Samuel Salzborn

The German Myth of a Victim Nation: (Re-)presenting Germans as Victims in the New Debate on their Flight and Expulsion from Eastern Europe

Various German expellee organisations have lobbied for a Centre Against Expulsions to be built in Berlin, in ‘historical and spatial proximity’ to the Holocaust memorial. Their designs for the Centre place their own, ‘German suffering’, at the core of German collective memory both geographically and politically. The article argues that the implicit aim of the project is to ascribe to the collective body of the nation the role of a victim while relativising the German past, specifically National Socialism and World War II. The article analyzes how the topos ‘Germans as victims’ is represented in the current debate on the Centre Against Expulsions in Germany and examines historical implications of enabling this topos, as well as addressing the conflict between the myth of German innocence and historical reality.

From a sociological perspective it may be surprising that interest groups that were founded in reaction to an event 60 years ago continue to be of social and political relevance. The Vertriebenenverbände (expellee organisations)\(^1\) which are the subject of this article might easily have lost their immediate significance and given up their existence after the admission and integration of the refugees into the social and economic fabric of the Federal Republic. Although this integration was not without its problems, it was generally accomplished by the late 1950s/early 1960s. Had it been the case that the expellee organisations had been founded with the sole purpose to represent the social and economic interests of those who had been displaced by flight and re-settlement as a result of National Socialism and the Second World War, this loss of significance would have most likely been the case. In this case only a few elderly people would still be telling stories about the former Eastern German territories, for example when they talked to their grandchildren about their own childhood. In the near future these territories would have the same social and political status that they have had in historiography and international law for quite some time: that of a closed chapter of German history.\(^2\) However, the expellee organisations, which were founded illegally immediately after the unconditional surrender of
Nazi Germany, were by no means conceived as a lobby with exclusively domestic political ambitions. The concept of ‘landsmannschaftlicher Gedanke’ was developed at an early stage, running counter to concepts of integration of the refugees into the Federal Republic. ‘Landsmannschaftlicher Gedanke’ implies that all refugees and re-settlers should not only live in their new ‘Heimat’ in the Federal Republic but should maintain a parallel mental existence in their ‘alte Heimat’ in order to safeguard a real German future for it. The identity of the new Federal citizens was supposed to be rooted in a Landsmannschaft, something that was articulated with a clearly recognisable territorial aspect. Since it was not just supposed to be concerned with the memory of times past but with the earliest possible restitution of the lost territories, the expellee organisations’ concept of Heimat resulted in political demands that could only be perceived by the East European neighbour states as a provocation and a threat. Of particular importance here is the insistence on ‘das Recht auf die Heimat’ in the statutes of the expellee organisations. The definite article ‘die’ is still being stressed today. What is at stake is not that every human being should have a right to live wherever s/he happens to dwell but a concept of Heimat that is tied to a particular region or territory. In the case of the expellee organisations, their ‘Heimat’ has (again) become the home of Poles, Russians, Czechs and others. The claim to ‘die Heimat’ in the expellee organisations thus implicitly questions the right of East European neighbours to their home. This generally völkisch conception of ‘die Heimat’ in the expellee organisations’ foreign policy ambitions was underlined by the fact that the re-settlers had already found a new home, either in the Federal Republic or in parts of the GDR. However, the political activities of the expellee organisations continue to this day, since they were not satisfied with this situation.

The political influence of the expellee organisations is certainly weaker today than it was 30 or 40 years ago – a time when they constituted a decisive factor in domestic policy and elections in West Germany. Nevertheless, the expellee organisations still make claims with respect to (foreign) policy and frequently manage to arouse public interest. The political claims that the expellee organisations stand for are linked to the moral function they have for a ‘self-confident’ German foreign policy. This can be illustrated by the fact that the expellee organisations have received generous financial