



BOOK REVIEW

Nicole Eaton, *German Blood, Slavic Soil. How Nazi Königsberg Became Soviet Kaliningrad*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023. xiii + 312pp. 4 plates. 11 figures. Bibliography. £31.00 hbk. \$14.00 ebk.
doi:[10.1017/S0963926824000270](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926824000270)

In *German Blood, Slavic Soil*, Nicole Eaton sheds new light on a corner of Europe that tends to go ignored, setting out to map ‘how Nazi Königsberg became Soviet Kaliningrad’ – a particularly timely question to ask given the current geopolitical climate. The work’s goal is to present ‘Königsberg and Kaliningrad as an entangled history of these two regimes, showing how they not only grew out of a common historical context, but also competed for the same geopolitical space and understood each other to be mortal enemies and competitors for the future of humanity’ (p. 6). A book on this topic is particularly welcome to English speakers: the German lands east of the Oder are often left out in discussions about Germany’s path through history.

Eaton’s first two chapters provide a highly readable summary of the current historiography of National Socialism in East Prussia. A welcome addition to this field is the trove of documents she found in the Olsztyn Archives, which scholars have thus far largely overlooked. The use of this archive, however, also raises a question that continues to linger throughout the book: Olsztyn, known until 1945 as Allenstein, lies in the southern part of the province, an area which after World War II would fall to Poland. As such, it fits somewhat awkwardly in the Königsberg/Kaliningrad story, leaving the reader to wonder what it is that this work exactly concerns itself with. Is it the city of Königsberg/Kaliningrad; is it the northern half of East Prussia, which later becomes Kaliningrad *Oblast*; or is it East Prussia as a whole?

Chapters 3 and 4, which examine the area’s downfall, plot a narrative that is familiar to most scholars of the region: that of the fight for the province and the flight of its native German population. Eaton’s analysis, it should be said, stays too close to the German victim narrative as it emerged in the 1950s. She presents Theodor Schieder, the controversial editor of the *Dokumentation der Vertreibung der Deutschen aus Ost-Mitteleuropa*, as a mere ‘émigré historian’ (p. 90), rather than as a man who earlier in his career at Königsberg’s Albertus-university had been at the forefront of deeply racist *Ostforschung*. By adopting his exculpatory telling of events, Eaton misses the opportunity to examine how and why some groups managed to leave while others stayed. Farmers left the province in higher numbers than urban populations; men drafted into the military went into allied captivity; the nobility used its networks to escape the province; doctors and specialists disproportionately had themselves ‘called away’ from Königsberg. Those who remained were forced to

interact with Red Army soldiers, whose time in the service, as Eaton convincingly shows, profoundly shaped ideas about Prussianism, Fascism and militarism. These ideas would in turn define relations in the post-war sphere.

The three final chapters examining Königsberg/Kaliningrad's immediate post-war era are by far the strongest of this work. It is clear that Eaton spent most of her time thinking about the plight of the city during these years. This section of the book nestles itself within three German works: Per Brodersen's *Die Stadt im Westen. Wie Königsberg Kaliningrad wurde*, which examines the city's administration and identity, Bert Hoppe's, *Auf den Trümmern von Königsberg. Kaliningrad 1946–1970*, which focuses on the architectural transformation of the city, and Eckhard Matthes and Yuri Kostjashov's *Als Russe in Ostpreußen*, which surveys the human dimensions of the immediate post-war era. Eaton painfully lays bare the interaction between the Soviet regime and the remaining German citizens, and should be praised for her efforts to show how the mentalities of the occupiers shifted from personal animosity to uneasy cohabitation.

Yet Eaton never truly puts her thesis to the test. The assorted statements of people like East Prussia's Gauleiter Erich Koch or the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin do not amount to a story of entanglement. Rather, both regimes actively tried to 'unweave' the region's cultural tapestry (to use Donald Bloxham's term), ignoring, rather than incorporating, the other's historic presence in the area. Presenting this as 'competition for the same geopolitical space' implies a sophistication in the political process for which little evidence exists. As Stalin had already told Churchill and Truman at Potsdam in July 1945: 'If a German administration were to pop up in Königsberg, we will drive them out. Drive them out, no matter what.' The book inevitably ends on a sombre note, with Eaton reconstructing in great detail how the decision to evict the entire native German population from Kaliningrad *Oblast* eventually won out over attempts at reconciliation or permanent cohabitation.

To initiated readers, especially those able to speak German, the book does not necessarily offer many new insights. But simply leaving it there does not do this work justice. This is the first scholarly endeavour to plot a course through the two most turbulent decades in the history of Königsberg/Kaliningrad. All major actors get their say, every event that would come to shape the region's history is given its due. Eaton has written a book that is deeply insightful and empathetic, and the work will surely find its place among a growing body of scholarship dedicated to Eastern Europe's transition from war to peace.

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