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Re-education as Ethnocide. Beyond the Nazi Concept of “Umvolkung”

Abstract

The paper deals with re-education as one of the hidden symbols of modernity using the example of National Socialist nationality politics. It analyses a theoretical concept behind the National Socialist ethnic and racial policy in East Central Europe, especially in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. It presents the concept of *Umvolkung* as a theoretical basis on which it was possible to think of a significant part of the Czech population that met the racist criteria of the National Socialists, that it was originally the German population who lost its national identity during the centuries. The concept should also help to develop a strategy to re-educate the people of the Protectorate, and in the long run it should eventually lead to ethnocide, i. e. to disintegrate or directly destroy the Czech collective national identity. One of the key figures in shaping the concept was the young Nazi scholar Hans Joachim Beyer (1908–1971), who came to the Protectorate on the advice of the Deputy Reich Protector Reinhard Heydrich and headed the most politically influenced Science Foundation in Czech Lands (Reinhard Heydrich Foundation for Scientific Research in Prague). In order to justify the future National Socialist Germanization policy, Beyer developed a new theory of the origins of the Czech people in collaboration with the anthropologist K. V. Müller.

Key words: Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia; Nazi politics of assimilation; social engineering; racial theory; war science; Reinhard Heydrich Stiftung in Prague

Re-education as ethnocide?

During the war years of the National Socialist regime, the concept of *Umvolkung* became a key concept in the implementation of their policies of genocide and ethnocide. Their goal was the *völkisch* homogenization,

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i.e. the national and racial homogenization of the future Greater German Reich (or in some Nazi visions of a Greater German Europe). The Holocaust of the Jews, Roma and Sinti was the most tragic and unfortunately implemented step in the fruition of Nazi politics of homogenization. To realize the deformed visions of future of Hitler and Himmler – well known from Hitler's Table Talks (Trevor-Roper 2000) or from the whopping *Generalplan Ost* – were projected a series of plans for the occupied and annexed territories in Middle and East Europe (Heinemann 2003; Madajczyk 2017: 187–193). This part of Europe – Poland, Ukraine, Belarus and also Czech lands – had to be ethnically cleansed and recolonised by Germans. There were planned population transfers, deportations of politically or ideologically undesirable people and also the direct physical liquidations of cultural elites of the defeated nations. The terror was combined with the ethnocidal destruction of the collective cultural identities of the population, which was considered as of suitable racial characteristics. People chosen at Nazi racial criteria had to change their native language and collective national identity and were “condemned” to become Germans, i.e. they were politically forced to assimilate into the German national identity. If we look for example at some of the research into the policy of this process in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, and Detlef Brandes's comprehensive study from 2012 in particular, we find that the weird word of *Umvolkung* appears directly in the title of his book (Brandes 2012). This word was a novelty in 20th century German political vocabulary and reminds us, for example, of the rhetoric of secretary of state of the Reich Protectorate, SS-Gruppenführer Karl Herman Frank's well-known memorandum on the future of the Protectorate. In the memorandum from 28th August 1940 under the title “Denkschrift über die Behandlung des Tschechen-Problems und die zukünftige Gestaltung des böhmisch-mährischen Raumes“ Frank wrote precisely: “*Ueber eine systematisch durchgeführte politische Neutralisierung und Entpolitisierung muss man zunächst zu einer politischen (geistigen) und dann zu einer völkischen Assimilierung des tschechischen Volkes kommen, um schliesslich die echte Umvolkung zu erreichen.*” (Kárný, Milotová, Moravcová 1987: 312) Ergo the objective of the Nazis' policies in the Protectorate was considered to be *die echte Umvolkung* (something like “real national identity change”) of racially suitable Czech inhabitants, forcibly and inherently involuntarily re-educated to be new Germans. The objective of this paper is to outline the short history of the concept *Umvolkung*, to introduce the most important link of the intellectual context behind it, to show the radical differences in the Nazis' approach of national policy and to interpret the concept as

a key instrument in Nazis' social engineering theory in occupied East Europe (Němec 2017: 1158–1164).

