

REVIEW ESSAY

From Expellee to Refugee: Absolute Victimhood and the Dokumentationszentrum Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung

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Introduction

The expulsion of millions of people and the loss of Germany's eastern territories at the end of the Second World War have been a part of ongoing public discussions about *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, or Germany's "mastering of the past." These events have deeply shaped personal and family memories in East and West Germany, even if political discourse about them had been marginalized in the German Democratic Republic. In the Federal Republic, the issue of expellees has been especially fraught because it represents the intersection of two discourses of German victimhood: war victims and victims of communism—here specifically the postwar East European governments that organized postwar expropriation and "resettlements." Memorials range from the eternal flame on Theodor-Heuss-Platz in Berlin to the small plaque affixed to the wall outside of Bayreuth's train station for the almost 40,000 expellees from the Sudeten region who arrived on thirty-three freight trains in 1946. The expulsions have made their way into popular culture as well, as can be seen in the works of artists who had had little or no direct experience in the "German East." In the 1969 song "Erstes Morgenrot," for example, Alexandra (born as Doris Treitz in 1942 in today's Lithuania) wistfully looks forward to the dawn that brings greetings from the land where "my cradle once stood." Heinz Rudolf Kunze, born in 1956, emphasizes his uprootedness and a sense of not belonging in his 1985 song "Vertriebener."

With the June 2021 opening of the Dokumentationszentrum Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung (Documentation Centre for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation) on Berlin's Stresemannstraße, there is now a centralized site for memorializing flight and expulsions during and after the Second World War. The documentation center expressly seeks to put the expulsions into a European context. While successfully moving away from accusatory tones in the search for reconciliation with Germany's eastern neighbors, however, expellee biographies have been distilled into caricatures embedded in a universalized yet segregated refugee narrative. Indeed, the tendency not to blame the victim fosters a silence about individual and familial involvement in National Socialism, and the museum misses the opportunity to provide a deeper understanding of interethnic relations and forced migration beyond general concepts and broad political brushstrokes.

The reflection below is not an exhaustive review and will highlight those issues pertinent to interethnic relations in Central Europe as well as the Holocaust. It will mainly consider the information presented on the displays rather than in the audio guides, although these will be discussed as well. There was no exhibition catalog available yet in late 2021, but promotional materials and mission statements have provided additional insight. With its many artifacts, the documentation center can be considered a museum as well, and this review will refer to

it as such. Direct quotes from the displays will be based on the English versions that appear on the text panels.

History of the Museum

The documentation center arose in reaction to the Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen (Center against Expulsions) in Wiesbaden, an initiative started in 1999 by the Bund der Vertriebenen (BdV, Federation of Expellees). Cross-party support for the original Center included the Social Democrat Peter Glotz, who was born in the Sudeten region of interwar Czechoslovakia. Yet the driving force behind the project was Erika Steinbach, a Christian Democratic member of parliament who was also the leader of the BdV. It is not surprising that the most ferocious criticism of this project came from Germany's East Central European neighbors. Especially the Polish press demonized Steinbach, culminating in the infamous 2003 cover of the newsweekly *Wprost*, a photomontage showing her in a SS uniform and riding then-Chancellor Gerhard Schröder like a horse.

In 2009, the Bundestag initiated the creation of a new project under the auspices of the Stiftung Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung (Foundation for Displacement, Expulsion, Reconciliation). Even with minimal BdV involvement in the Foundation, however, several members of the multinational academic advisory board were unhappy about the project's direction and quit their posts over the years. In 2016, Gundula Bavendamm took over the directorship, and the following year an updated conceptual framework of the permanent exhibit promised to embed the expulsions of Germans in the larger story of forced migrations. The documentation center has elided these difficult beginnings. Erika Steinbach was briefly acknowledged at the opening ceremony held in hybrid format in June 2021, but she did not physically attend.

The documentation center is located in the Deutschlandhaus, which was a headquarters for expellee political activity during the Cold War. A stained-glass triptych from that time remains in the foyer, although its positioning is regrettable since it is almost impossible to see the detail on the top panels. A video station allows the visitor to learn about the building and the location, and a "room of stillness," resembling an empty chapel, is also located here.

A brief introduction in the foyer states that "[the] Documentation Centre sets out to show the causes of displacement and expulsion and what this fate means for those affected. The permanent exhibition depicts a European history of forced migration, mainly in the twentieth century. Its central focus is on the roughly 14 million Germans who were displaced or expelled in the historical context of World War II and Nazi policies." The permanent exhibition itself is spread across the next two main floors, with the first floor devoted to a universal history of refugees and the second devoted to the German experience in the wake of the Second World War.

