

HISTORY AND MUSEUMS IN GERMANY

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The notion of the "loss of history" was a much-used slogan in West Germany during the 1970s. There is hardly a better way to describe the Germans' difficult relationship to history. In the light of the then most recent history of the West German state, this notion became one of the media's most popular explanations for the Germans' "apathy towards history" to quote another idea from the postwar period. In 1974 Gustav Heinemann, opening the memorial to freedom movements throughout German history in Rastatt, saw "various plausible reasons" why, after the collapse and catastrophe of 1945, the Germans remained and had to remain for so long "in a consciously nurtured preliminary condition", among them the lack of German sovereignty under the occupying powers and the Germans' difficult relationship to recent history. The repressed consciousness of collective shame and guilt, of disgrace,

and the loss of honour and of any sense of purpose led not only to the repression of recent history, but also to a fundamental questioning of history in general, since this was seen as a purely fatal process. In addition to this, the urgent task of reconstruction and the economic miracle of the 1950s provided a welcome distraction from the need to address history. Golo Mann summed up what a great many people felt: "We have experienced history in such a horrific way that we are no longer able to credit earlier historical conditions with any moral value".

A lack of knowledge and an unconscious, emotional and intuitive form of rejection thus meant that broad sections of the population in the postwar period had a prejudiced view of history. This German prejudice against history can be shown in three areas: first, the treatment of historical monuments, secondly the changes made to the

teaching of history in schools, and thirdly the redefinition of historical and national museums as museums of arts and crafts.

1. Until the 1980s, historical buildings and monuments were still being removed from German cities. Monuments that had already been removed were not replaced, and important historical buildings were deliberately demolished. The debates on the rebuilding of significant artistic monuments exemplified in Berlin by the cases of the Berlin Stadtschloss which had been blown up in 1950 and Karl Friedrich Schinkel's academy of architecture can be seen as nothing less than a far reaching German trauma. Other European nations approached the task of rebuilding with no

comparable qualms. Poland is one good example: the old town of Warsaw was reconstructed down to the last detail after the war.

The problems the Germans have with rebuilding ultimately reflect the continuing lack of sovereignty and the political difficulties we rightly have without our own history and national identity. In the mid-1980s, a gradual but growing awareness emerged that the answer was not to try to opt out of history and to remove its traces. Interest in historical objects and their care and preservation through scholarship and education began to be purposefully developed and promoted. The reconstruction of Dresden's Frauenkirche, which did not start until 1994, is an impressive example of this - the



Model of the future DHM. On the right, Zeughaus.

architects copied the original design and building techniques, using sandstone from Brandenburg and stone blocks that had been carefully retrieved from the ruins.

2. The experience of recent history had a marked effect on the teaching of history in schools. This was preceded by a crisis of orientation among historians, who questioned the very culture of historical tradition itself by asking: "History: what for and why?" The demands made by society for a "practical base to knowledge" and the "social relevance" of the subject forced historians to rethink the fundamentals. The general decline of interest in history is evidenced by countless publications from the 1970s on the "crisis of historical consciousness".

In the immediate postwar period the image of history presented in schools was first distorted by deliberately omitting recent history: fascism and the Second World War. Then the education reform of the 1970s led to a comparable one-sidedness. Historical theory had endeavored to redefine historical sciences as practical sciences, and this was reflected

in secondary schools in the reduction of the subject of "history" to "social sciences" or "community studies" restricted entirely to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The requirement of defining history according to a standard of practical relevance pursued the legitimate enlightenment aim of explaining the phenomenon of Hitler, but it overstepped the mark, and did so at the expense of a broader historical culture.

3. The gradual transformation of historical museums into museums of arts and crafts can also be seen as evidence of the Germans' prejudice against history. The initial emergence of historical museums across Europe had been linked with the wish to save, preserve and study objects and monuments that were felt to be of national and historical value. In Germany the romantic wish to incorporate previous epochs in the establishment of national identity had played a decisive role, particularly in conjunction with the prevailing sense of national enthusiasm after the wars of liberation. By the middle of the nineteenth century the efforts of historical associations had led to the opening of nearly fifty museums with historical or historical and cultural aims. The Germanic National Museum in

Nuremberg, which was intended to collect the entirety of German culture under one roof, was opened in 1852. These museums were very much like historical archives, which Novalis had called "the memory of the nation", and they could rightfully claim to fulfill a function of memory. As Otto Lauter, the director of the museum for the history of

Hamburg, put it as early as 1919, these museums were able to concentrate "their enthusiasm for collecting and preserving an the artefacts of historical conditions, developments and events"

