

Reconciling with Expulsion

Erika Steinbach and the Controversy Over the Center Against Expulsions

Brigitta Helbig-Mischewski | **The conflict between Poland and Germany over expellees is becoming ever more emotional. What is at stake is no less than the collective memory of Europe and the victory of an ultimate narrative of the Second World War and its consequences. At the center of the controversy is Erika Steinbach—but her role depends on other, deeper concerns.**

In February 2008, Erika Steinbach, chairwoman of the government-sponsored German Federation of Expellees, subject of renewed controversy in recent months, complained to a *Spiegel* reporter: “I could stand on my head and catch flies with my feet, it wouldn’t make any difference. In Poland I am misrepresented, distorted and insulted.” And she is correct. How has it come about that this CDU politician, who is highly regarded in Germany, especially within CDU/CSU circles, has advanced in recent years to become the collective embodiment of the enemy for the Polish people?

Władysław Bartoszewski, the 87 year old former Auschwitz inmate and the Polish government’s foreign policy advisor on German relations, described her at the beginning of 2009 as “anti-Polish” and denied her the moral right to occupy a seat on the advisory committee of the German federal foundation “Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung” (Flight, Expul-

sion, Reconciliation). She is a continual target of attacks in the Polish media. The weekly magazine *Wprost* pictured Steinbach on the front cover of its edition 39/2003 wearing an SS uniform and riding on Chancellor Schröder’s back. The German media spoke of Polish hysteria or mass psychosis.

From the temperature of the debate surrounding Steinbach it is clear that a highly emotionalized controversy between Poland and certain political forces within Germany is being carried out on her back. At issue are profound differences in historical understanding, especially in regard to an assessment of the significance of expulsions. What is at stake is the collective memory of Europe, and which narrative of the Second World War and its consequences is victorious. The Polish side criticizes Germans for increasingly placing the emphasis on their own victims, seeing in this a danger of blurring proportions and relativizing German guilt and responsibility

for the Nazi atrocities. The Poles are accused of claiming a monopoly on the victim status and attempting to gloss over their retaliatory crimes.

The conflict began approximately ten years ago. In the summer of 2000, together with the SPD politician Peter Glotz, Steinbach established a foundation with the intended aim of erecting a “Center Against Expulsions” in Berlin as a memorial to the fate of German and other Europeans expelled after the Second World War. The “Center” initiative encountered opposition from both Polish and Czech as well as many Jewish and German intellectuals, especially from the ranks of the SPD, the Greens, and the Left Party. Many were alarmed at the decision to establish the foundation’s headquarters in Berlin, as well as the leading role of the BdV (Bund der Vertriebenen—German Federation of Expellees)—for, as Marek Edelman said, “in politics it is not so important what is said, but who is saying it.” The German Federation of Expellees is viewed with extreme suspicion in Poland due to its decades-long resistance to recognizing the Oder-Niese border and its raising of compensation claims against Poland. At a festive gathering of the BdV, Gerhard Schröder condemned the expulsions as unjust, but he rejected the demands of the expellees to erect a memorial in Berlin as well as all territorial demands.

The public debate began in the spring of 2002, coming to a head in the spring of 2003. The Polish intellectuals Adam Michnik and Adam Krzemiński proposed Wrocław as a possible site for such a memorial, a suggestion taken up by Markus Meckel (SPD). The traditionally BdV-

friendly CDU supported the foundation’s concept, while the coalition fraction demanded a stronger European orientation—an approach supported by the state presidents Kwaniewski and Rau as well as the German government’s foreign policy advisor on Poland, Gesine Schwan. Although a “European Network for Remembrance and Solidarity” was founded (2005), the initiative eventually fizzled out. Meanwhile, the media war was in full swing—the reaction in Poland, governed by the Kaczyński brothers, was especially fierce, but the tone in Germany was also becoming increasingly harsh.