Making Refugees

The first floor, which includes a library and testimony archive, provides historical context for ethnic cleansing and forced migration in the twentieth and twentieth-first centuries. There is no strict path through the first floor, which encourages visitors to roam. Nonetheless, the initial content displays cover the fall of multiethnic empires in Europe after the First World War. Rather than seeing the problem in the existence of nation-states themselves, excessive nationalism and the abuse of modern social control, including maps and passports, are suggested as threats to minorities.

The displays that follow mix together various crises and case studies, including Armenia, Macedonia, and the partition of India. An enlarged photograph of an Indian family on the move foreshadows the East Prussian and Silesian treks depicted on the next floor. The narrative emphasizes here the danger of migrant journeys, particularly that of the hundreds of

thousands of Syrian refugees who arrived in Germany in 2015. Prominently displayed are mobile phones as well as pictures taken by refugees. These artifacts heighten the emotional identification with individual fates, including that of one young man, Bassem from Damascus. The visitor can follow how opportunists along the way took advantage of refugees like Bassem, including selling him a fake SIM card. Still, besides a reference to the 2020 Greek pushbacks of refugees into Turkey, the museum avoids the thornier issues of current European immigration policy. The problematic practices of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) remain largely unexplored, and only the very last panel on the second floor mentions the large number of North African refugees who cross the Mediterranean Sea to southern Europe in dangerous conditions that lead to frequent drownings.

Eastern Europe and the plight of German refugees receive considerable attention in various displays on the first floor, and thus persons, definitions, and events overlap with the next floor. The section on the January 1945 sinking of the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, whereby thousands of German refugees from East Prussia died, includes a porthole from the ship. The experiences of Jews as well as Sinti and Roma are addressed at various points on this floor, with the latter receiving more detailed treatment in regard to Nazi Germany's genocidal policies. Jews appear most prominently in the example of Bukovina, where Romanianization after the First World War disrupted a supposedly idyllic "fruitful coexistence." Both victimized groups become paradigmatic cases in the general European phenomenon of ethnonational ostracization.

Probably the most striking section on the first floor are the three life-size video panels that allow the visitor to meet nine forced migrants who settled in (West) Germany: refugees from Vietnam after 1975, German expellees from the Second World War, and those who fled the war in Bosnia in the 1990s. Recorded in Berlin in 2019–20, the roughly one-minute stories center mostly on the interviewees coming to Germany and their integration. Many visitors will connect with Dat Vuong, the owner of the popular Monsieur Vuong restaurant in Berlin-Mitte. The Second World War expellees in the center panel include Christine Rösch and Doris Festersen, who mention their involvement in expellee and reconciliation politics.

Overall, the emphasis appears to be on Germany's ability to absorb these three waves of immigrants. At the same time, the panels put each of these migrant events in silos, separate from each other and even from the larger population. Focusing on refugee success stories, the speakers occasionally raise questions about German attitudes and policies toward immigrants, but these are left largely unanswered. Why did Hans Schiller mention that his Lithuanian-speaking parents were called Pollacken, and why did Anita Dadić's family have to leave Germany to return to Bosnia? More comprehensive testimonies could provide answers, but the museum's own video archive contains only interviews with German expellees and refugees.

Another issue that skews a historical understanding of forced migration is that all the people introduced in the video displays had been children or teenagers when they migrated—their youth conveys pure innocence. Little is said about their lives before emigrating. One exception is Dat Vuong, who mentions that his father was in the South Vietnamese military and hence his family suffered repression at the hands of the communist government. The omission of family histories in administration, military, or police forces beyond this lone example is forgivable given the brevity of the stories here—but it will become a greater liability elsewhere in the individual biographies of the German expellees. Overall, the prevailing edict appears to be not to judge or blame the migrants, but to treat them as if they had been victims of a natural disaster and to allow them to be absolute in their victimhood.

Making Germans

The second floor is the heart of the museum for it focuses on the three concepts that make up the documentation center's name: the flight and expulsion of the Germans from Eastern

Europe during and after the Second World War as well as Germany's reconciliation efforts with its eastern neighbors. In order to provide greater context, the museum divides the second floor into three sections: Nazi expansionism and the Second World War; the expulsions and the remaking of Eastern Europe; and German expellees and refugees in the Federal Republic of Germany (and, to a far lesser extent, the German Democratic Republic) after 1945. In contrast to the first floor, the exhibition's pathway on the second floor is noticeably more constrictive than on the first floor. The sections are divided physically, and a portal precedes each section. This layout is thus very different from the more open floorplan on the first floor.