Theoretical debate and the respective functions of a museum of arts und crafts und a historical museum did not begin until after the Bavarian National Museum in Munich was opened. From its inception this museum was designed as a treasure chamber rather than an "archive", and its exhibition and collecting practices fueled these debates in the years after 1910. The concept of a museum of arts und crafts, which went beyond the high arts of painting, graphic art and sculpture to include crafts and applied arts, has had a disastrous impact an the idea of a historical museum to this

day. The historical value of the collected artefact was neglected, whereas articles in everyday use were elevated to the status of works of art. This meant that the aesthetic value of an object understood to be autonomous became the single standard, whilst any historical value was subjugated to this. In the postwar period, the corresponding thesis, vigorously defended up to the mid1980s, stated that historical exhibitions in museums were not able to present history appropriately. This argument claimed that because exhibitions were static they necessarily led to simplification based an only a few aspects of their subject and they could not do justice to the complexity of history. The result of this prevailing view was that the historical insights that collections provided were purposefully removed and presentations were based solely an aspects of technology, and the history of crafts and all.

It was the large historical exhibitions of the 1970s such as "Bavaria Art and Culture" (Munich 1972), "The Time of the Hohenstaufen Empire" (Stuttgart 1977), "Trends in the 1920s" (Berlin 1977), "Wittelsbach and Bavaria" (1980), and "Prussian Attempt to Take Stock" (Berlin 1981)

that evidenced the Germans' rekindled interest in history, not least because of the overwhelming numbers of visitors. A veritable flood of historical publications ensued, particularly about Prussia, and many of these even became bestsellers. The German Bundestag exhibition, "Questions on German History", which was opened in the Reichstag in Berlin in 1971, a hundred years after the foundation of the German empire under Bismarck, was so well attended that it was soon transformed into a permanent exhibition. In subsequent years it was expanded and a great deal of detail was added, although it remained a "reading exhibition" in which original objects played no real role. The new awareness of history can also be seen at local and regional levels, where history workshops and small Heimat or local and regional museums have been established.

It was the success of the large exhibition on Prussia in particular that clearly demonstrated the need for a permanent exhibition on German history in Berlin. The fact that half a Million people saw the Prussia exhibition in the MartinGropiusBau was seen as a successful trial run for the

acceptance of and the interest in a museum of German history. In 1982 Berlin's mayor, Richard von Weizäcker, set up a commission with four prominent historians, who were asked to prepare a paper on the subject of a "German Historical Museum in Berlin". The commission was asked to investigate whether, and if so how and where such a museum could be established in Berlin. It concluded that the project was commendable and suggested the MartinGropiusBau in Berlin, which had proven its suitability with the Prussia exhibition. The commission wrote that "like Johan Huizinga, we see history as the way in which a nation, a people and a society calls itself to account". A revived interest in this kind of stocktaking was observed, which the commission saw evidenced in the large numbers of visitors to historical exhibitions and Museums and the widespread wish that the teaching of history in schools be intensified. The aim of the new Museum was to grasp history with all its contradictions, "the greatness and the burden, Weimar and Auschwitz. Only then can history facilitate a dialogue between the past and the issues that will determine the future." In contrast to the Prussia exhibition, which had been criticised for having too

narrow a scope, the new project was intended from the outset "to grasp the history of the material, intellectual and political culture of Germans from all sections of society in the European arena".

The museum was also intended to be an alternative to East Berlin's "Museum of German History", which had been founded in 1952 and was housed from 1953 in the Zeughaus an Unter den Linden, although the commission did recommend some cooperation with East Germany. The Museum of German History in East Berlin shared the aim of presenting the history of the Germans from the earliest period to the present, but combined this with a finalistic, Marxist-Leninist view of history. The fact that the East German Museum of German History was founded at such an early date shows the extent to which, from 1949 onwards, the socialist state was more confident in pursuing an active policy of history, which was also a propaganda of history. The aim was to provide historical legitimation tot the new state and thus to help its citizens identify with the state. Whilst it is true that the official socialist view of history in Last Germany was ideologically instrumentalised, it often remained a complex

product of frequently contradictory impulses. These would merit specific investigation within their own terms of reference, so as to gain a better understanding of historical reality under communist rote.