Internationally recognized authorities in Poland raised objections to the project. The commander of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, Marek Edelman, now deceased, described the project as a “purely political, nationalist and chauvinist affair” and raised concerns that the denazification process in Germany was far from complete. Expulsion was to be understood as punishment for Hitler’s crimes and the enthusiasm of the majority of the German population for his politics. The philosopher Leszek Kołakowski, also deceased, expressed the opinion that a “Berlin monument... could underline territorial claims for which there is no justification.” Significantly, monuments have not been built for worse crimes such as the mass murder of German prisoners or the raping of German women by Red Army soldiers, as these “would be a useless provocation of Russia and could not form the basis for any restitution claims.”

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On the question of how Germans should remember their victims, the editor-in-chief of *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Adam Michnik, answered: “Above all you should remember who you have to thank for being expelled—not the Poles, not the Russians, not the English, not the Americans, but Hitler, only Hitler, and once again HITLER.” A number of German and Polish scientists and stakeholders from the cultural sector (including the historians of eastern Europe Hans Henning-Hahn and Eva Hahn) warned in a signed statement from September 2003 that the erection of a monument “part-

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ly financed by public funds” would pose the threat of a “state sanctioned ‘decontextualization of the past,’ ‘revision of history’ and the ‘torpedoing of the European dialog.’”

In his commemorative speech on November 9, 2005, Dieter Graumann, Vice President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, spoke of the project in the following words: “The reinterpretation of history in Germany is proceeding apace. In the meantime we are only presented with victims of World War II, in particular, German victims. One asks oneself: where were the perpetrators then?... It is precisely amongst the expellees where you will find large numbers who... enthusiastically supported the Nazi regime and its crimes over years...” In his opinion, a “center against expulsions” in Berlin would also represent an embarrassing provocation to all east European neighbors. Graumann emphasized, “If one were to actually build such a center in Berlin... then one would be advised

to... pull down the new Holocaust monument at the same time.”

Immediately following the change of government in November 2005, a clause was included in the coalition agreement announcing the intention to establish a “visible symbol” in Berlin against the injustice of expulsions. Angela Merkel promised that the documentation center would be designed in “the spirit of reconciliation.” In December 2008 the federal foundation “Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung” was founded. It was decided that the memorial center would be housed in the Deutschlandhaus at Anhalterbahnhof. The conversion would cost 20 million euros, with the Federal Government committing 2.4 million euros annually to the “visible symbol.” The legal entity is the Deutsches Historisches Museum (German Historical Museum). The main focus of the permanent exhibition will be on the fate of Germans, while accompanying exhibitions will commemorate other expellees. CDU politicians expressed their satisfaction that “many absurd taboos” have now fallen. In February 2009 a new controversy erupted. The subject was the 13 seats on the foundation’s advisory committee. Three of them were to be occupied by the BdV. The German Federation of Expellees proposed Steinbach, igniting a fierce dispute culminating in an open exchange of letters between the Auschwitz survivor Władysław Bartoszewski and the President of the German Bundestag, Norbert Lammert. The BdV accused Poland of interfering in German domestic politics in an unacceptable fashion, and the German government (which considered blocking Stein-

bach's candidature) of a lack of democratic understanding. As the SPD opposed Steinbach's membership in the foundation's advisory committee, the BdV resolved, in a demonstrative act, to leave their candidate's seat temporarily unoccupied, as a sign that they were not to be "blackmailed." The Polish historian Tomasz Szarota and the German historian Claudia Kraft resigned from the foundation's circle of advisors. However, the Poles rejoiced too soon. Following the formation of a new coalition with the FDP in the fall of 2009, the issue was back on the table. The BdV insisted on Steinbach's candidature, placing the Federal Government under pressure.

At the end of 2009 the BdV presented the Chancellor with what amounted to an ultimatum. By the end of December the Federal Government should have come to a decision as to whether it was prepared to accept Erika Steinbach's nomination for the advisory committee. Prior to this Guido Westerwelle, out of respect for Polish sentiments, called for Steinbach to stand down. As the Federal Government did not respond to the BdV's demands, in January 2010 Steinbach proposed to the coalition government that she relinquish her seat in exchange for the fulfillment of certain conditions. These included, amongst other things, the enlargement of the number of BdV members on the foundation's advisory committee (although the BdV already claimed 3 seats) and the disassociation of the foundation from the German Historical Museum, which was meant to provide a guarantee against tendentious representations. Furthermore,

the BdV was to be given the right to name the members of the advisory committee, thus preventing a further "political imposition on our victims' organization."

