectivization. For Steinhart, situational and social psychological motivations were paramount, stronger perhaps for the Black Sea militia than for even Browning’s subjects, and their conformity and obedience were informed by the historical context, although Steinhart is less convincing in arguing that Black Sea Germans were “biographically conditioned to comply with authority” (p. 219).

Steinhart emphasizes the agency of his subjects, who, on “the eve of mass murder ... had not

imbibed the Nazi agenda; they had hijacked it” (p. 10). Complicity in genocide preceded any real allegiance to National Socialism or even anti-Semitism but served as a means of affirming their Germanness. His study of Transnistria thus aligns with previous studies by Wendy Lower and Doris L. Bergen, which draw similar conclusions on the importance of anti-Semitism and ethnic identity, respectively, as motivating factors for local civilian perpetrators in eastern Europe.[1] Local residents’ willingness to kill reduced initial doubts harbored by the SS as to the racial and political value of this “human material”; *Volksdeutsche* identity papers were duly issued to militiamen and their families in spring 1942, their allegiance to National Socialism further cemented by SS largesse with the possessions of their victims.

Steinhart also vividly illustrates the problems encountered by the Nazis in trying to make an ethnic vanguard of the Transnistrian “Germans.” The criteria used to identify “Germanness”—cultural and political ties to (Nazi) Germany—proved problematic given the Black Sea Germans’ distance in cultural and linguistic terms: not for nothing were the locals presented with language primers tellingly titled “Be German” (p. 184). In such a context, significant scope opened up for local informants, key in defining “the boundaries of Germanness” (p. 9), to manipulate this opportunity to their own advantage, while the regime increasingly conflated Germanness with militia membership. Germanization emerges as an ad hoc, chaotic process, the authorities abandoning their guidelines in favor of local discretion, their subordinates on the ground being told “they would know real ethnic Germans when they found them,” while even “mixed race” children were not automatically to be excluded from the Nazi *Volksgemeinschaft* (pp. 76, 191). Steinhart’s book thus contributes to a broader recent reassessment by historians of the nature of Nazi Germanization in eastern Europe, emphasizing its improvisational aspects and inconsistencies with-

out overlooking the centrality of race in the regime’s thinking.[2]

Steinhart has written an engaging, highly illuminating study of the relationship between the ideologues of the Third Reich and the complex reality they encountered on the ground as they attempted to remake eastern Europe into a racially ordered imperium founded on genocide. For me, more might have been said on the relationship between Germany and Romania as it played out in Transnistria. Steinhart refers to the bureaucratic struggle between the SS and the Romanians for control of German settlements in Transnistria, complaints from the latter amounting, as he puts it, to “death by a thousand paper cuts” (p. 83). While the aims of the Romanians appear sporadically here, it is clear from what is included that Bucharest was more than adept at using the Germans to solve their own “Jewish problem” (p. 156), for example, opportunistically exploiting fear of typhus to enlist German cooperation in mass murder. The killings, Steinhart writes, “began and ended with the Romanian deportations” (p. 155). Bringing out in a more sustained way the Romanian side of the triangular process that played out in Transnistria would have shed new light on wider, ongoing debates about the role of the Axis powers in the Nazi genocidal project. However this is a minor criticism, and Steinhart is hardly the first historian to focus more on the one side of that bilateral relationship than the other. It is certainly to be hoped that Steinhart’s concluding call for more local and regional research is heeded: while the broad interpretational lines here are familiar, Steinhart sheds important new light in bringing them to bear on the little-studied region he examines.

#### Notes

[1]. Doris L. Bergen, “The Nazi Concept of ‘Volksdeutsche’ and the Exacerbation of Anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe, 1939-1945,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 29, no. 4 (1994): 569-582; and Wendy Lower, *Nazi Empire-Building and the*

*Holocaust in Ukraine* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

[2]. For example, on Poland see the recent study Gerhard Wolf, *Ideologie und Herrschaftsrationality: Nationalsozialistische Germanisierungspolitik in Polen* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2012).

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