The introductory panel to the second floor states that 14 million Germans were displaced and expelled, of whom 600,000 died while 12.5 million settled in the two Germanies. Somewhat irritatingly, neither the panel nor subsequent displays provide an overall breakdown of these numbers by region, nor is displacement (a rather unhappy translation of *Flucht*) ever clearly defined against expulsions—the museum itself often uses “expellees” as an overarching term. However, these figures are problematic less for how expellees are counted and more for who counted as German. In order to understand this, one must return to the first floor, where a touchscreen display called “A Little Dictionary of Forced Migration” contains an entry for “Refugees” (*Flüchtlinge*), which quotes the Basic Law from 1949 to define “Germans” as both German citizens as well as “‘refugees or expellees of German ethnicity’ who were taken in by Germany.” The same display then defines “Ethnic Germans” (*deutsche Volkszugehörige*) as those of German ethnicity or those who identified with Germany, although it also states that “[i]n 1945 nearly all refugees and expellees were German citizens.” The captions here do not leave the Germanness of the “ethnic Germans” in doubt. It remains useful, however, to move away from legal definitions and to distinguish historically between prewar German citizens and the citizens of foreign countries who had become German citizens under National Socialist rule. The museum does not describe, for example, how these German minorities formed in Eastern Europe in the first place, moving decisively away from the *Kulturträger* focus on German cultural contributions that was the mainstay of conservative-national narratives associated with the *BdV*. But this reticence to talk about immigration from German-speaking lands to the East misses the opportunity to complicate prewar interethnic relations in East Central and Eastern Europe and the contingency of Germanness.

Moreover, the museum avoids using loaded terminology such as “*Volksdeutsche*,” yet this omission leads to new misunderstandings. The portal through which guests enter the second floor contains several displays that provide an introduction to Nazi Germany's policy to Eastern Europe. Here, one display entitled “Germans outside German Borders” (*Deutsche jenseits der Staatsgrenzen*) describes “*Volksdeutsche*” as “Nazi jargon” for “anyone living outside the Reich who was regarded as an ethnic German.” Yet many of these “*Volksdeutsche*” had lived for generations among different ethnicities, spoke German poorly if at all, and lived in mixed marriages. During the Second World War, it was often a political decision whether locals could qualify as German citizens. By omitting the term beyond the occasional institutional name or direct quote, the museum conceptually reduces all “*Volksdeutsche*” to Germans. The complexity of Nazi naturalization policies is hinted at briefly with an identity card for the *Deutsche Volksliste*, but the two-sentence description merely conveys that Poles were threatened with deportation if they did not apply for German citizenship. There is no room here for Polish agency, nor is there a follow-up on the fates of such Poles. At another display, Anna Schiller, mother of Hans Schiller from the video display on the first floor, is introduced as “not German enough.” Even here, however, no information is given as to why Nazi authorities were not convinced about her Germanness.

This review's use of “*Volksdeutsche*” with quotation marks is precisely to underline the contingency of Germanness in East Central and Eastern Europe. Especially the scholarship from the last two decades has focused on “national indifference” in Central Europe, whereby Germanness is increasingly seen as a political practice and voluntaristic act rather than a

fixed ethnic category. Germanness was not just imposed from above: there was an eagerness from below to be recognized as German with all its attendant social and economic advantages. As Jewish testimonies from the German occupation of Poland have pointed out, prewar Polish Janeks suddenly and enthusiastically became German Johanns. Eliding the term “*Volksdeutsche*” misses a range of behavior for such wartime collaboration in East Central Europe. An exhibition that seeks to cover millions of expellees from Central Europe should find ways to address these questions of shifting ethnic identification. In short, the problem of “*Volksdeutsche*” is too complex (and too important) to be left to German history alone and requires a deep understanding of local relations.

The reliance on broad structural explanations continues in the second floor’s first section on German expansionist policies, where the focus is not on the expected Nazi bigwigs (although Adolf Hitler necessarily has his own panel), but rather on racial hatred and *Lebensraum* ideology. As the museum makes clear, the displacement of Germans had already been started by the Third Reich with the work of Werner Lorenz, the head of the *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* (translated in the museum as Main Office for Ethnic Germans) who organized the resettlement of purported Germans from across Eastern Europe to occupied Poland as well as the murder and deportation of local populations. These original German sins are provided as the main reasons for the wartime flight of German civilians as Soviet troops arrived and for the postwar expulsions as East Central European societies and governments reckoned with their German minority populations.