Nationalistic origins of the key concept

Translated literally, the newly coined word *Umvolkung* means something like “national mutation”. On a theoretical level it was used to indicate a specific phase in a long-term, multi-layered social process, which resulted in the formation of a “nation”, a German *Volk*. More precisely, this concept of *Umvolkung* referred to a period in the nation-building process when a specific ethnic group or part of an ethnic group, influenced by geographical and historical circumstances, discarded its existing nationality and collective identity, and merged with another national group. Therefore, this concept included the processes of assimilation, acculturation but also disintegration, which lay behind the terms used for the secession from a national collective in the liberal-national and nationalistic discourse of the late 19th and early 20th century (for example, de-Germanization/*Entdeuschung*, in general de-nationalization/*Entvolkung*), as well as for integration into a different national collective (Germanization, Slavonicization, Magyarization, Czechization, Jewification, Polishization etc.)

Naturally, the new word *Umvolkung* did not originate from the debates between Hitler's historians, sociologists, ethnologist, demographers and other social scientists focusing on so called “national research” or “ethnic research” (*Volksforschung*). It came to be part of the lexicon of the National Socialist academic elite in the 1930s, but had first been used by conservative German nationalists from national defence societies (*Schutzbund*) (Loesch 1925: 213–241). After the military defeat of France, the main party, political and administrative apparatus of the Nazi regime was transferred to the lands annexed and occupied by Germany, marking the start of the policy of Germanization – in Nazi jargon the *Umvolkungspolitik*, which can be translated as “policy of national mutation”.

The concept, therefore, covered phenomena commonly known from the 19th century which were linked to the dynamic creation of collective national identities. Upon closer inspection, however, it is apparent that the ideological basis for the Nazis' concept of “nation” (*Volk*), and thus the concept of *Umvolkung*, was radically different from that of 19th - century liberal nationalism. Each definition also had different implications for political moral and political practice.

Conceptualization and instrumentalization in the Third Reich

There was an academic workshop in Stuttgart in August 1937 which looked at the issues surrounding changes in collective national identities, and for the first time made systematic use of the concept of *Umvolkung*. The organiser, an ambitious twenty-nine-year-old academic from Hamburg, Hans Joachim Beyer (1908–1971), would soon establish himself at the university in Berlin and then he would work for a short time at the Reich university in Poznań (Posen) before becoming a professor at the German Charles university in occupied Prague (Deutsche Karls-Universität) (Roth 1997: 262–342; Míšková 2007). There, on the orders of the incoming Deputy Reich-Protector, Reinhard Heydrich (1904–1942), Beyer 1942/1943 established the Reinhard Heydrich Foundation for Scientific Research in Prague (Die Reinhard Heydrich Reichsstiftung für wissenschaftliche Forschung in Prag) (Fremund 1965: 1–48; Wiedemann 2000; Němec 2021: 113–133). Beyer saw himself as the prototype of a new Nazi scientist whose main goal was to link research work with the political and ideological goals of the time. He worked with the SS security forces (Sicherheitsdienst, SD SS) and after 1940 became one of the most prominent theoreticians on the practice of ethnocide in the annexed and occupied countries of Central-Eastern Europe.

Several years later, and independently, the Berlin professor of ethnology, Wilhelm Emil Mühlmann (1904–1988) (Käsler 1997), also examined *Umvolkung* as part of the conceptualization of assimilation and dissimilation processes (Klingenmann 2009: 363–373). Unlike Beyer, though, Mühlmann was not so strongly connected to the Nazi regime's network of execution institutions, even his book was published in connection with the Reinhard Heydrich Foundation (Mühlmann 1944). His influence on the formation of a policy of ethnocide in occupied Europe was minimal.

In the summer of 1937, however, all of this was still open to the future. At that time, Beyer was only the head of the Research Center for foreign German studies (Arbeitsstelle für Auslandsdeutsche Forschung), which had worked as a cooperative institution of German Academy (Deutsche Akademie) and the German Foreign Institute in Stuttgart (Deutsches Ausland-Institut) (Roth 1997: 279). The inhabitants of Central and Eastern Europe were not his main area of interest, as it would later be in occupied Poznań and Prague, but so-called foreign Germans – German-speaking groups living outside of Germany in Europe and overseas. Beyer used the *Deutsche Volksforschung* quarterly journal to publish the results of interdisciplinary research on the

“nation” (Volk) by a wide spectrum of Nazi-orientated researchers from various disciplines.

