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Book Review

Thomas Lane, *Victims of Stalin and Hitler: the Exodus of Poles and Balts to Britain*. Basingtoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, ISBN 1-4039-3220-4, 280 pages.

Professor Thomas Lane's interest in the "movement of peoples across national boundaries" is longstanding. It began with a study of movements from the south and east of Europe that accounted for 80 percent of migrants to the United States in the two decades before the First World War. In this book, he considers the mass uprooting of Baltic and Polish peoples during the Second World War and the subsequent arrival of some of them in Great Britain.

When the war ended, every second inhabitant of the shattered region that became West Germany was a displaced person, and most of these desperate victims of war hostilities came from Eastern Europe. They were the flotsam of Soviet and Nazi deportations, gulags, stalags and forced labor camps, victims of enforced military service, or had simply fled for their lives westward to avoid the advancing Red Army. All carried dreadful memories, and none were willing to return to their Soviet-occupied homelands. A small minority from these millions arrived in Great Britain and has stayed ever since. When younger, they refused to return to certain persecution or death. When Communism ended, they felt too old or too bound to the families they had raised here to return to their roots. This book discusses the circumstances of their arrival, their experience of resettlement, their present community life, and their future.

Amid this material, Lane distills some forty extensive accounts given to him either personally by the survivors or recounted by their children. This approach leaves the reader with a sense of first-hand intimacy. Even if the broader story is familiar (readers of *Lituanus* will have their own links with comparable witnesses) this account, with its vivid demonstration of how the long shadows of Hitler and Stalin spread over other lives in succeeding decades, will be regarded as a valuable record.

Lane draws our attention to the "barriers that have existed to familiarizing a broad readership with the terror of the Soviet system" and the resulting paradox that "has left the crimes of the Soviet Union less well-known than those of the Nazi regime." It is everywhere acknowledged that the Nazi creed was wholeheartedly committed to the destruction of all those it deemed enemies, but the Leninist-Stalinist doctrine was more subtle. Somehow it wrapped its ruthless utilitarianism into a kind of benevolent humanism, successfully passing off its ruthless incarceration of opponents as "remedial and re-educational." It was a brutal lie. Since the fall of Communism, even the Russian press has openly acknowledged that Stalin ordered fifty million murders, but it made a real difference because the party line was widely followed. Solzhenitsyn observed bitterly that the West was "ready to forgive his purges," suggesting the amnesia was "gratitude for Stalingrad." Interestingly, some aspects of Russia's recent celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the war seemed designed to revive that sentiment.

The book offers a fascinating account of the implications of the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union of June 22, 1941 for over 1,500,000 Poles who had been detained in Russian prison camps since the German occupation of their country. Against the odds, but with British backing, General Sikorski, Polish Prime-Minister in Exile, secured agreements that permitted 100,000 men to travel via Iran to help Allied efforts in the Middle East and to create six Polish divisions. However, Soviet management of this "release" of Polish troops was ambiguous. Several hundred thousand men were indeed freed, but many thousands more were not. Stalin's treachery, already brutally evident in internal affairs, was now emerging on the international stage. Soviet inability to maintain common trust is evident everywhere in this account, particularly where it opens onto General Anders' realization that 4,000 officers (known for certain to have been in Russian hands) had failed to report for service in his new divisions. When asked about the missing tally, Stalin sickly suggested they "must have escaped to Manchuria." The world now acknowledges his cynical dissimulation. He had certain knowledge that his henchman Kalinin (his name continues to pollute a certain European city to this day) had ordered their extermination in the forests near Smolensk, at a place called Katyn.

The horrendous human dislocation that followed the war was an international problem, whose immensity was complicated by the dawning recognition of the malignity of Stalin's intentions toward those driven westwards by the fortunes of war. As early as October 1945, Eisenhower responded to this knowledge by banning forcible repatriation of any kind from the American Zone, a determination mercifully backed by General Alexander in Italy, who similarly refused a Soviet demand for the return of the Poles under his command. When this information reached the United Nations (called into being the previous year in the hope of returning the world to sanity), its General Assembly declared, early in 1946, that "refugees who have expressed valid objections shall not be compelled to return to their countries of origin" (a principle now enshrined in International Law). Yet, despite this high-level announcement, the threat of repatriation returned very shortly afterward from within the UN itself when UNRRA (the United Nations Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Administration – which was responsible for the camps in the western zones of Germany – issued an order for the "speediest possible repatriation" of displaced persons.

This announcement was an attempt to reduce an almost unmanageable task to some sense of order but was the starkest reminder of the precarious condition of the refugees. It resulted in so much unrest that it was quickly withdrawn, but the move had clearly emphasized the vulnerability of the displaced people and their status as what we would now call asylum-seekers. The Poles had no illusions about the nature of Russian domination in their homeland, and the Balts (who shared much of that history) had tasted Soviet occupation for themselves early in the war, when friends and family members were deported to the gulags. They also knew that (whether they had been conscripted to the Wehrmacht or the German labor brigades or simply fled because they dissented from the Communist ideology) they could expect no mercy in their homelands. By this time too, word had seeped out that widespread deportations to Siberia (realistically the smallest price they might expect to pay for having, however unwittingly, offended the system) had begun again throughout the Baltic States. For them, there was now no returning.