The focus on Germany’s policies as the main driver of wartime and postwar suffering thus permeates the second-floor exhibition, which devotes considerable attention to the lands of interwar Poland as well as to those eastern German regions that would become part of postwar Poland and the Soviet Union. According to the museum, the changing of Poland’s own eastern borders led to the expulsion of 1.5 million Poles, many of whom were themselves resettled in formerly German farms and apartments in western Poland. In 1947, the Polish government forcibly resettled 140,000 people in Operation Vistula in an attempt to neutralize a purported Ukrainian threat. The notion of a shared fate between German, Polish, and Ukrainian expellees, although not explicitly mentioned, seems especially well suited for a reconciliation narrative. Likewise, the museum avoids contentious topics such as antisemitic violence against Jewish populations during and after the war by non-German perpetrators (e.g., in Jedwabne, Kielce, or Radom) beyond a mere sentence on pogroms in postwar Poland. The other thematized case that receives somewhat more nuance is Czechoslovakia, where President Edvard Beneš called for the removal of the Sudeten Germans and received support from the Western Allies. Even here, the museum recognizes individual “Good Slavs,” like Přemysl Pitter, who helped orphaned German and Jewish children after the war.

In this search for reconciliation between Germany and its eastern neighbor states, the exhibition shies away from the totalitarianism paradigm of suggesting close similarities between the communist and National Socialist systems. At the same time, the museum remains on the level of generalities when it comes to longer interethnic conflicts as causes for the expulsions. While focusing on the postwar states’ desire to create homogenous populations, the museum capitulates to the idea that it was simply impossible to live together after years of Nazi terror. Yet thousands of people who had become “*Volksdeutsche*” during the war were “filtered” back into postwar Polish and Czechoslovak societies, and they were able to live with their neighbors after the war. Thus, the desire to expel most “*Volksdeutsche*” was not a foregone conclusion or out of revenge. Indeed, more could have been done in the exhibition with how German and “*Volksdeutsche*” property, often itself “*aryanized*,” played a role in the expulsions on a national and local level.

Making Victims

Despite—or because of—the emphasis on Nazi Germany’s direct and overall guilt, the individual refugee stories interspersed throughout the second-floor exhibition show the

Germans as victims of circumstances beyond their control. As with the video displays of the nine refugees on the first floor, the narrative of absolute victimhood is fostered by the selection of expellee stories: those on display are predominantly young, female, or both. While they personally may have been too young to have participated in Nazi crimes, however, their family contexts also do not suggest possible involvement. Indeed, the German and “Volksdeutsche” biographies that one finds on the folding panels often consist of a few sentences—far less information than what the nine refugee videos tell us orally on the first floor. There are no focused biographies of the elderly, who also made up a large number of those who fled. Their inclusion may have clouded the absolute victimhood of the refugees.

The participation of “Volksdeutsche” in Nazi crimes does not go unmentioned. The first portal on the second floor explains that “[m]any of them, especially young people, gave their express support to the idea of belonging to an ethnic German community and saw opportunities for advancement in the German Reich.” Regarding occupation policy in Poland, one display notes their role in enforcing a regime of terror: “Often with the help of volunteers from the German minority, they shot members of the Polish elite.” One of the accompanying images on the video screen shows German police conducting a raid with the help of the *Volksdeutscher Selbstschutz*, an ethnic German paramilitary force that briefly existed at the beginning of the war. Regarding collaboration in Southeastern Europe, local Germans joined the *Waffen-SS*, became camp guards, and were involved in anti-partisan warfare. More often, however, German minorities appear as objects of top-down German occupation policies, as in the takeover of an apartment building in Posen/Poznań or in the plan to completely resettle the city of Zamość.

Only a few individual biographies mention personal, active involvement of “Volksdeutsche” in the Nazi Party or in atrocities. Yet even these examples do not delve too deeply into agency, motivation, and complicity. Wenzel Hondl, a mayor in prewar Czechoslovakia who joined the Nazi Party and the *SS*, is introduced with the question “Just a follower?” No explicit answer is provided, but the end of Hondl’s biography notes that he died of ill-treatment in prison after being arrested by Czech revolutionary guards at war’s end. The leader of the Germans in Serbia, Josef Janko, vaguely “shared responsibility for crimes committed during the occupation.” Elsewhere, participation is portrayed as passive, perhaps with a hint of opposition: Gustav Hille from Czechoslovakia was drafted into the reserve police and in 1942 was a “witness” to shootings of Jews in eastern Poland (now Ukraine), which he photographed and then passed the photos on to his former employer. These men appear at the start of the second-floor exhibits introducing the Second World War, and their biographies are thus spatially distant from the stories of flight and expulsion at the end of the war.