On February 11, 2010, the partners agreed to a compromise which represented a significant concession to the BdV. The BdV received six seats on the foundation's advisory committee. However, the demand for the disassociation of the foundation from the German Historical Museum was not met. The SPD, including the Vice President of the Bundestag, Wolfgang Thierse, sharply criticized this solution, seeing it as a result of "Erika Steinbach's blackmail attempt." This time Poland responded cautiously, expressing satisfaction with the outcome (Steinbach no longer sat on the

foundation's advisory committee), even though the majority of the

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BdV's demands were met and the organization's influence on the design of the "visible symbol" would grow. In Poland efforts were now concentrated on the construction of the Museum of the Second World War in Danzig, which, under international participation and in the appropriate context, is also designed to commemorate the expulsion of the Germans.

Why is Steinbach so unpopular in Poland and what is the reason for Poland's vehement opposition to the project?

Erika Steinbach, as speaker of the BdV, lacks credibility in Poland as she is actually not an expellee. She was born in 1943 on Polish territory, in

Rumia, close to Danzig, and fled from the Red Army together with her mother and sister in January 1945. Steinbach's father, who originated from Hanau in Germany, entered Poland as a soldier of the occupying army. Her mother came from Bremen. This is not a case of the expulsion of people from their homeland, but of flight from occupied territory. Steinbach's response: "You don't have to be a whale to defend whales." However, it would certainly be more credible to be a whale in order to represent whales.

The figure of 1.5 million expellees repeatedly cited by the BdV is misleading and disputed amongst historians. There is a considerable lack of clarity as to which groups of people are included in these figures. In addition to expellees, i.e. forced evacuees, the figure includes refugees and ethnic German repatriates, that is, numerous descendants of non-expelled Germans,

who, in the majority of cases, have returned voluntarily to Germany and continue to do so.

Above all, Erika Steinbach is accused of voting against the German-Polish Border Treaty in 1990 as the expellees' property matters had not been regulated. She insisted on the safeguarding of expellees' property rights and right of return, and attempted to link this theme to the European Union's eastern expansion.

Steinbach also antagonized Poland by failing to place primary responsibility for the expulsions at the door of the Nazi regime. "The Germans were expelled as a result of National Socialism, however they are not victims of

National Socialism.... Other persons were actively responsible." Thus Steinbach is representative of the tendency in Germany to paste over the fact that the shifting of Poland's borders was decided on by the allied powers in Potsdam as a consequence of the war. In the minds of many Germans, Poland annexed these territories more or less independently. Equally lacking in the social consciousness of Germans is the extent to which Poland was affected by the terror of war and occupation, or that it lost its eastern territories as a result of the resolutions of the Yalta Conference, receiving Germany's eastern territories in exchange.

Steinbach is undoubtedly correct in asserting that there were acts of retaliation before the Potsdam Conference and that the resettlement of Germans was often carried out in an inexcusable, inhuman fashion. The crimes committed in this connection are the subject of intense debate in today's Poland, even if Steinbach is of the opinion that "many Poles feel this all to be unjust," which doesn't guarantee them "an impeccable victim status." The historian Tomasz Szarota stated: "After the war it was clear: We are a nation of victims, the Germans a nation of perpetrators. However we were also forced to recognize that Poles were also Holocaust bystanders. Later, during the debate on Jedwabne, we learnt that a number of us were also accessories to the crime.... In Germany the process proceeded in the opposite direction: the Germans are increasingly turning to their role as victims."

