REETZ, 1945

A case study in wartime flight and civilian turmoil

by Janine Fubel

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Photo credit: A refugee convoy on the marketplace in Reetz on February 4, 1945: trucks covered with tarpaulins and horse-drawn wagons. Photo by Werner Carow. Signatur DX895 / Archiv der Stiftung Brandenburg, Free access - no reuse

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At the end of the war in 1945, the town of Reetz (Neumark) east of the Oder was transformed into a large evacuation centre where experiences of flight, deportation and expulsion intertwined.

> *28 January 1945. Germany. 38 kilometers since our last overnight stop (yesterday). We have managed 90 kilometers in two days. Germany has greeted us inhospitably, with snow flurries, fierce winds, and almost completely deserted villages. The people here, the Germans, fear the wrath of the Russians. They are fleeing, leaving behind all their belongings. [...] 30 January 1945. [...] The locals are terribly frightened. [...] Their homes have been ransacked and anything of use has been taken. But the lavishness of these houses—the furnishings and interiors—is almost indescribable. And the wealth and refinement of these people's possessions is overwhelming. Our Slavs will be amazed.*[1]
>
> ***Wladimir Gelfand, Soviet soldier***

At the end of January 1945, the Soviet army broke through the so-called Ostwall ("Eastern Wall"), a line of fortifications that had been constructed in the 1930s along the German-Polish border. Moving at a tremendous pace, Soviet troops advanced into the Pomeranian and Brandenburg regions of the Neumark, pushing forward to the Oder River, where their progress came to a temporary halt in early February.
Prior to this, columns of refugees and prisoners of war—driven westward under guard—had heralded the advance of the Red Army. At the end of the war, there were waves of deportations alongside both civilian and military flight. The full extent of this upheaval becomes strikingly clear in the example of the small German town of Reetz (today Recz, in Poland), where recovered diaries, letters, and photographs offer poignant glimpses into the experiences of those caught in the turmoil.[2] Despite official propaganda, there could be no talk of an orderly withdrawal, nor of a timely evacuation of the civilian population. Rather, the situation resembled the chaos of a crowded transit railway station and has been described as

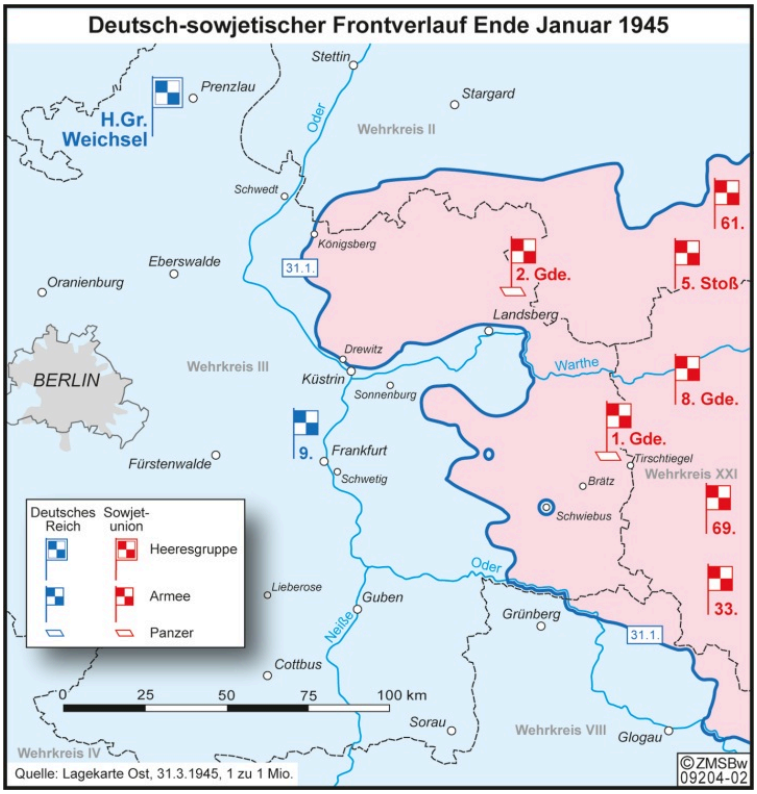
a “grim counterpart to the once-celebrated September campaign of 1939.”[3]