The segregation of macrolevel collective guilt from microlevel victimization is most noticeable with the later biographies of individual German expellees whose trajectories we follow after the war. In this part of the exhibition, even vague perpetrator complicitities melt away. The stories of individual German expellees do not ask how their families may have been involved in German political organizations in interwar Poland and Czechoslovakia or how they may have welcomed Nazi troops. In these expellee family stories, the *Volksdeutscher Selbstschutz* in occupied Poland and the “Volksdeutsche” militias that joined *Sonderkommando R* in murdering Jews in Transnistria in 1942 do not appear. Once again, there is almost no discussion of interethnic relations or of attitudes toward Nazi Germany or the Jews. The Ferger family, evacuated from the Vojvodina in 1944, “left behind their Serbian neighbors, whom the authorities did not evacuate.” The museum does not comment here on the attitude of Serbs toward the Germans or how this particular family likely profited from the war as “Volksdeutsche.” Elsewhere, the actions of non-Germans are understood as reactions to German occupation, for example as Yugoslav “revenge” against German families (Robert Zollitsch).

The omission of individual refugees’ ties to the Nazi Party, the *SS*, or persecution of the Jews becomes more untenable when the narrative moves to the Soviet advance on the Reich’s prewar eastern territories in late 1944. Although German citizens from pre-1938

Reich territories made up some two-thirds of all expellees, relatively few of these Altreich-to-postwar biographies appear in the exhibition. When they do, the brief stories are from the perspective of relatively young people who can recall the events and consequences of flight and expulsion, but not the prewar years in Nazi Germany. Such examples include two Lower Silesian girls who fled with their mother from Riga to Zwickau (the Paetzsch family with the foldout title “Mother Heavily Pregnant”), an Upper Silesian woman who gave birth while being deported on a train (Margarete Jendretzki), the postwar Polish ostracization of a German family through the eyes of a boy (Rudi Norbert Florian), as well as another boy (Gerd-Helmut Schäfer) born in 1948 to parents deported to Siberia. Occasionally throughout the second floor, cartoon wall projections of individuals, especially children, underline this innocence (Otfried Pustojevsky and the aforementioned Zollitsch and Florian boys). Few German adult men appear in this part of the exhibition, and when fathers of families are mentioned, there is no hint about possible involvement in the Nazi rise to power, antisemitism, or in wartime expansionist policies. Indeed, the information is vaguely exculpatory: one served in the Wehrmacht in Italy (the Paetzsch family again), another was a military doctor (Fritz Dohrmann). Through such elisions, more questions are raised than answered about the families’ overall experiences in the Third Reich—and before the expulsions.

As mentioned already, the confiscation of property could have been better thematized in the museum. Although the video introduction to the portal on German expansionism and the overview to the “Heim ins Reich” subsection both mention that Jewish and Polish homes and farms were given to German settlers, this contextualization is missing in the concrete examples shown. On one panel, the roughly nineteen-year-old Helmut Grossmann from the Black Sea region received a flat in Międzychód/Birnbaum in 1943, but without mention of its origins. More important, it seems, was his fate: he disappeared without a trace in 1944. The video touchscreen display for the Zimmermann family from Bessarabia shows them grinning at their new farm in occupied Poland. Scrolling through the images, the visitor comes across another picture of piles of wares with the caption: “Many resettlers from Bessarabia were given new household goods and furnishings once in the Warthegau.” That such moveable property could have been taken from Polish homes or from Jews in the nearby Łódź ghetto is not mentioned. One must patiently find and listen through the three audio comments (including by former German president Horst Köhler) before historian Isabel Heinemann explains that the Bessarabian Germans had a choice to stay or leave and were ultimately beneficiaries of Nazi crimes.

