Christian Ingrao, La promesse de l'Est : Espérance nazie et génocide, 1939-1943

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Christian INGRAO

La promesse de l'Est

Espérance nazie et génocide, 1939-1943

Paris : Seuil, 2016, 467 p.

Subject to Christian Ingrao's book are Nazi imaginations of Eastern Europe in a future during and after Germanization. Among other aspects, he is interested in the emotions involved in this utopia. The volume deals with the essence of German ethnic policies in the East.

The study starts with a chronological survey of Nazi plans for German settlement in Polish and Soviet areas and for the removal of local populations deemed undesirable. This is followed by a long chapter about the complex array of German institutions and agencies concerned with such plans and policies and with their personnel, called "ethnocrats" further down the line (p. 295). The author argues that about 27,000 individuals worked in the apparatus(es) involved, mainly including various SS agencies on the policy level and a number of other Nazi party organizations, such as of students and women, plus the labor service, more on the implementation side. While some pages here and there are devoted to these usually lesser researched formations, SS agencies are clearly the focus of the author's interest (especially the Reich Commissioner for the Strengthening of Germandom, the SS' Central Office for Administration and Economy (WVHA) and the Reich Central Security Office). Accordingly, the bulk of these chapters appears fairly conventional.

In the second half of the study, Ingrao describes in more detail German plans for Eastern Europe and certain principles of policy, aesthetic aspects of planning, segregational planning for cities and villages as well as WVHA plans. Then he goes on to practice and what can be discerned from it, to a description of German policies of settlement in one particular area, the region of Zamość in Southeastern Poland. There, the new German order led in 1942-43 to the murder of about 50,000 Jews, the removal of, according to Ingrao, 100,000 Poles (many were deported to forced labor), the settlement of a few thousand ethnic Germans, the resettlement of ethnic Ukrainians and, after the situation went out of control, to a multipolar civil war. Zamość, as Ingrao argues, marked the most radical implementation of German ethnic policies (of the relatively limited areas—except for Western Poland—where such policies were actually implemented).

The study makes use of, and presents, quite a few relevant archival documents and provides a useful overview of SS plans for settlement and resettlement. It provides interesting material and a multi-faceted view of its theme. It points out the passion with which many of the actors on the ground pursued their dream of a German east, as well as some of their fears. Ingrao argues that the “*espérance impériale [...] est l’un des fondements de la croyance nazi*” (p. 153). Also, it devotes more space than is usual to the second half of the Second World War.

There is a large body of research literature concerning Nazi German combined policies of Germanization in Eastern Europe. Ingrao’s reading of it is selective. The book lacks a bibliography, but, among others, the works by Chad Bryant, Dietrich Eichholtz, Tone Ferenc, Norbert Kunz, Peter Longerich, Czesław Łuczak, Bernhard Rosenkötter, Sybille Steinbacher and Alexa Stiller seem to be absent from the endnotes. The same goes for Christoph Dieckmann’s works about Lithuania and Wendy Lower’s study on Zhitomir, and Bruno Wasser’s book on Lublin is strangely under-utilized. In terms of topics, ethno-racist notions and ideas and German stereotypes of Eastern Europe (Poles, Russians) are not subject to in-depth analysis. In regard to institutions, some are not taken into consideration, such as the *Reichkommissariat Ostland*, the *Reichsstelle für Raumordnung*, the military and the Institute for Labor Science of the German Labor Front. Hitler does not play an important role in the story told in this book, and Alfred Rosenberg, another chief ideologue-cum Reich Minister for the Occupied Eastern Territories, does not appear in the index at all.

These omissions and the author’s particular reliance on the scholarship by Götz Aly, Karl Heinz Roth and Czesław Madajczyk have certain effects on the direction the book takes. Ingrao focuses on the SS and emphasizes central planning. One important aspect pertains to what was supposed to happen to many millions of undesirable non-Germans who, as Nazi documents mentioned, should be removed. What that was exactly supposed to mean is not entirely clear, but Ingrao does not bring much light into this affair. On a relatively slim source basis, and somewhat speculatively, he argues that the Nazis wanted at least 25 million people to die for their settlement plans (p. 188-194; see also p. 13, 385 note 59; cf. p. 54). Some of

the more or less recent scholarship does not see such a direct connection between settlement policy and mass murder.

Being on the one hand of a broad scope and focusing on the other hand on SS planning, the study generates relatively little that is entirely new. This has to do with the sources used, that is, with the heavy reliance on administrative documents. There is no reflection on sources in the very short introduction (p. 19-24). The book has its strongest passages when it turns to material from exhibitions, to songs and poems, newspaper reports and a novel. Some mission reports are also illuminating. But the study is too much spread out and its topics are too diverse to go in-depth with this material, beyond what the author calls examples. The argument is patchy. Many of the documents cited were published before. Possibly, reports from press journals and diaries, for example, could have helped to deliver more on the claims to explore the topic beyond public policy (p. 22) and to provide an “anthropologie sociale de l’émotion nazie” (p. 356).

Above all, Ingrao’s claim is to analyze a Nazi utopia. “Utopie” – here usually written with a capital – is the key term of the study. However, it is not conceptualized in the book and, as far as I see, never defined. This would have been necessary, given that utopia is an analytical term, because it has apparently not been taken from the sources. It is not by accident that the term *Utopie* has no entry in the famous dictionary of the brothers Grimm – the respective volume was published in 1936, e.g. in the Nazi period (Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm, Munich: dtv, 1991, vol. 24, columns 2616-2617). More in the way of theoretical considerations about how historical agents thought about the future would have been advantageous. There would be some potential in a focused analysis of plans for road construction, for railways and other infrastructure, the analysis of pictures and contemporary maps and a detailed analysis of metaphors. Discourse analysis has its pitfalls here. It seems as if more distinctions should have been made between Nazi imaginations of different zones of Eastern Europe and between different time frames or planning intervals. Instead, everything tends to being merged into what appears as one broadly coherent utopia, the “projet utopique nazi” (p. 92), as description of which serve the most far-reaching utterings (see, for example, p. 255 and 357).

As a side note, there are some formal problems. In addition to few factual errors, German words and names are often misspelled. More gravely, no page numbers are given repeatedly when specific information or a quotation is being taken from the secondary literature.

Christian Ingrao’s book provides a useful overview and many insights. His volume moves toward an exploration of Nazi utopian thinking in connection with Eastern Europe but, by going not very far off the beaten track, delivers more of a study of SS central planning in World War II.

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