Reetz (Neumark)

The small town of Reetz lies on the Ina River, a tributary of the Oder, and belonged to the district of Arnswalde in the Neumark until 1945. The district had belonged to the Prussian province of Brandenburg until it was transferred to Pomerania in 1938 as part of an administrative reorganization. At that time, Reetz had a population of 3,646.[4] There was also a small Jewish community in the town. During the November pogrom of 1938, the synagogue and Jewish cemetery were destroyed.[5]
The German invasion of Poland in 1939 initially had only an indirect impact on this border town. Personnel from the Gabbert airbase to the north frequented Reetz as the closest small town, and some of them even lived there. During the war years, Reetz also saw an influx of women and children who had been evacuated from cities threatened by Allied air raids and relocated to the rural regions of eastern Germany.
In January 1945, as the major Soviet offensive on German territory began, streams of refugees from the nearby Reichsgaue of “Wartheland” and “Danzig–West Prussia”—the first areas to be affected—began moving westward. Just over two weeks later, the residents of Reetz—mostly women, children, and elderly people—also became swept up in the upheaval of flight and war.

The Theatre of War: Neumark 1945

On January 12, 1945, the Red Army launched its winter offensive. In the central sector of the Eastern Front—which would soon affect the town of Reetz—Soviet units that had assembled near Warsaw began their major assault two days later, with the goal of advancing toward Berlin. The Red Army held not only numerical and material superiority over the Wehrmacht, but also benefited from favorable weather conditions: snowdrifts made it easier to breach the defensive fortifications of the so-called Eastern Wall.
Within a short time, the Red Army broke through the resistance of the few scattered German units and triggered a mass exodus of refugees. Unlike in the First World War, this time the German side was unwilling to surrender as it retreated behind the borders of the Reich—now those of 1939. Instead, the forces under the command of Army Group “Vistula” launched a counteroffensive in February in the district of Arnswalde. As a result, Reetz experienced two separate evacuation orders and weeks of intense fighting. The reason was that the city had now come under the regulations governing “rear areas.”



German-Soviet front line at the end of January 1945. Zentrum für Sozialwissenschaften und Militärgeschichte der Bundeswehr, Free access - no reuse

The military term for “rear areas” (in German, “rückwärtige Gebiete”) referred to the zones immediately behind the front lines. These areas served to supply the units at the front and to support combat operations. Accordingly, they were to be cleared and “secured.” The Wehrmacht’s security units and the (field) police adhered to this principle even as the fighting shifted to German territory in 1944/45. Together with guard units, they cleared prisons and forced labor camps, took action against civilians who advocated for an end to the war and the peaceful surrender of their towns, and arrested German soldiers who no longer wished to fight. They also threatened forced laborers with death if they were found away from their workplaces—including those who were trying to obtain food—accusing them of looting. At the same time, they were responsible for managing streams of refugees to keep routes to the front clear for German military movements.

From the beginning of the Soviet winter offensive, the roads and railway stations of the Neumark region became scenes of disarray and confusion, as illustrated by the words of local resident Dora Münch:

> *Reetz, late January 1945. The town lies under a thick blanket of snow, and it is bitterly cold. For days now, the thermometer has shown between minus 18 and 20 degrees Celsius. When I go into town I freeze to my very core. And day after day, there's the same harrowing sight: endless columns of refugees heading west, fleeing the horrors of war. Their vehicles are piled high with household goods and provisions; in the wagons, elderly people and small children lie on beds of straw, mercilessly exposed to the cold. The market square has become one big military encampment, crammed with vehicles, livestock, and people. I'm shaken to see a dying woman lying in wet straw in an open wagon. Next to her, a young woman wraps her newborn child in blankets and pillows. Only one thought consumes me: I must get away from this chaos! But at the station outside town, my last hope deserts me. For weeks, endlessly long trains have been passing by. People hang off the freight cars like grapes, or squat with prams, boxes, and suitcases, even on the roof. How am I supposed to manage that with an eighteen-month-old child?*[6]

