This chapter focuses on the narrative constructed by more than 1,400 local expellee monuments located throughout Germany. Ignored in the debate over the proposed national memorial/documentation ‘Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen’ in Berlin, these local monuments – erected throughout the entire post-war period – have made permanent contributions to discourses on ‘German wartime suffering’ by generating and reflecting a one-sided narrative of German victimhood. Emphasising the loss of ‘Heimat’ and asserting the collective innocence of the expellees, the narrative comes at the expense of an inclusive, contextualised account of the Second World War and its aftermath, thus contesting the centrality of the Holocaust in German post-war memory.

Monuments to the Expulsion – A ‘Blank Spot’ in Germany’s Memory Culture?

Since its inception in September 2000, the private foundation ‘Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen’ has spearheaded an effort to construct a large-scale memorial/documentation and research center in Berlin dedicated to twentieth-century victims of forced migration in Europe. Proclaiming, ‘Alle Opfer von Genozid und Vertreibung brauchen einen Platz in unseren Herzen und im historischen Gedächtnis’,¹ the foundation, under the aegis of the Bund der Vertriebenen (BdV – League of Expellees),² sought the German government’s official sanction and financial support of its project. Although in a 2002 vote, the Social Democrat-led Bundestag approved merely the initiation of a Europe-wide discussion on the emplacement of an international memorial in a location to be determined, the Grand Coalition headed by Chancellor Angela Merkel passed legislation in late 2008 which opens the door for a state-sponsored centre in the German capital and grants the BdV an advisory role as well as a legitimate say in the ultimate form the memorial will take.³

From the start, the idea of a national memorial to the expulsion was contentious. Not only did the opponents of the idea fear the possibility of a self-absorbed, revisionist presentation of the German experience in WWII which might overshadow the innumerable crimes of the Nazis, they also could not forget the long-standing revanchist policies
espoused by some members of the League, which included their boisterous opposition to the recognition of the Oder-Neisse border.  

Seeking to assuage the concerns of their opponents, the League and the foundation ‘Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen’ stated repeatedly their combined desire to include representations and documentation of all expulsions of the twentieth century, not just that of the Germans. Nevertheless, even a cursory look at the foundation’s objectives listed on its website indicates the preponderance of the German experience.

As could be expected, the League’s reaction to this recent development was positive. Nevertheless, in a statement by Erika Steinbach released to the press the day after the German parliament’s decision, the BdV president declared that the government’s resolution of this issue ‘comes late, but not too late’. For the ‘Erlebnisgeneration’, the release continued, the building of the centre would provide comfort, ‘dass ihr Schicksal nicht vergessen ist, sondern einen festen Ort im kollektiven Gedächtnis unseres Vaterlandes hat’.

The last point is particularly striking. The BdV’s argument had always been that commemoration of flight and expulsion had been a ‘weißer Fleck’, a blank spot, in German and European history and that there had been no place for the expellees in German memory culture. The ‘Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen’ would thus fill a significant lacuna in the Federal Republic’s understanding of World War II and its aftermath.

Overlooked in this argumentation, however, are the ubiquitous monuments on the local level already commemorating flight and expulsion. Erected in every decade following the war, the 1,400+ monuments dot the landscapes of reunited Germany, are located in small numbers throughout the former ‘German East’, and can even be found as far away as the United States and Africa. Taken as a whole, these concrete examples of cultural production – up to now, never systematically and comprehensively analysed by scholars – comprise an important component of Germany’s memory culture and make an unequivocal but overlooked statement about the expellees’ understanding of their war experience. These monuments and their contribution to discourses on German suffering in the Second World War are the focus of this chapter.