When researching Germans living outside of Germany, Beyer focused on the fact that the communities of German groups living in other countries were subject to natural assimilation dynamics. Therefore, deliberations on the concept of *Umvolkung* came into his area of interest. This was not for the first time – he had already used it in his previous study on Germans in Eastern Europe (1935). His new research, though, was mainly motivated by the belief that the Germans’ loss of national and cultural identity outside of its own borders was highly undesirable. One of the regime’s prominent psychologists, Oswald Kroh (1887–1957) from the university in Tübingen, who was also one of the participants at Beyer’s workshop in August 1937, estimated that in the US alone more than 20 million Germans had been “alienated” from the German nation through migration and subsequent assimilation. Therefore, according to Nazi scholars the German nation had lost “*valuable German blood of inheritance and German national strength*” due to *Umvolkung*. Beyer’s research was supposed to contribute towards the better understanding of the principles of the assimilation process in order to find social defence mechanisms which in the future would prevent migrant Germans from becoming “alienated” from their national collective.

At the Stuttgart workshop in August 1937 the examination of the *Umvolkung* issue had been far from exhaustive and Beyer continued to turn to it in subsequent years until the end of the World War II. With the outbreak of the war in autumn 1939 he began to study the phenomenon even more intensively than previously, as research into Germany’s eastern borders had lost its passive character of attempting to prevent the loss of “*German national strength*”. It had now been transformed into an active attempt to “regain” for the German nation the East European populations of German origin, which in the past had been assimilated into East European nations. In 1939, at the instigation of the leader of the SD, Felix Alfred Six (1909–1975), he wrote a thesis which systematically examined the issue of *Umvolkung*. However, the thesis was not intended for publication as it dealt with the current highly political issues of the time. Within the SD and later the RSHA, Beyer’s text was supposedly used – as Karl Heinz Roth indicated some years ago – as a “conceptual matrix” for the Germanization policy of Germans from the occupied territories of Central-Eastern Europe. Today the text is thought to have been lost. It was only towards the end of the war in Prague that Beyer rewrote the text of his thesis and finally prepared it for publication. This book is also thought to have been lost. We know that it was published in

Prague in the spring of 1945 by the Reinhard Heydrich Foundation as part of the series Prague studies and documents on the intellectual and moral history of East Central Europe (Prager Studien und Dokumente zur Geistes- und Gesinnungsgeschichte Ostmitteleuropas). The book had the simple title of *Umvolkung* with the subtitle “*Studies on the question of assimilation and amalgamation in East Central Europe and overseas*” (Studien zur Frage der Assimilation und Amalgamation in Ostmitteleuropa und Übersee). We know that the book was in fact published because the Karl Hermann Frank had been informed of its publication by Rohrer publishers. However, the book was obviously never distributed and it is possible that all of the copies were destroyed at the printing houses in Leipzig. Fortunately, two or three copies have survived in Czech libraries. I had the opportunity to view a copy from Library of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, which, judging by the stamps, served as a publishing proof.

A racial reinterpretation of the Protectorate population

Therefore, what concept of the nation stood behind the concept of *Umvolkung*? The theoreticians of it, besides Beyer and Mühlmann there were, of course, other scholars, who were reluctant to answer the question of what constituted a nation until they had understood the concept of *Umvolkung*. For them, *Umvolkung* was synonymous with the process of the birth of nations (*Volksverdung*). In reality, however, Beyer had had a firm idea of what constituted a nation since his student years. In the very first edition of the *Deutsche Volksforschung* journal in 1937, Beyer referred to the leading Nazi education theoretician, Ernst Krieck (1887–1942), when he systematically endorsed the principle of the holistic research into the “nation” (*Volk*). It is, therefore, unsurprising that he disputed the ideas of liberal scholars from the turn of the century and refused to accept their definition of the nation as a linguistic and cultural community, which had set the paradigm for studies on the nation since the 19th century. But his criticism, surprisingly, also applied to the most important contemporary theories of the nation based on pan-German (*gesamtdeutsch*) national conservatism. Max Hildebert Boehm (1891–1968), a Jena professor of the theory and sociology of the nation, expanded upon this in his book “*Das eigenständige Volk*” (The Independent Nation) from 1932 (Prehn 2013). Boehm defined the nation as a historically originating, self-aware organic community, which form themselves into national figures with a common cultural consciousness

and historical mission. For Boehm, a common consciousness and historical mission were more important in the process of forming nations than any other factors such as citizenship or racial affiliation. The West European idea of the nation as a *Staatsnation* (F. Meinecke) was irrelevant for Boehm's holistic concept of the nation. According to Boehm, the example of the German nation clearly demonstrated that a nation can exist for a long period even outside its borders and past the borders of other countries. Boehm believed that the biological concept of race was too imprecise and amorphous while he rejected the idea of racial purity as a modern myth, which was demonstrated by the fact that members of a single nation usually displayed different racial characteristics.

