

Controversy on a Planned Museum on “Flight, Expulsion, and Reconciliation” (November 12, 2008)

Abstract

A German historian describes the plan, advocated by refugee pressure groups, to create a new museum on “flight, expulsion, and reconciliation” which created much resentment in Poland and the Czech Republic since it focused on German suffering.

Source

The Debate: Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation

In March 2008, the German federal government decided to establish a dependent foundation “Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation” under the auspices of the German Historical Museum. Wolfgang Benz has been following the plans for the Center for Expulsions for several years now. In this article he traces the debate surrounding it.

In March 2008, the German federal government decided to establish a dependent foundation “Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation” under the auspices of the German Historical Museum. This was preceded by years of disputes over the project of a “Center Against Expulsions” vigorously promoted by the CDU politician Erika Steinbach, chair of the Federation of Expellees. Her project, which was also intended to serve as a memorial site recalling the sufferings of Germans expelled from their home regions in Eastern Europe, and at the same time as a documentation center, monument, museum and central venue for events, was vulnerable to attack. In the 1990s, the idea of an “Expulsion Center” very clearly propagated as a memory-political counterpoint to the “Foundation for the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe” divided public opinion.

The project also marred political relations with neighboring countries because people there, at least in Poland and the Czech Republic, were baffled by the initiator’s insistence that it be located in Berlin and nowhere else. The attempt to set up an internationally funded commemorative and documentation center in a European spirit in the cities of Breslau/Wroclaw or Görlitz/Zgorzelec, or perhaps also Prague, but at any rate not in Berlin, had prominent support but proved unsuccessful. Poland and the Czech Republic, made distrustful by the shrill tones of the Federation of Expellees’ project, exercised restraint.

National aspirations and the interests of the funding body

The discrepancy between the national aspirations of the Center against Expulsions and its funding body, namely a foundation of the Federation of Expellees, was also unusual. Finally, the political arguments, which stirred emotions but could not meet intellectual—i.e., scholarly and formal—criteria, were problematic. After all, they did not address the occasion for and causes of expulsion or the integrative achievements of the postwar FRG and GDR states, operating instead with finger pointing and analogies to the genocides of the twentieth century, and basing their demands on the assertion that the sufferings of twelve million Germans who lost their homelands after the Second World War had received scant attention and indeed even been a taboo.

The Federation of Expellees presented its positions in an exhibition entitled “Forced Paths” in the summer of 2006. Despite efforts at a more nuanced view than was evident from the original drafts, which had appealed solely to the emotions and blamed the “expeller states” Poland and Czechoslovakia, the political intentions were all too obvious, and became more so when the German Historical Museum

mounted an exhibition on the same topic, devised by the Haus der Geschichte in Bonn (Haus der Geschichte Foundation of the Federal Republic of Germany), which ran simultaneously to the Federation of Expellees' exhibition just down the road in Berlin's Kronprinzenpalais. This portrayal of German history, which was praised as balanced and thorough, will form the basis of the presentation in the future Documentation Center of the Federal Foundation Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation at Anhalter Bahnhof.

Political debates about the Center

The disagreements soon became a dispute between political parties. The SPD largely distanced itself from the project. The CDU, in contrast, adopted the Federation of Expellees' (BdV) demand for a commemorative and documentation center as part of its platform for the 2005 Bundestag elections and then was forced in the Grand Coalition with the SPD to find a compromise, which occurred in the spring of 2008: A "visible sign" was to be erected, but the design, contents and interpretation were not to be left up to the interest group BdV, but would grow out of a general societal consensus and sense of responsibility.

The law drafted by the minister of culture was preceded by diplomatic efforts that managed to dampen the suspicion and resentment in Prague and Warsaw that had become widespread since the insensitive campaigns to implement the Center against Expulsions project. Particularly in Poland, the propaganda used to push the BdV's plans had evoked fear and revived resentments that were openly voiced in often insulting tones on the official level by the Kaczynski government and in the Polish media. In a speech she gave on "Tag der Heimat" (Homeland Day) on September 6, 2008, Erika Steinbach made it clear that she did not believe that the federal Foundation Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation would fulfil the mission of the BdV's Center against Expulsions. She announced a new activity by her center, an exhibition to be shown in 2009 in the Bavarian state government representation in Berlin that would address the cultural and settlement history of the Germans outside the German Empire.

On the same occasion, the president of the Federation of Expellees also propagated a view of history in which the expulsion of the Germans from East-Central Europe took the form of genocidal intent. It was argued that she placed those expelled from their home regions on the same level as survivors of the Holocaust as victims of genocide (i.e., systematically planned and implemented extermination)—under protest from historical experts, however. The nationalist conservative Polish media were not the only ones to smell political calculation. The underlying notion of history is yet another good argument for the new institution under the aegis of the central German museum of history, that is under public and professional control, motivated by the desire to educate and illuminate and underpinned by historical research.

The future "visible presence"

The "visible presence" of the Foundation Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation will be built on two floors of the Deutschlandhaus in Berlin near Anhalter Bahnhof (and not far from the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe). It will be some time before the remodeling (for which 29 million euros have been allocated) is completed. Before then, there could be disputes over personnel issues. The foundation board is supposed to consist of representatives of the federal government, the Bundestag and societal groups; three seats are planned for the Federation of Expellees. If the Federation's president places her own self-regard above the requisite diplomatic restraint, she will be criticized again. Wladyslaw Bartoszewski, a Polish historian and friend of the Germans who in his capacity as secretary of state to the prime minister in Warsaw is responsible for matters of German-Polish neighborly relations, expressed concerns that, once on the board of the new foundation, Ms. Steinbach would rekindle the old Polish fears of German revisionism and the resulting resentments in Poland. This would call into question the foundation's aim of reconciliation and endanger the intention to install the exhibition and documentation center as "sites of dialogue."

Source: Wolfgang Benz, „Zur Debatte: Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung“, in *Dossier: Geschichte und Erinnerung*, Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, November 12, 2008.

<http://www.bpb.de/geschichte/zeitgeschichte/geschichte-und-erinnerung/39826/flucht-vertreibung-versoehnung?p=0>

Translation: Pam Selwyn

Recommended Citation: Controversy on a Planned Museum on “Flight, Expulsion, and Reconciliation” (November 12, 2008), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/a-new-germany-1990-2023/ghdi:document-5280>> [May 15, 2024].