In these difficult circumstances, the refugees were alert for any opportunity to start a new life elsewhere. In time, the UNRRA and the Western Allies also engaged this task. The battered postwar economies of Europe noted significant shortages of labor in their strategic industries, and these refugees could provide a significant reservoir of manpower. The British were the first to offer recruitment: their approach was pragmatic and opportunistic, and tensions arose at the political and the social levels as the refugees arrived (reflecting anxieties about "outsiders" that are still found in our politics where communities respond to "asylum seekers" or even the "New Europeans," as the young Balts and Poles who arrive these days are likely to be identified). Yet, these difficulties were surmounted by an essential goodwill, neatly summarized by one of Lane's interviewees, who remarked on this initial unfriendliness by saying:

> We weren't angry about British trade unions because everyone was fighting among themselves. They were afraid because they'd never seen a stranger or a foreigner, but they steadily got used to us and we have been the best of friends since then. We mixed in and they forgot. It was no trouble.

This comment reflects a national characteristic that grows from a long history of accepting immigrant populations. The island itself seems to absorb the tensions inevitably expressed when new communities reach these shores (a racial memory is perhaps at work, for the English, the dominant nation for the last thousand years, first came as Saxons, a boat-people seeking economic betterment by settling one of the grain bowls of the former Roman empire!) But it was the government's Economic Survey of 1947 that opened the doors to this Balto-Polish inflow, letting them come as workpeople at the lowest levels of the economic ladder. The Report noted acute labor shortages in the coal, textile and agricultural industries, all crucial to economic recovery, and drew attention to the pool of labor lying untapped in Germany. By 1950, when the resulting recruitment ended, some 14,000 Poles, 12,000 Latvians, 5,700 Lithuanians, and 4,000 Estonians had entered Britain by this route, together with substantial numbers of Ukrainians, Yugoslavs, Hungarians and Czechs, plus a further 124,000 former members of the Polish armed forces.

Lane's account of the later integration of these people shows how many of the arrivals moved upward in the social system in step with the postwar economic recovery in Britain. Statistically, they were perhaps marginally more successfully than the general population. From holding an originally obvious ethnic status, emphasized by their occupation of lowly jobs under state direction, they moved on to become sixty years later an all-but-imperceptible element of British society. Gradually their self-made communities have dispersed into the wider population, the parents almost always having accepted legal naturalization, the children identifying themselves as British and losing the immediate national identification and attachment to native languages and the ethnic institutions originally so important to their parents or grandparents. Those of the first generation, now ageing, have also become "in some important respect British" and again the interviews neatly illustrate aspects of the transition: "When we got our passports we felt free, especially when we went to Poland, and our feelings were more settled; but we don't feel less Polish because we are not Polish citizens," and: "When I come back to England, I feel as if I am in my own country." This last realization Lane observes was "emphasized by the collapse of Communism," which "undermined the claim to a different status from other ethnic minorities."

This book evidently went to press just before the Baltic States and Poland finally entered the European community on May 1st 2004. That this event happened, less than fifteen years after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the return of full international recognition of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia as independent states, was the result of considerable labor and its achievement marks a transition of great significance for these nations that actually transforms their relationship with the rest of us. In that act, Europe at last affirmed itself, collectively, as "whole and free," and our citizenship rights have converged as a result. We can thus stand shoulder to shoulder and proudly affirm: "We are all Europeans now." Balts and

Poles now stand equal with us, and all the others, sharing the same democratic values, hopes, and, importantly, institutions. Together, we are common heirs to the rich endowments of Western Civilization. Accession to the European Union has brought them the prospect of improved economic status and all this implies in terms of life-chances for individuals and families. It has also given them access to a freer and wider communal space, the restrictions of their recent past and their struggles to reach this place serving to add greatly to the value of what they have gained.

Lane closes his book expressing sadness that “a gap has opened (i.e., for these postwar immigrants) between their fellow (home) countrymen and themselves,” because “the assimilation to the British scene of their children and grandchildren has ensured that Britain is the country they can most call home.” This may be so, but we can also feel some joy that these, neighbors, have family roots in that “other part of the greater Europe that we can all now call home.” Their presence in our community reflects the bonding process that makes Europe what it is and that calls us to achieve yet more. The achievement of those whose words give the true focus of this study can be examined with great pride because they reflect lives made meaningful again by a rugged determination to recover from the appalling horror that had torn things apart so abruptly in the early 1940s and the ensuing aspiration for the recovery of their homelands for decent human values not finally realized until 1991. Thomas Lane has now opened a panoramic view of what they have done with their lives, in which we can begin to see that their very anonymity was part of the vision which led to the conception of a “Europe whole and free.” For it was their collective despair that established the conviction that sent the first architects of what was to become the European Union to their drawing boards.

We must now hope that our appreciation of their effort will invite the next generation to share the profound cultural capital now at our disposal as Europeans fully and creatively with the remainder of our human race, not least because the desperate situation these migrants faced in the mid-1940s can now be understood as a birth pang, both of the European Union and of the United Nations. We remain indebted to their generation for its sacrifices and fortitude, recognizing that these two great institutions were in some sense built on their backs. A world which refuses in any way to work toward the fuller achievement of the ideals embodied by the U.N. and the E.U. (however imperfectly they may be expressed at present), does not bear contemplation because its implication would be a return to the horrors that the veterans of this exodus so gratefully left behind.

Anthony Packer