

“What You Won’t Read in Baedeker. A Short Travel Guide through the Eastern Zone” (1947)

Abstract

A journalist visited distressed cities and regions in the Eastern Zone and compared the grim realities he encountered in 1947 with the images presented in the celebrated Baedeker travel guides of the prewar era. According to the author, life in many parts of the Eastern Zone had been irrevocably changed by the influx of expellees and resettlers from the East and by the attendant tensions between members of these groups and the resident population. Prosperous and idyllic farming regions of days past were now crowded with people in need. In the countryside, an embattled rural population suffered from poverty, deprivation, and the pressure of “delivery quotas” to urban areas. In cities, the dismantling of industry and infrastructure contributed to a picture of overwhelming bleakness.

Source

Everything has changed, here as well as over there [*drüben*]. This is due in large part – here as well as over there – to the refugees’ arrival in the land. By now, they have stopped accepting expellees [*Vertriebenen*] in the Western Zone; in the Eastern Zone, however, new transports of expellees arrive day after day, and all of them end up in the so-called quarantine camps. Delousing, registration, medical checkup – that takes fourteen days. But the camps, which are under the direct control of the Central Office for Resettlement or the Soviet occupying authority, are not in bad shape. There are sanitary facilities, which have prevented the spread of even a single epidemic up to this point. The inmates of the quarantine camps are being relatively well provisioned – in fact, many households in the Eastern Zone do not have such nourishing food on their dinner table. The fact that many people still left the camps, not on foot, but rather in coffins – or the like – was solely attributable to the pitiful state of the expellees upon their arrival. There are also permanent camps of refugees. But their number – and this, especially, sounds unreservedly positive compared to conditions in the West – is small, whereby the resettlers [*Umsiedler*] doubtless owe their placement in apartments to the great energy of the state governments. Where do the resettlers come from? From Western Prussia, Pomerania, Silesia, the Wartheland, and recently also from the Russian-occupied part of Eastern Prussia. One misery is the same, though, here as well as over there: the natives regard the expellees as intruders, and the resettlers are therefore embittered. But in those places where the city, the community, or the church apply themselves with energy, a benefit can immediately be felt and conditions become bearable. On the other hand, wherever a long-term camp still exists in the Eastern Zone, one can infer that something is amiss with the authorities or the community. Mind you: in the Eastern Zone. This report says nothing about the Western Zone. [...]

There is the state of Mecklenburg. You visitors to Germany of old can forget what was written about Mecklenburg in Baedeker! The state has twice the population, while the other states of the Eastern Zone have grown only by a quarter. Mecklenburg, once a luxuriant, peaceful farming land, is crowded with people. In Castle Basthorst near Civitz, for example, 32 families, a total of around 150 people, live in 32 of its rooms. But each room has a stove that belongs to the families themselves. And the settlers say that this is something at least. The estate houses in the entire district of Parchim are densely occupied. Rural living, but few opportunities to get anything in addition, because the “delivery quota” of the farmers over there is tightly controlled; more tightly, apparently, than in the Western zones. The food makes its way to the cities, and as a result there are no potatoes in the village of Dobbertin, for example – it is among those villages that were especially hard hit by looting back then. But, unfortunately, even though the

cities see the “delivery quota” being met, they cannot return the favor to Mecklenburg’s rural population. No textiles, new settlers in rags. And the pastor of Dobbertin is still running around in his prisoner of war garb. No shoes: that has been seen especially in Güstrow, where, aside from that, there are no means of transportation to get workers to their jobs. Churchgoers in rags – that is what we hear about Wismar; in badly-destroyed Rostock, living conditions are said to be difficult; still, the long-term refugee camps have been dissolved. At least they accomplished this much in the badly destroyed city. [...]

In Saxony, too, which has always been one of Europe’s most densely populated areas, hunger rules the land. Previously, in Baedeker times, industry could repay what had to be contributed from the agricultural regions of the East. [...] Today, industrial dismantling has eaten away crucial parts of the factories, and the Eastern territories are no longer supplying anything, in any case. The bleakness of this situation makes it almost naturally clear that the reports about Saxony may mention good will here and there, but note little success.

And there is the March of Brandenburg. And there is Forst, once the famous “city of hats,” today overcrowded despite of all the rubble; and in the middle of it all is a transit camp reserved for “illegal border crossers.” In Guben, there is a sign by the train station: “Mission in service of solidarity with the people of the March.” People in Cottbus were saying that before the new harvest arrived, they had not seen a sliver of potato since Christmas, and that the meat markets frequently had no meat, but only cottage cheese [*Quark*]. Finally, there is Frankfurt an der Oder, the great station of transports from Russia, where a “packages from the West initiative” made it possible to help the returnees in the first place. Packages are a must! For what can a returnee do with the 50 DM he is paid in the transit camp of Cronenfelde? All the states of the Eastern Zone have their counseling centers in Frankfurt. But there are no counseling centers for returnees from the Western Zones. Memo: “The returning prisoners of war are now in a better state of health than before. Still devastating, however, is the sight of half-starved women returning from Russian forced labor camps.” [...]

According to the memos, the situation is worst, however, in the Oderbruch. Severely affected in the last year of the war, the area was dealt a death blow by the catastrophe that was the burst dam of last year. Most of the localities around Seelow are about 80 percent destroyed. Fallow fields as far as the eye can see; quickweed, thistles, reeds. Farmsteads with 200 or 300 acres but without a single horse. And many farmers do not have a single cow. Still, contrary to original pronouncements, a “delivery quota” still weighs on the farmers, who, when they plow, often have to yoke themselves to the plow. Faced with a terrible famine, the farmers are groaning about the “quota” of this “bureaucratic masterpiece.” Old Schwedt, the tobacco town of the Mark, has been hit so hard that the residents are living only in cellars: of the city’s 20,000 former residents, only 6,500 were left. Tuberculosis and a “tobacco quota,” which made it seemingly impossible for them to grow enough potatoes. Everything had changed since the Baedeker days. Only the Oder was still there. One could look across to the other side: no more arable land, fields; only weeds, brambles.

[...]

Source: Jan Molitor, “Was nicht im Baedeker steht. Kleiner Reiseführer durch die Ostzone”, *Die Zeit*, November 20, 1947; reprinted in Christoph Kleßmann and Georg Wagner, *Das gespaltene Land. Leben in Deutschland 1945-1990. Texte und Dokumente zur Sozialgeschichte*. Munich: C. H. Beck, 1993, pp. 62-64.

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