The Berlin Senate's plan for a new historical museum provoked heated debate in the Berlin press. The Berliner Morgenpost provided a critical forum for politicians, historians und representatives of museums, in which the various positions regarding the project were presented. Five years prior to the great controversy of 1986 and 1987, which directly preceded the foundation of the museum in 1987, the arguments for and against had already been rehearsed, but this debate had been largely ignored outside Berlin. The Berlin senator tot science and cultural affairs at the time, Volker Hassemer, suggested establishing a forum for contemporary history as an alternative to a historical museum in the MartinGropiusBau. This forum was to be directed by temporary curators and to specialise in large temporary historical exhibitions. In addition the longterm plan was to develop a permanent exhibition an German history and its contexts based an material from these

temporary shows, a plan which was initially approved by the government of Helmut Kohl and the new mayor of Berlin, Eberhard Diepgen. In 1985 Chancellor Helmut Kohl took the initiative and, disregarding Berlin's plans, announced that the national government would build and stock the German Historical Museum to coincide with the 750th anniversary of the city of Berlin. This plan again led to heated debates among scholars, politicians and journalists, now across the whole of the republic. Leftwing historians, above all, but also social democratic politicians and members of the Green Party parliamentary group voiced the fear that the German Historical Museum would be instrumentalised by national government to present a neoconservative and affirmative view of national history dictated by the state. They feared that the history of National Socialism and its crimes would be watered down or unjustly curtailed in favour of the legitimisation of a collective national self-esteem drawn from the thousand years of German history before 1933.

Fundamental rejection of the idea of the nation after National Socialism and the Holocaust also influenced the way in which the German left saw the

reunification of Germany in 1989. As Jan Werner Müller has recently noted, a German national state was perceived especially as a threat to the democratic achievements of West Germany, and alternative concepts of identity, such as the ideas of the "cultural nation" or "postnationalist constitutional patriotism", proved too insubstantial to have any relevance for the future. Similar reservations led to the Historikerstreit, around the same time, in which prominent historians discussed the interpretation of National Socialism, concentrating on the question whether the mass murder of the Holocaust was unique or could be compared to other cases. This debate was triggered by conservative historians, who had argued that the National Socialist past wrongly prevented the emergence of a "healthy" national spirit. The main reason why the debates concerning the new German Historical Museum were so heated was that these had become interlinked with the issues raised in the Historikerstreit. These debates implied a characteristically prejudiced view of history, which saw the formulation of history as a relativising process, a view from which the commission clearly distanced itself at the official inaugural ceremony for the new

museum. In addition this prejudice made it necessary to define the educational aims and capabilities of a museum of this kind more precisely.

Even Jürgen Habermas, a key figure in critical theory who played a major role in both debates, finally supported the establishment of a German Historical Museum, though he added the stipulation that "history as a science should not provide meaning" but "can only help to prepare the ground for a critical assessment of multivalent contexts of meaning". The Greens rejected the project in a far more radical and fundamental way. A museum of this kind would be a "monument of a new national identification" and lead to the "watering down" of National Socialism, as the latter would be placed within the entire context of German history and thus trivialised. Instead of a museum the Greens proposed alternative ways of dealing with history, including workshops. The field in front of the Reichstag, which was originally set aside for the planned new museum to be designed by the Italian architect, Aldo Rossi, should still be used as a free public space: 'Turkish barbecues, a football field where eight games can be played at the same time,

popular festivities in front of the Reichstag and the Tempodrom. This should all remain," wrote Mathias Greffrath in *Die Zeit* on 11 October 1985. The new commission of experts, with sixteen prominent historians, and historians and representatives of museums, worked out a new concept for the German Historical Museum, taking into account the criticisms and suggestions that had come from the many colloquia, public hearings and debates conducted by all the political parties and broad sections of the media. Two years of negotiations (1985-1987) between the national government and the Länder led to a constitutional agreement which removed the constitutional barriers to the foundation of the museum. As a reaction to the abuse of cultural policy by the National Socialists, the authors of West Germany's constitution had placed the "stewardship of historical consciousness" in the hands of the Länder in 1949, thus strengthening state-level authority. The national authorities were given cultural authority only in those areas for which the Länder had no jurisdiction. In 1987 the Länder accepted the national government's claim to partial authority in matters of the stewardship of historical consciousness, on the basis that

German history was a greater matter than the history of the federal bodies. This compromise was only achieved on condition that national government would not hold more than fifty per cent of the votes on the museum's supervisory board, and, moreover, that it was prepared to provide all the initial finance for the project. The inaugural agreement for the German Historical Museum was signed in 1987, on the occasion of the 750th anniversary celebrations of the foundation of the city of Berlin.