Beyer agreed with Boehm that the state was not the decisive factor in creating a nation. However, as a convinced National Socialist he did not share Boehm's distrust of the concept of race. On the contrary, he was convinced of its central importance. The nation (*Volk*) as an organic unity is constructed from race, culture and history. Race, however, was the most important element in the continuity of a nation's life, thanks to which the nation could survive. As he termed it, it was a "biological inheritance substance" (*biologische Erbsubstanz*) or the "firm core of national life" (*der feste Kern des völkischen Lebens*) (Beyer 1942: 1–16; Beyer 1944: 193–214). While working in Prague during the Protectorate, Beyer's emphasis on the biological element of the concept of the nation became even more pronounced. Humans were defined as a trinity of the body ("blood"), soul and spirit, and the "nation" analogically became a "biological-spiritual-mental reality". However, the elements of this trinity were not equal. Due to cultural influences (the collective cultural identity reflected in the language and in the historical consciousness), the "spirit" (*Geist*) was the furthest from the "blood" (race), and therefore as a result of historical development it could become completely "alienated" from race as collective biological matter. Sometimes the alienated "spirit" would even stand in direct opposition to the "blood" according to Beyer (1944: 208). The question concerning the practical application of the theory was whether it was possible to preserve the essence of a specific racial population subsumed by "alien" cultural thinking, or whether and when the mixing of ethnicities led to their demise. It was, therefore, necessary not only to understand cultural history, but more importantly, to grasp the demographic developments of a country. Let us turn briefly to the case of the Czech nation, which Beyer examined in Prague together with racial anthropologists and psychologists as pressing issues of the day. On the basis of this research, which was often based on isolated claims and dubious stereotypes, and from his readings of the anthropolo-

gist Karl Valentin Müller (1896–1963), who was probably Karl Hermann Frank’s most influential advisor on the question of Germanization from 1940 (Kubů 2004: 93–114; Ferdinand 2014: 23–54), Beyer reached the original conclusion in his *magnum opus* from 1945 (Beyer 1945). It was – that is to say - in complete harmony with the regime’s policies of occupation in Czech lands. The biological essence of the populations of Bohemia and Moravia was said to have been fundamentally transformed after the Thirty Years’ War with the arrival of aristocratic families from various parts of the Habsburg Empire, as well as by the wave of migratory farmers from German lands to the war-ravaged country. The nation which began to gradually emerge over the next 150 to 200 years supposedly had a different racial character to that of the medieval Bohemians and Moravians. It acquired a “*high percentage of German blood*”, however, “*the language and a certain spiritual-mental tradition survived in the body of the previous Czech nation*” (*...von dem früheren tschechischen Volkskörper die Sprache und gewisse gestig-seelische Traditionen übernahm*). Therefore, the continuity of the Czech nation was supposedly not biological but merely linguistic-cultural. Beyer even coined the phrase “*Newczech nation*” (*neutschechisches Volk*), in order to emphasise this fact. At the same time, he highlighted the close biological relationship between the “*Newczech nation*” and the Germans (Beyer 1945: 101–113).

Conclusion and epilogue

Such an ideological construction allowed the theory of *Umvolkung* to be used to legitimize the practical application of Germanization, or to be more precise, the re-Germanization policies in occupied Central-Eastern Europe according to the utopian visions of Heinrich Himmler (1900–1945), Reinhard Heydrich and Karl Hermann Frank. As race was the “core” of a nation’s essence, all that was required was a scientific study of the populations of the occupied countries to find the suitable racial qualities and declare these people the survivors of the original Germanic population which had reportedly been “mutated” over the course of history. This was the initial state so that re-education of the selected population could be started. This was to have been followed by the ‘spirit’ being “repaired” by a multi-layered cultural process, during which the racial qualities of the selected population were to be “returned” through cultural and ideological re-education “back” to the German national collective.