The many artifacts and the emphatic personal stories that accompany them likewise remain unentangled with the Holocaust and “aryanization”: the text accompanying the fur coat of Margarete Jendretzki (apparently acquired in 1941) omits information that such coats had been confiscated from Jews during the war for local “Volksdeutsche” or distribution in the Reich. The small teddy bear discovered by fifteen-year-old Eva Lange while fleeing from Łódź is presumably lost by another child—but the possibility that the child could have been Polish or Jewish is not raised in the audio comments by the two museum employees, a curator and a registrar. Included here is the recording of a contemporary child who empathically states that the teddy bear is “very sweet.” As objects of Reich and postwar policies, the world of expellee-refugees that the museum conjures is one without particular Nazis, only absolute victims.

The postwar section of the museum follows the different fates of various groups of settlers, including returnees from Siberia and the Spätaussiedler to East and West Germany. For East Germany, there is a panel about a small child whose family had been evacuated from Slovakia to the Sudetenland and ended up in Mecklenburg. The emphasis is on the inability to speak about these experiences openly, “since resettlers were expected to adapt to their new social circumstances.” More space is devoted to West Germany, where the focus is on a largely successful integration narrative through economic success, the work of the churches, and Ostpolitik. Still, many of the expellees experienced continuing

discrimination by fellow German citizens in the “Kalte Heimat” (also the title of a book by historian Andreas Kossert, who is a research associate at the museum).

The political activity of the expellee organizations themselves is cursorily mentioned. The 1952 Lastenausgleichsgesetz (translated as the Equalisation of Burdens Law) started a vast program to compensate expellees for their lost property. A touchscreen video panel illustrates the difficulties the applicants had in getting the paperwork filled out. But here again, there is no hint of how Reich Germans and “Volksdeutsche” as wartime beneficiaries of confiscations and “aryanization” and now as expellees might have manipulated property claims and abused the system. The last sections show how many expellees came to terms with the loss of their homelands through home visits and in literature and film, but the focus here only on Germans leaves out the memory work being done by others. For example, an inclusion of the perspective of former Polish neighbors or settlers in the “recovered territories” as well as the insights of contemporary authors such as Inga Iwasiów and Olga Tokarczuk on “post-German” and “post-Jewish” absences would have enriched this section.

Finally, just as the opportunity to understand individual biographies in interethnic contexts in Eastern Europe was missed, so too was the intersectionality of the expellee experiences with other immigrant and refugee groups in postwar Germany. How did the migrant backgrounds of German expellees cause some to identify even more strongly with a German ethnic ideal while others may have shown compassion for Gastarbeiter who were finding their place in West Germany? Such examples would have had a powerful historical-didactic impact, but as with the refugee stories from the first floor, the German expellee experience remains discrete and confined to its own silo.

Conclusion: Versöhnung vs. Verstehen?

Germany now finally has a national site of remembrance for the forced migration of millions of Germans during and after the Second World War. The project has not succumbed to the kind of political and cultural claim-making that was feared when plans for the original Center against Expulsions were first proposed. Yet is this anti-revisionist stance consistently narrated in the documentation center? Both museum levels complement one another in their emphasis on the successful integration of refugees on the one hand and absolute victimhood on the other. By focusing on individuals without raising uncomfortable questions, however, the overall documentation center has a distinctly victim-centered perspective—perhaps fulfilling much of what Erika Steinbach may have originally wanted in a Center against Expulsions.

The documentation center’s flyer entitled “A New Place for Remembrance and Understanding” (Ein neuer Ort zum Erinnern und Verstehen) advertises the site as “a place for historical education and lively debate in the spirit of reconciliation [Versöhnung].” In the desire not to blame the Eastern Europeans, the permanent exhibition focuses on how Germany began a cycle of hate and deportations. Yet the emphasis on high politics comes at the expense of local contexts and perspectives, where complicated histories of coexistence and conflict cannot be reduced to the prism of German policies alone. It would have been more insightful to explore the contingency of ethnic belonging in East Central Europe and then how Nazi Germanization policies, expulsions, and postwar integration policies created competing meanings of being German that could provide more facets of understanding the historical “German expellee.”

The museum has become part of a growing cultural ecosystem that includes the nearby Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe and the Topography of Terror, one focused on the victims and the other on the perpetrators of the Holocaust. Although the newly opened documentation center largely elides the Shoah, the silence on non-German collaborators in particular is perhaps typical for projects that seek reconciliation between Germany and its eastern neighbors. A memorial to the Polish victims of National Socialist Germany is currently in the works. It is itself a direct consequence of the establishment of a museum

devoted to the German expulsions in the heart of Berlin. Will the continuing search for German-Polish reconciliation enable the memorial to highlight Polish heroic narratives while whitewashing Polish-Jewish relations? Let us hope that *Versöhnung* does not once again come at the cost of *Verstehen*.

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