

Helmut Kohl on the Creation of a German Historical Museum as a Contribution to National Unity (October 28, 1987)

Abstract

On Berlin's 750th anniversary, Chancellor Helmut Kohl announces the creation of a German Historical Museum in the Western part of the city as a reminder of the Germans' shared past and as a symbol of hope for reunification.

Source

Berlin Remains the Focal Point of the German Question

Today Berlin celebrates its 750th birthday. On this day 750 years ago, the city was mentioned in writing for the first time. On this anniversary, I would like to warmly congratulate all Berliners: in the name of the federal government and also in the name of all of the citizens of our republic.

We have gathered here to officially mark the founding of the German Historical Museum. This museum is a birthday present to Berlin from the federal government. [...] There is hardly a place more tightly linked to our German history and better suited to be the seat of this museum than the former German capital. Our history is reflected in its past and present fate. [...]

In the initial planning phase of the German Historical Museum, we were well aware of the fact that we were facing an extraordinary task. I myself continually stressed that it is a national task on a European order. The creation of the museum is a necessary political and cultural undertaking—it is of great significance for our divided nation and beyond that also for our neighbors. [...]

In recent years, many people have learned through experience that a clear determination of our place in the present is only possible if we are aware of the continuum of which we are part. Many feel that the repression of history lessons, undertaken in the name of enlightenment and better critical-thinking skills, has caused precisely the opposite of true enlightenment. Young people especially are discovering that a lack of knowledge about the past is blocking their path to personal and social maturity. They notice that without history people are homeless and rootless, at the mercy of the particular zeitgeist without any kind of support.

For us Germans, the question of our history presents itself in a special way: we must never forget the experience of the National Socialist dictatorship, which brought immeasurable suffering to other peoples and to our own. We feel the pressure to learn a lesson. This requires that we deal with history in a responsible way. According to the conception of the German Historical Museum, the period of National Socialism will also be presented as a significant part of our history and will occupy substantial space in the museum.

Dealing with our history in a way that is responsible, reflective, and avoids one-sided lecturing is possible only if history is presented as objectively as possible according to the proven standards of serious scholarship. In planning the establishment of the German Historical Museum, the federal government allowed itself to be guided by this conviction. Therefore, it commissioned a panel of experts comprised of highly qualified, independent scholars and museologists to develop the museum's conception. [...]

To be sure, a museum cannot be a substitute for the direct observation of cultural landscapes conditioned by history and for historically significant sites. But it can provide a stimulus that awakens curiosity and the joy of discovery. I would therefore like to encourage our young citizens especially: use the opportunities granted to your generation to encounter our history in the places where it is manifested, in landscape planning, architecture, and the fine arts.

In particular, make use of the chance to travel to the GDR. In doing so, you not only will broaden your horizons but also will contribute to greater human understanding within our fatherland. You will experience firsthand the extent to which all Germans' sense of togetherness derives from the irrepressible sources of language, culture, and also history.

The German Historical Museum gains its political significance as a national task on a European order especially against the background of the division of our homeland. There is only one common history of the Germans: a long, varied, and above all continuous one. By dealing with our history, we are keeping alive the consciousness of that which links all Germans to each other. The German Historical Museum will at the same time show us how diverse our common cultural and historical heritage is.

I would like to emphasize the museum's significance with the gift that I will later present to you, Dr. Stölzl, as director of the German Historical Museum. It is the first printed edition of *The Song of the Germans* by Hofmann von Fallersleben.^[1] His passionate call for "unity, justice, and freedom for the German fatherland" has since proven to be the decisive leitmotif in German history until the present day. People's desire for freedom, self-determination, and unity has remained unbroken. It cannot be stifled, not even in such a long period of non-freedom [*Unfreiheit*] and heteronomy. This alone justifies our confidence that the present division of the country cannot be permanent.

In addition, the people of Germany are suffering from separation—by a wall that stands in their way and repels them. They want to come together because they belong together. I believe that the development of Germany policies over the last few years has impressively confirmed that the consciousness of the unity of the nation in both parts of Germany is not only unbroken but has also grown even stronger in recent weeks and months. [...]

Despite the necessity of working together with the states of the Warsaw Pact to serve the mutual benefits and good of the people, we must constantly remember that the dividing line that presently runs through Europe is the dividing line between democracy and dictatorship, between freedom and non-freedom [*Unfreiheit*]. There is no middle road for us Germans to take; that is one of the decisive lessons of our history. Konrad Adenauer aptly described the conclusions that can be drawn from this. When the Federal Republic of Germany became a sovereign state on May 5, 1955, he declared: "There is only one place for us in the world, on the side of the free peoples. Our goal is a free and united Germany in a free and united Europe." [...]

The people in central Europe have certainly been influenced in a special way by their shared historical and cultural roots. The German Historical Museum will clearly demonstrate this to us. But central Europe's historical common ground was not able to stop the political division of Europe. The actual cause of this division is that the people on the other side of the dividing line that runs through Europe are being deprived of freedom and self-determination. Freedom remains the central aspect of the German Question, which will always also be a "European Question." It remains the prerequisite for overcoming the opposition between East and West.

This opposition can be overcome only by a lasting, comprehensive, European order of peace, in which human rights for all the peoples of Europe are realized, undivided and undiminished. Now as before, Berlin remains the focal point of the open German Question. Policies committed to freedom must therefore always be put in the service of this European metropolis of freedom.

[...]

The German Historical Museum, which is being established near the Berlin Wall—albeit not in its shadow—will deepen the consciousness of the sense of belonging together that exists among the people in divided Germany. We know that all Germans have a single, common history. From this knowledge comes the confidence that the future of Germany and Europe will be a common future—a future in which Berlin is a bridge between free people.

NOTES

[1] Hoffmann von Fallersleben was a nineteenth century romantic poet who wrote the German national anthem from which this quotation stems—eds.

Source: Helmut Kohl, “Berlin bleibt Brennpunkt der Deutschen Frage,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, October 29, 1987. Republished with permission.

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Recommended Citation: Helmut Kohl on the Creation of a German Historical Museum as a Contribution to National Unity (October 28, 1987), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/two-germanies-1961-1989/ghdi:document-1158>> [January 21, 2025].