As German troops and trains carrying military equipment and ammunition moved eastward toward the front, German units and individual soldiers were retreating in the opposite direction. Prison and camp inmates were also being moved on foot away from the front lines. Guard units escorted them to areas considered safe from combat operations.
The roads were also crowded with civilians fleeing westward. The evacuation of civil institutions and civilians from the war-threatened areas had not been adequately planned in advance. Evacuation orders were only issued when the front was already within roughly 20 to 30 kilometers—in effect, it was a call to flee. Once an area had been abandoned by German forces, Wehrmacht engineering units destroyed bridges, as well as drinking water supplies, gas lines, and power grids. For those left behind, the consequences were devastating.

The End of the War in Reetz (Neumark), 1945

Although evacuation orders for the Arnswalde district were issued on January 28 and 29, 1945, only part of Reetz's population fled—and even then, not until February 4 and 5. German propaganda and the fortifications of the "Eastern Wall" had given many residents a false sense of security and made them unwilling to leave their hometown. People were also concerned about the fate of their homes and livestock. Added to this were the bitter winter temperatures far below freezing, which especially deterred elderly people and mothers with small children from attempting the journey on foot. As a result, most of the population hesitated even after the district mayors gave permission to depart and issued evacuation plans with Anklam as the destination—and people continued to wait, even when the power supply failed and the Red Army started their advance.
By the time Soviet units reached the town, only about a third of the population had fled. What finally triggered the exodus was the shelling of the nearby district capital, Arnswalde, by the Red Army on February 4. Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS units, which had arrived only days earlier, withdrew through Reetz toward Stargard (Szczecinski). Some of the civilian population followed. The refugee convoys, led by a column of Soviet prisoners from the POW camp in Arnswalde, signaled that the front was close. Guard units, supported by members of the Volkssturm, drove the prisoner column toward Stargard, from where the prisoners were to be deported further to a POW camp in Waren (Müritz).

Prisoners were the first to be transported out, in order to prevent any uprisings or interference during combat situations—which many of the prisoner transports encountered in January and February 1945.[7] The prospect of prisoners of war being liberated and then rearmed by the Red Army for renewed military deployment was to be avoided at all costs.[8]
The civilian population thus shared the escape routes with retreating Wehrmacht units and westward-bound columns of prisoners. The fleeing residents of Reetz joined the end of the prisoner convoy, inadvertently blocking any potential escape paths the prisoners might have used to reach Soviet forces. Together, they moved toward the Oder River.
Werner Carow's photographs capture the catastrophic atmosphere of a town population forced to flee under harsh winter conditions. In the cold and falling snow, the few available trucks and horse-drawn carts were hastily prepared with the help of members of the Wehrmacht and the Volkssturm. Only a limited number of trains were available for evacuating the Neumark region, but some were deployed in Reetz. The Ina River was frozen, making transport via water impossible. Carrying only a few belongings and with little protection from the elements, some of the population fled in convoys alongside refugees who had arrived in Reetz in the days before.

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A column of refugees gathered in Reetz's market square on February 4, 1945, with trucks covered by tarpaulins and horse-drawn wagons, Photograph by Werner Carow.

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A truck loaded with refugees and their belongings in front of the “Deutsches Haus” hotel on the market square in Reetz on February 4, 1945, Photograph by Werner Carow.

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Trucks with refugees at the market square in Reetz on February 4, 1945, Photo by Werner Carow.

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> Refugees with carts at the market square in Reetz on February 4, 1945, Photo by Werner Carow.

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> Refugee convoy in front of the “Deutsches Haus” hotel on the market square in Reetz on Febru-ary 4, 1945 , Photo by Werner Carow.