In conclusion, we saw that the concept of *Umvolkung* gave alleged objective scientific legitimacy to the policy of the “erosion of Czechness”, as Václav Kural appropriately described the cultural policy of the regime in the Protectorate (Kural 2002). People were now only carriers of biological material and it would depend on their inherited biological qualities whether they deserved (or did not deserve) to return to their allegedly original national collective. It is clear that this did not mean genocide in the strict sense of the word, but ethnocide. The objective of this Nazi policy was not to murder all the members of one nation or to prevent the reproduction of its population, but to destroy a specific nation as a community of values and of a cultural consciousness. By using the objectivist concept of *Umvolkung*, the Nazi perpetrators of this form of genocide could free themselves from any moral problems which may have arisen when implementing a policy for the destruction of a cultural identity through long-lasting cultural terror and ideological violence. Any destructive behaviour would be justified by the idea that past injustices in history had been righted in the name of the “original” nation and the race.

As an epilogue, I will show how different and cynical this Nazi social engineering was from the thinking of the liberal democrats so despised by the Nazis, by returning once more to the mid-1930s. It is well known that the Czech historian, diplomat and last foreign minister of the First Czechoslovak Republic, Kamil Krofta (1876–1945), strived to understand the nationality question in Czechoslovakia in a series of lectures and writings (Werstadt 1936; Dejmek 1998; Dejmek 2001: 137–152; Němec 2017: 161–173). At some point during the last two years of the First Republic, Krofta made some remarkable notes, the fragments of which have been preserved in his estate (Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Papers of Kamil Krofta, box 7, signature 437). It is unknown whether Krofta ever intended to publish these ideas, but the aim was obviously to openly present different ways of resolving the complex problem of national coexistence in Czechoslovakia. Krofta’s concept of the nation was based on it being a linguistic and historical community. He wrote several points referring to theoretical solutions, including the renunciation of the territory occupied by Germans (rejected due to the geographical and economic unity of the territory), the search for a unified state consciousness (rejected as being a hopeless task that had never once succeeded in Czech history), or persisting with the national character of Czechoslovakia with legal guarantees for the national development of all its minorities. Of interest here in connection with the Nazis’ concept of *Umvolkung* is the point which rejected the “Czechoslovakization”

of the national minorities – i.e. transforming them by re-educational violence into a nation in the spirit of Czechoslovakia – which was based on ethical factors. Alongside this point Krofta wrote in his notes: “*impossible, not taking into account its immorality*” (originally in Czech). The comparison of a Czech democratic patriot with a German Nazi is perhaps somewhat misleading without even taking into consideration the person’s character, their experiences in life or the situation in which these statements were made. Nevertheless, the mention of “immorality” brings us to an important point relating to the influence of world values. Given the right political circumstances, a racial concept of the nation led to a policy of ethnocide on a mass scale, whereas the concept of the nation as a linguistic and cultural community could have acted as a moral barrier against the use of ethnically and racially motivated political violence of that kind of ethnocide.

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Reedukacja jako etnocyd. Analiza nazistowskiej koncepcji „Umvolkung”

Streszczenie

Artykuł dotyczy reedukacji jako jednego z ukrytych symboli nowoczesności na przykładzie narodowosocjalistycznej polityki narodowościowej. Analizuje teoretyczną koncepcję polityki etnicznej i rasowej narodowosocjalistycznej w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej, zwłaszcza w protektoracie Czech i Moraw. Przedstawia koncepcję

„Umvolkung” jako teoretyczną podstawę postrzegania znacznej części ludności czeskiej, która spełniała rasistowskie kryteria narodowych socjalistów, jako pierwotnie ludności niemieckiej, która straciła swoją tożsamość narodową w ciągu wieków. Koncepcja ta miała również przyczynić się do opracowania strategii na rzecz reedukacji ludności Protektoratu, a w dłuższej perspektywie ostatecznie doprowadzić do etnocydu, czyli rozpadu lub bezpośredniego zniszczenia czeskiej tożsamości narodowej. Jedną z kluczowych postaci w promowaniu tej koncepcji był młody nazistowski uczonec Hans Joachim Beyer (1908–1971), który przybył do Protektoratu za radą Zastępcy Protektora Rzeszy Reinharda Heydricha i stanął na czele najbardziej wpływowej politycznie Fundacji Naukowej na Ziemiach Czeskich (Fundacja Badań Naukowych Reinharda Heydricha w Pradze). Aby uzasadnić przyszłą narodowosocjalistyczną politykę germanizacji, Beyer opracował nową teorię początków narodu czeskiego we współpracy z antropologiem K.V. Müllerem.

Słowa kluczowe: Protektorat Czech i Moraw, nazistowska polityka asymilacji, inżynieria społeczna, teoria rasowa, nauki wojenne, Reinhard Heydrich Stiftung w Pradze