

The German Historical Museum Aims for an Open View of the Past (June 2, 2006)

Abstract

The German Historical Museum opens after almost twenty years of heated scholarly debate on the appropriate presentation of the German past. A journalist describes the upbeat mood at the official opening and goes on to discuss the nature of the museum, which emphasizes the presentation of historical artifacts and aims for “authenticity instead of display,” in the words of director Hans Ottomeyer. The journalist expresses general enthusiasm for the museum’s permanent exhibition, which walks visitors through the highest and lowest points in 2,000 years of German history, but also points to critical voices.

Source

“It’s done!”

It was as though God, too, had given his blessing. At the very moment that Minister of Culture Bernd Neumann declared the large, permanent exhibition “German History in Images and Artefacts” officially open, the bells of Berlin Cathedral chimed.

But on earth, as well, in the marvelous, light-filled Schlüterhof of the arsenal Unter den Linden, an armory built under Prince Elector Friedrich III and the pantheon of the Prussian military, there was a palpable sense of friendly ease, a cheerful lightness, which otherwise isn’t exactly a hallmark of German history.

Whoever wanted to could read this atmosphere of joyful relaxation as a practical commentary on the current patriotism debate, which seems to revolve chiefly around the question of who was the first to feel the new love for Germany in the area above his beer belly.

The sun was shining through the translucent roof, a cute baby boy of just under a year was crawling peacefully, pacifier in mouth, across the light-colored stone floor, the Vice President of the German Bundestag, Wolfgang Thierse, casually joined journalists at one of the standing tables in the back, and in the first row Helmut Kohl’s radiant visage seemed visible even to those who could only see him from behind.

Not without good reason: on this morning, no name was mentioned as often as his. It is the former chancellor who is chiefly to thank for the fact that now, after almost twenty years of preparation, the German Historical Museum [*Deutsches Historisches Museum* or DHM] can finally present its programmatic exhibition on 2,000 years of German history. Even Berlin’s incumbent mayor, Klaus Wowereit, who raised his glass for a toast with the words “It’s done!,” emphasized this fact straight out: “And I say this emphatically as a Social Democrat.”

When Helmut Kohl gave voice to the idea of a Museum of German History in the mid-1980s, he and the later founding director Christoph Stölz encountered massive criticism. It was the time of the passionate *Historikerstreit* [“Historians’ Quarrel”] over Auschwitz and the gulag and the comparability of the Communist and Fascist logic of annihilation.

Leftist intellectuals warned against a neo-national historiography with a reactionary tendency, against

putting a sparkling gold gloss on the past, and, naturally, against the relativization of German responsibility for the war and the Holocaust; in short: against a dangerous historical-political turn back to the *Biedermeier* era of a hypocritical Reich of the German Nation.

None of that has come to pass. On the contrary. All the great debate about Nazi terror and the destruction of the Jews, about German guilt and national responsibility, took place during the last twenty years. The exhibit, too, shows no lack of clarity when it comes to these things.

Still, the eternal question of whether, and if so, how, we can learn from history continues to hang in the air. But there is something new, which goes largely unnoticed, probably because we have gotten used to it in the meantime: that German history also knows happy moments when liberty and unity found each other – the old dream of the revolutionaries of 1848.

In her speech, Chancellor Angela Merkel pointed to a noteworthy coincidence, to a “moment pregnant with history at a place pregnant with history.” For the baroque arsenal housed not only Prussia’s armory, but – until 1989 – also the GDR Museum for German History, where, in strict Marxist-Leninist fashion, Thomas Müntzer and the peasants’ wars in the late Middle Ages already seemed to point toward Erich Honecker, Egon Krenz, Erich Mielke, and the Central Committee of the SED.

“Historical-dialectical materialism” it was called back then, an immutable natural law of historical development, which had achieved its climax for the time being in the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Merkel reminded her listeners explicitly of this unhappy legacy, which, in the fortunate moment of the fall of the Wall and reunification, was united dialectically and congenially with Kohl’s museum plans. Despite its ideological orientation, the collection of the GDR museum, a very practical stroke of good fortune, contained irreplaceable treasures, an abundance of rare original pieces.

Soon after the *Wende* of 1989/90 it was clear that a German national museum, whose preferred name in the end was “German Historical Museum,” could find its ideal home only in the old arsenal – between the Lustgarten and the Brandenburg Gate, between the Alte Nationalgalerie and the Kronprinzenpalais.

Here, according to Merkel, no “view of history” will be foisted upon anyone. Everyone should draw his own picture of the “heights and depths of days gone by.” Perhaps the largely still “divided memory” in East and West could be reconciled through historical contemplation – possibly to a view of history that is devoid of pseudo-scientific natural laws, but is “open, multifaceted, and comprehensive.” A differentiated historical consciousness that would contribute to the nation’s direction and identity.

Proud DHM director Hans Ottomeyer – “I am extremely happy, struggling for words” – pointed out that the audience for his museum, which also includes a wonderful glass addition built by Chinese-American architect [I.M.] Pei to house rotating exhibitions, is extraordinarily young.

“History is en vogue,” Obermeyer noted and highlighted the concept behind the museum once more: authenticity instead of display. Not a replacement for the study of history or the reading of hefty books, but the offer of an overall impression that is sensory, first off, and capable of triggering different thoughts and emotions in each visitor.

During the subsequent tour of the two-story exhibition, the chancellor wasn’t the only one overwhelmed by the approximately 8,000 exhibits in an overall space of 7,500 square meters – from the completely “armored” knightly steed with rider to the uniform of Friedrich II, from an anti-aircraft gun to Dürer’s portrait of Charlemagne, from a medieval gold coin to the wash basin of a working-class family around 1900, from sparingly deployed film and video installations to an original handcart, the kind used by expellees from the former Eastern part of the German Reich as they fled towards the West.

It is impossible to even begin to convey the diversity of the exhibited objects, which are arranged in rough chronological order and accompanied by brief texts in German and English, organized according to historical epoch and, not least, put into their European context.

The spatial arrangement is generous and makes sense, even if the abundance and attractiveness of the objects tempts at least the hurried visitor to wander about in a confused zigzag.

A few critics have decried the “conceptual restraint” and “interpretive reluctance” of “museum cases arranged like a construction set,” and, like *FAZ* feuilleton editor Patrick Bahner, they speak rather derogatorily of a spectacle “devoid of deeper meaning and mystery,” one that is, in the final analysis, nothing more than a “walkable school textbook.” The smug conclusion: “The well-ordered positivism of the German Historical Museum may be counted as a democratic achievement.”

Thus the aristocrat of the mind speaks about “a people that no longer wants to be disturbed by its history.”

We understand.

While some are indulging in their hollow patriotism, others are thirsting for a philosophy of history, for the great transcendental accomplishment. And in the middle of all of this is the museum. It invites you to stroll, to look and wonder, to read and think, relaxed and yet full of curiosity.

Source: Reinhard Mohr, “Es ist vollbracht!”, *Spiegel Online*, June 2, 2006.
<http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/0,1518,419500,00.html>

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