

## The German Minority in Romania

In 2009, the Nobel Prize for Literature went to Herta Müller, a German-speaking author originally from Romania. Klaus Iohannis was elected President of Romania in late 2014. As a result of these two events, a little known fact has drawn greater public attention in the past few years far beyond Romania: Romania is the country to the east of the closed German language area with the most significant German-speaking community. It has indeed shrunk to a small fragment of its previous size since the phase of mass emigration to Germany in the early 1990s. The German-speaking group now accounts for far less than 1 percent of the total population and does not play a decisive role anymore within Romania. Even in the city and *Județ* (district) of Sibiu, the heartland of the German population where Germans still were in the absolute majority in many places in the early 20th century, only slightly more than 1% of the inhabitants described themselves as Germans in the 2011 census. The share of Germans only amounted to between 3% and a maximum of 7% in a half-dozen smaller, rural communities.

If it is not their demographic clout, how do we explain that Romania elected a German president, who explicitly referred to “German” virtues during the electoral campaign and that study programs not only in Romanian, but also in two languages of national minorities (Hungarian and German) were introduced at the Babeș-Bolyai University (one of the most renowned universities in the country) in Cluj? The image of the Germans, which has been historically severely damaged in many countries of Eastern Europe is extremely positive in Romania in general. This has to do with the fact that Transylvania and the Banat, the main areas of settlement of Germans within Romania, belonged to Hungary until 1918 and the political and to large extent social elite

(nobility, landlords) were Hungarian. The age of disputes over nationality policy and the stronger attempts at Magyarization in the 19th and early 20th century put Romanians and Germans on the same side of the barricade and at least partially made them allies. Contrarily to the case of the Germans in the Baltic States, for example, there is no pronounced resentment towards the one time dominating social elite (“Herrenschicht”) in the Romanian culture of remembrance, as they were primarily identified as Hungarians. Unlike the Sudeten Germans in Czechoslovakia or the Germans in Yugoslavia, Poland, or the Soviet Union (Volga Germans), the Germans did not play the role of a Fifth Column during the Second World War, because Romania was a close ally of national-socialist Germany and the Germans were once again on the same side of the front.

These circumstances show that the – for Eastern European standards – extremely positive perception of the Germans in Romania is not entirely unproblematic from a historical standpoint. The positive image of the Germans is based on functionally equivalent stereotypes to the negative clichés about other groups. The positive self-perception and outside perception of the Germans refers time and time again back to topoi such as German thoroughness, diligence, sense of order, cleanliness, etc., which were already previously used on the basis of the notion of “bearers of German culture” who conveyed “German merits” to the peoples of Eastern Europe. This is a viewpoint which has been definitively discredited by national-socialism, but is sometimes still influential in the Romanian context.

The role of Germans in Romania therefore must be viewed critically and from different angles, in particular because including all

German-speaking inhabitants of Romania into one coherent group is an impermissible simplification in itself. The present issue of *Euxeinos* examines the Romanian-German community with a series of eight exemplary

Swabians as well as the smaller German-speaking communities never developed. The term "Romanian Germans" is an artificial structuring concept, which primarily reflects the outside view. In the 20th century,



Saxons and Swabians in Romania. Source wikipedia

articles. It begins with an overview of the historical development of the various German-speaking communities on the territory of present-day Romania by Daniel Ursprung. The two most significant groups exhibit an entirely different history: while the Transylvanian Saxons settled in Transylvania in the High Middle Ages and had extensive privileges and a pronounced sense of community resulting from their own *Landstand* (status as one of three politically leading estates), German-speakers only settled further west in the Banat during the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

An intense, overarching sense of togetherness between the Transylvanian Saxons, Banat

Saxons and Swabians in Romania identified more with Germany than with the respective other group. This had fatal consequences in the 1930s, when national-socialism attracted many followers among the Romanian Germans. During the Second World War, national-socialist Germany asserted a special status for the German minority over its ally Romania, which collectively defined the Germans as the so-called "German Ethnic Group in Romania" (*Deutsche Volksgruppe in Rumänien*), a kind of "state within a state". In his article, Ottmar Trașcă deals with the role of this configuration within Romania and also shows how Germans were mobilized for war as part of the *Waffen*