However, what incenses the Poles more than anything else is the thesis voiced by Steinbach that the expul-

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sions were, so to speak, the realization of the “Polish drive westwards,” which, without Hitler, could not have been put into practice. According to this thesis, National Socialism was only the excuse for the expulsions. It is as the result of such statements that reconciliatory gestures on the part of Steinbach, such as the exhibition on the Warsaw Uprising organized by the BdV, are not honored as such. The same applies to the BdV exhibition “Erzwungene Wege” (Forced Paths), which also documented the fate of Polish (and other) expellees. The suspicion is that these are just alibi activities and an attempt to place the fate of Germans on a par with the suffering of other victim nations, thus denying one’s own share of the responsibility.

Steinbach also does not honor Poland’s interest in the German expellees sufficiently. The expulsions were as little subject to taboos in Poland after 1989 as they were in the Federal Republic. If it is really about empathy and compassion, as the President of the BdV emphasizes in her speeches, then the expellees actually become a great deal of it in Poland. As Steinbach herself admits, friendship and cooperation have long existed at the private and municipal level. Polish historians and stakeholders from the cultural sector have also explored this theme extensively. Writers such as Stefan Chwin, Olga Tokarczuk, Inga Iwasiów, Artur Liskowacki and others have highlighted the fate of the Germans in an impressive fashion. The scientific and cultural dialog is far more advanced than the political. The German cultural heritage is maintained with great dedication in Dan-

zig/Gdansk, Breslau/Wroclaw, Stettin/Szczecin. When expulsion is examined as an “existential experience,” as the committed advocate of the “visible symbol,” publicist and author Helga Hirsch formulated it, then there shouldn’t be any problems with empathy. Problems emerge as soon as the theme takes on a political dimension.

In Steinbach’s speeches it is possible to identify (hidden in the linguistic structure) a tendency to draw a parallel between Hitler’s crimes and the expulsions. For example, in her well-meaning words to the Poles/Czechs: “Neither the Germans are a nation of National Socialists, nor the Poles/Czechs a nation of expellers.” Steinbach also refers to the BdV as a “victim organization” on a noticeably frequent basis.

What is obscured Steinbach tends, consciously or not, to draw parallels between Hitler’s crimes and the expulsions. The part of expellees to an “impeccable” victim status are equally illegitimate, and many of them carry an individual burden of guilt. The BdV’s anachronistic “God and fatherland rhetoric,” designed to provide a religious-patriotic legitimation for political concerns, also awakens mistrust. This rhetoric leaves an unpleasant taste in the mouth, especially in Germany.

Unfortunately Steinbach occasionally strikes the wrong (back slapping) tone when she speaks about Poles, i.e. Eastern Europeans, e.g.: “I have understanding for Polish emotions. In the post-communist countries it will take a further 20 years before they have come to terms with themselves. It took us that long here in Germany

too.” Poles react sensitively to such schoolmistressy tones, especially as they are aware that many people in Germany still adopt a condescending attitude towards Poland, cultivating humiliating prejudices which have a very long history. As is known (although far too little), Slavs were regarded as subhumans under National Socialism, and school books depicted Poland as a half-Asiatic, primitive, even barbaric country. It takes generations before the last echoes of this attitude have been overcome.

The German Federal Republic should remember its victims, and where appropriate, the loss of its eastern territories, in its own way. To this day the expellees have the feeling that they have paid a higher price for the war than other Germans and that they have not received sufficient compensation from the rest of German society. According to Tomasz Szarota, the center is, above all, “about a reconciliation between the expellees and the other Germans.” This reconciliation, i.e. moral atonement, appears to be justified. Nevertheless, it is a shame that it will be a national, not a pan-

European, center. That Erika Steinbach does not have a seat on the foundation’s advisory committee is of mere symbolic significance. The controversy surrounding the BdV President is actually an expression of deeper-seated political and inter-cultural problems, problems which have been personalized for far too long. The issue is Germany’s and Poland’s unresolved common past and diverging historical perceptions. The efforts of Germans to bring about Franco-German reconciliation have had a model character. In the case of Poland, things have not been so straightforward. There is more underlying aggression, whereby the pain of expulsion and the territorial losses, the extent of one’s own responsibility and the German image of Poland play a role.



BRIGITTA HELBIG-MISCHEWSKI teaches at Humboldt University of Berlin and co-edited the book *Deutsche und Polen im heutigen Europa*.