Politics of Plunder: Post-German Property and the Reconstruction of East Central Europe after the Second World War

(book projekt)

Around the end of the Second World War two processes dramatically changed the socio-economic landscape of East Central Europe: the expulsion of up to twelve million Germans and the establishment of a new social order inspired by the Soviet model. This project is an inquiry into the interconnectedness between these apparently distinct histories. My aim is to understand how the redistribution of property formerly owned by Germans shaped the post-war reconstruction of the social order in two countries whose territories were comprised of up to one third of the post-German lands: Poland and Czechoslovakia. The specific focus of this study lies in the illegal takeover of property left behind by Germans, attempts to control it and the associated discourse. Studying the destructive and productive effects of plunder offers me the opportunity to reveal how public security, economic stability and redistributive justice were negotiated at various intersecting levels. I show that the illegal property transfers were both an obstacle to the post-war reconstruction as well as an opportunity used by individuals and institutions to accelerate it. In more general terms, this reading highlights the critical role of the legally-opaque property arrangements to be found in any modern socio-economic order.