The plan to build the new museum near the Reichstag was dropped after the reunification of Germany in 1990, when the new Chancellery building took priority. It was then agreed to use the Zeughaus on Unter den Linden, which had housed the East German Museum of German History since 1953. With the reunification of Germany on 3 October 1990 (the "day of German unity") the German Historical Museum received both the collections of the Museums of German History, which had already been closed by the East German government, and also permission to use the building itself. The sophisticated and ambitious plan for the German Historical Museum, which had

been prepared by renowned German historians, an historians and representatives of museums, made it necessary to construct an extension to the existing building. This prestigious commission went to the architect M. Pei, who had gained renown for his glass pyramid extension to the Louvre in Paris. The new annex to the German Historical Museum will be used for temporary exhibitions, whereas the Zeughaus will house the new permanent exhibition on German and European history. When the German Historical Museum is reopened (planned for 2004) the museum's own collections will be presented for the first time as a permanent exhibition. Since 1988 the German Historical Museum has been systematically extending its own collections of artefacts from German and European history. In contrast to the traditional written sources from various national linguistic cultures, these objects represent part of a common European culture of artefacts. In a way which transcends linguistic barriers, history has left its traces in a generally legible pictorial language with a plethora of surviving images, artefacts and material objects of every kind. If this language of objects can be successfully

decoded, read and interpreted, then they can relate and bear witness to the real lives of real people, people whose desires and worries once made history, and these objects can achieve this in a way which is more concrete and vivid than can be done by any text.

Humankind has always made use of this language, and has also done this consciously so as to influence the image that is passed down to posterity. Many historical artefacts were created with the express purpose of witnessing and passing down events, and commemorating people, and with the aim of placing these in relation to history and thus legitimising a particular identity in the present. State portraits, images of events, leaflets, series of prints, gifts of honour and memorial donations, but also posters, and later documentary photographs were all used in a variety of ways for this purpose. Certainly the emphasis is on praising rulers and an official historiography using traditional means, to a degree to this day. A historical museum that takes its mission seriously will not only have the task of telling the stories of the powerful and the rulers by means of often precious artefacts of high aesthetic value, but will also

have to raise and present issues relating to the everyday history and social and economic history of both German states. The fates and the lives of individuals who did not belong to the privileged classes must be clearly presented as an essential element of history, even if the historical evidence is often difficult to trace today, in particular for earlier periods. Historical relics can be understood as evidence of historical processes and they demand a form of understanding that takes them seriously and yet also evaluates them critically. In addition to the permanent exhibition and an active publications policy, the German Historical Museum will also stage large temporary exhibitions on German and European history. In contrast to the 1970s and 1980s, which saw a renewed emphasis on regional and local historical consciousness, today it is rather global issues such as migration, discrimination and international dialogue that are significant. The term "historical culture" is better suited to a broad concept of history today, and it is this which underlies the German Historical Museum's endeavours to promote a wide range of "narrative methods", from scholarly research to exhibition design, and the artistic

expression of the greatest possible variety of manifestations of historical memory.

As has been mentioned above, the German Historical Museum has frequently been criticised in the press for attempting to propagate a binding image of history which glorifies German postwar politics, and for wishing to create a conservative national consciousness. After more than a decade of balanced and successful exhibitions, it would be fair to expect such criticism to recede, but the fact is that these objections are still voiced today - often with an even greater degree of polemic. A particularly eloquent example is Gustav Seibt's review of the exhibition "Prussia 1701. A European Story", which ran in spring and summer 2001. In *Die Zeit* of 10 May 2001, Seibt wrote: "Seldom has the obfuscating function of the founding principles of the German Historical Museum, as inspired by Helmut Kohl's European policy, been seen so clearly. This officious image of history endeavours to subsume as much of the German past as possible under the criteria of the Western and Federal systems. The old empire becomes a precursor to the Bonn republic, and nearly everything else that

happened in Germany, with the exception of the brief period of the 'Third Reich', is supposedly no different from events in the rest of Europe, from the period of absolutism to the nation state." Shortsighted prejudices of this kind and they are certainly prejudices lead to a thorough misunderstanding of the true central aims of the German Historical Museum. The aim is to create a modern museum concept using innovative visual means, with a view to facilitating knowledge about and an overview of history, and also a critical investigation of German history in the European context. This should be done in the most neutral way possible, whilst of course providing unideological insight into historical reality. If a subject raises the question of national identity, then this is not in the name of affirmative national historiography, but as a series of suggestions for identity, seen critically, pluralistically, and above all in terms which transcend any one culture. An educational approach is at the forefront, borne out by the open emphasis on a variety and alternatives, both to the historical process and to the interpretation of history and its conflicts. From the outset the aim was to present the language of the

objects passed down by history, and thereby to bear witness to history, to contribute to a critical approach to history and to historical understanding, and to do all of this beyond the borders of Germany.

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