On February 6, Soviet units launched an attack on Reetz. During the night of February 7, assault troops entered the town. The occupation was accompanied by fierce fighting. Following the invasion, the Volkssturm was disarmed. Soviet soldiers requisitioned horses and motorcycles, occupied and looted homes, or set them on fire. Women and girls were subjected to rape. Death lists compiled by local residents testify to the high number of civilian casualties in Reetz. These victims were executed, died from illness, or took their own lives—in some cases as late as April, during the continuing Soviet occupation.

Immediately after the Red Army's arrival, the forced deportation of German men and women for labor also began. Those primarily targeted were individuals with proven membership in the Nazi Party—though mere suspicion was often enough. Meanwhile, French forced laborers deployed in the region, who had either not been driven westward or had gone into hiding, experienced the arrival of the Soviets as a liberation. With German troops launching counterattacks, the fighting around Reetz continued, so the Red Army evacuated the remaining civilian population from the combat zone. On February 12, an estimated 1,500 people who had not fled were forced to leave the town—"toward evening, the migration began,"[9] as one account puts it. They were relocated to more remote villages and, in some cases, had to change accommodations multiple times before being allowed to return three weeks later.

Afterward, the local population in Reetz was assigned to cleanup operations, dismantling machines designated for transport to the Soviet Union, providing medical care, or working as farm laborers. In the weeks and months that followed, refugees who had fled as far as Mecklenburg began to return and were required to find new housing and employment, the latter to be arranged through the local Soviet command post. By the time the fighting finally ended, it is estimated that around 80 percent of the town's residential buildings had been destroyed. Meanwhile, deportations for forced labor to the Soviet Union continued.

Following the formal transfer of the area east of the Oder River to Polish administration, the expulsion of the German population began in July. Gathered on Reetz's market square and placed under Polish guard, the emaciated residents—carrying what little they had left—set out on long journeys on foot toward the Oder River, into an uncertain future.

English translation: William Connor ↗

Footnotes

1. Gelfand, Wladimir: Deutschland-Tagebuch 1945–1946. Aufzeichnungen eines Rotarmisten. Berlin 2008, S. 28 f. ↥
2. For this article, I consulted letters, diaries, and photographs held in the archives of the Stiftung Brandenburg. Some of these sources have also been published in a source edition. See: „Man bleibt eben immer der Flüchtling." Eine Quellenedition zur Flucht und Vertreibung aus dem Kreis Arnswalde 1945–1947, edited by Klaus Neitmann. Berlin 2020. ↥
3. Hielscher, Alexander Karl: Das Kriegsende im Westen des Warthelandes und im Osten der Kurmark. Bielefeld 1987, p. II. ↥

4. Cf. Rademacher, Michael: Landkreis Arnswalde. Internet address: www.eirenicon.com/rademacher/www.verwaltungsgeschichte.de/arnswalde.html (last access 2024-12-18). ↥

5. Cf. Lexikon zur Geschichte der jüdischen Gemeinden im deutschen Sprachraum: Arnswalde (Neumark/Brandenburg). Internet address: https://www.jüdische-gemeinden.de/index.php/gemeinden/a-b/2230-arnswalde-neumark-brandenburg (last access 2024-12-18). ↥

6. Diary entries by Dora Münch, reprinted in: „Man bleibt eben immer der Flüchtling.“, pp. 131–135, here p. 131. ↥

7. Cf. Fubel, Janine: Evakuierungs- und Kriegsschauplatz Mark Brandenburg. Das Aufeinandertreffen von Ostfront und „innerer“ Front im Januar 1945. In: Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift 81,1 (2022), pp. 174–208, here p. 200f. ↥

8. Cf. Overy, Richard: Russlands Krieg 1941–1945. Reinbek 2012, p. 409. ↥

9. Letter from Christa Müller dated 3 June 1947, in: Archive of the Stiftung Brandenburg. ↥

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