SS, even though they were Romanian citizens. After the Second World War the Germans were collectively accused of having been collaborators with national-socialist Germany. As Hannelore Baier shows, before the end of the war tens of thousands of Germans were subject to deportation from Romania to the Soviet Union as a punitive measure. There they were forced to carry out reconstruction work. While Hannelore Baier provides an overview of these events from the perspective of a historian working with archive sources, Günter Klein sheds light on the individual destinies of his family members. The memories of the contemporary witnesses convey a particularly descriptive picture of their years of hard labor spent in the Donbass, before it was possible to return to Romania. This actor-centered perspective provides insights into individual fates, which repeated themselves in a comparable way in countless other cases. Cristian Cercel takes yet another perspective on this theme by analyzing the deportation to the Soviet Union in the culture of remembrance. What is typical is that the deportation did not play an important role for the culture of remembrance until relatively late, in Germany in particular after the mid-1970s and among the Romanian public only after 1989 – thus one or two generations after the events. Cercel correctly highlights that the deportation should be viewed in the larger context of the preceding events, above all the uncritical stance towards and indeed frequent enthusiasm of many Germans for national-socialism. This aspect demonstrates the selectivity of the narrative of remembrance, which is primarily focused on one's own role as a victim and only marginally takes into account the links between the deportation and the commitment to the national-socialist policy of conquest and destruction.

The position that national minorities and in particular the Hungarians and Germans as the largest national minorities took in the socialist regime is a question on which historians are still far from having reached a consensus. Hungarians and Germans frequently refer to the repressive policies of the regime, by which many Germans also felt repressed, in particular in the later years of the Ceaușescu regimes (1965-1989). However, the extent to which the increasingly chauvinistic rhetoric of the regime can in fact be understood as a policy of "Romanianization" aimed primarily against the minorities is anything but certain at the current stage of the discussion, despite the very firm opinions on all sides. It should also be taken into consideration that the repressions are not to be exclusively and not even primarily understood from an ethno-national perspective, as the Romanian majority population suffered to a similar extent from the many restrictions.

In this regard, Markus Bauer offers an interesting perspective on the Banat Action Group (*Aktionsgruppe Banat*), a literary circle of German-speaking authors in the Western Romanian Banat region, who came into conflict with the regime. This conflict had more to do with the increasing repressions by the regime against true or purported members of the opposition than with ethno-national suppression. Markus Bauer also points out that the actions of the group were driven, in particular, by a desire to distance themselves from the traditional "Germanness" of their parents' generation and – analogously to the 1968 movement in the west – to critically assess their conduct during the Second World War. Florian Kühner-Wielach shows once again that the juxtaposition of the oppressed minorities and repressive "Romanian" regime is oversimplified. The question of collaboration

with the regime, which spied on Romanian society by means of numerous informers, was raised with regard to members of minorities as well. The example of informer activities within the German-speaking literature scene of Romania shows that binary categories such as victim and perpetrator overlook the much more complex realities. Coming to terms with the past is all the more difficult in the presented examples, as this process is largely being carried out in Germany, where most of the protagonists have emigrated to. Kühner-Wielach provides a more distanced perspective on the often emotional debate among the German public, in which a relatively small network of people who know each other well are making moral and legal accusations against one another. Besides these problems, which are primarily relevant to insiders, the analysis of this group of people enables us to exemplarily address issues of historical research on collaboration and strategies of action under repressive socialist rule.

To conclude, Benjamin Józsa, Managing Director of the Democratic Forum of the Germans in Romania - the interest representation of the German minority-, sheds light on the contemporary situation of the German minority by looking at the city of Sibiu, which has traditionally been the center of the Germans in Romania. He explains how the German physics teacher Klaus Iohannis succeeded in being elected mayor of this city several times after the year 2000 due to his solid performance. Ultimately he even became President of Romania in 2014, despite the fact that his voters were primarily from the Romanian majority population. However, this success does not necessarily alleviate the structural problems of the German minority in Romania, which is overaged and lacks an

assertive young generation. This poses a major challenge for the school system.

Although far from presenting a complete overview of the history and present situation of the Germans in Romania, this edition of Euxeinos outlines a wide range of problems which have played and still play a central role in the Romanian-German communities. The future will show to what extent an enduring feeling of belonging to the German nation will sustain itself after the many disruptions and discontinuities of the 19th and 20th centuries.

*Translated by Michael Dobbins*

#### **ABOUT THE EDITOR**

Daniel Ursprung, researcher and teaching assistant at the chair of East-European history, University of Zurich (Switzerland), is specialized in the history of Southeastern Europe and Romanian history. Research and publications on late-medieval to contemporary history, among others with a monograph on the legitimation of power in the Romanian space (17th-20th centuries), studies on the comparative history of personality-cults in socialist regimes and on the history of Wallachia.

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