

The Flight and Expulsion of Germans in Contemporary German Culture

Veranstalter: Bill Niven, History and Heritage Department, Nottingham Trent University
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Between 20 and 21 October 2011 the History and Heritage Department, Nottingham Trent University, held a conference at the Nottingham Conference Centre, Nottingham. Organised by Bill Niven the conference drew delegates from a number of countries to discuss the place flight and expulsion holds, or should hold, in public and political memory in the twenty years since German reunification.

New television films - notably *Die Flucht* and *Die Gustloff* - have seemingly brought the flight of Germans after World War Two to a wider public than ever before. Over the last twenty years, novelists such as Hans-Ulrich Treichel, Günter Grass, Tanja Dückers, Dagmar Leupold and Reinhard Jirgl have depicted flight, or flight and expulsion, and/or its long-term effects. New memorials have sprung up not least in eastern Germany to the victims of war, expulsion and violence. In recent years, too, psychologists, journalists and others have written on the traumatic effects of flight and expulsion, and the transmission of this trauma across generations. Since the early 1990s, historians too have shown an increasing interest in researching the history of the flight and expulsion of Germans, and of its impact. Never was the debate about how to contextualise this event - in relation, for instance, to the Holocaust, or the Second World War as a whole, or indeed the history of expulsions throughout time - more intense than now. This seemed a good moment, then, to take stock: if a „taboo“ on flight and expulsion has been „lifted“ (a view that remains contentious), what has its removal revealed?

The conference opened with a keynote lecture by K. ERIK FRANZEN (Munich), entitled 'Deutsche Erzählungen von Flucht, Vertreibung und Integration nach 1989: Zurück in die Zukunft?'. The paper illustrated the tension between communicative memory

'von unten', family and generational memory through to political and cultural memory by mapping out the post-war memory landscape in both East and West Germany. By using the debate on the Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen as an example it showed how the theme of flight and expulsion is not an isolated topic, always instrumentalised and still highly relevant in foreign policy and Polish/German relationships. During questions the plurality of memory and the impossibility for one transnational memory was highlighted.

Session 1 was devoted to museums. In her paper 'From „Unforgotten Heimat“ to „Flight and Expulsion“ – Representations of Refugees and Expellees in Germany's Regional Museums', CORNELIA EISLER (Oldenburg) used examples to show how early *Heimatstuben* focussed primarily on giving comfort to expellees, maintaining their cultural identity until a return to the homeland was possible. German history in the East was glorified and expellees were portrayed as victims or martyrs. More recently, professionally run establishments have the challenge of rewriting the myths and a transformation process is underway to bridge the gap. ARDDUN HEDYDD ARWYN (Aberystwyth) discussed 'East and West Prussian *Heimat* Museums in the Federal Republic of Germany, 1950-2010'. She argued that *Heimat* museums are sites of communicative memory when curated by expellees, where frequently a nostalgic, imaginative past is portrayed without exploration of the causes of flight and expulsion. She used the professionally run, state-shaped Wehlauer Museum in Lower Saxony as an example of a site of cultural memory that exhibits a wider, more politically correct memory culture. TIM VOELKERING (Berlin) illustrated a variety of paradigmatic exhibition concepts from 1950 to 2006 in his paper 'Die Themen „Flucht, Vertreibung und Integration“ in historischen Wander- und Sonderausstellungen'. These included the themes of successful or difficult integration of expellees; *Heimat* loss; expellees as victims; complaints about human rights, and reconciliation with neighbouring lands. Expellee suffering or their integration capabilities were particularly emphasized in the early post-war years and the 2006 *Erzwungene Wege* exhibition that aimed for a Eu-

ropean context showed the expulsion as one of many in a century of expulsions, with no German responsibility. He finished with the 2002 Lower Saxony exhibition *hier geblieben* where expellee suffering was not shown as isolated, rather as comparable to guest workers and asylum seekers. This exhibition was not locally or regionally focussed, a sign that Germany is recognised as an *Einwanderungsland*.

Session 2 had the theme of literature. MICHAEL ENNIS (Cincinnati) looked at three novels that illustrate three competing memory discourses: victim, perpetrator and a hybrid mix of the two, in his paper 'Toward a Critical Empathy: The Literary History of the "Wilhelm Gustloff"'. He showed how expellees as innocent victims were portrayed in Joachim Brock's *Nacht in den Tod*; how the Wilhelm Gustloff was used as an emblem of German collective guilt in Christa Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster*, while the narrator Nelly also distances herself from any responsibility, and finally in Tanja Dückers' *Himmelskörper* where a more critical view of the past emerges, the grandparents as perpetrators, but who are also seen as human. CHARLTON PAYNE (Erfurt) contended the narrative authority of flight and expulsion as he discussed 'Fictions of the Autobiographical in Contemporary German Literature of "Flucht und Vertreibung"', using examples of Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum*, Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster* and in particular Hans-Ulrich Treichel's *Der Verlorene*. In her paper 'Flucht und Vertreibung im Werk zeitgenössischer ostdeutscher Autoren zwischen Opferdiskurs und Distanzierung', CAROLA HÄHNEL-MESNARD (Lille) contrasted Reinhard Jirgl's *Die Unvollendeten* and Emma Braslavsky's *Aus dem Sinn*. Both novels involve expellees as victims, using the leitmotif of the family, and portray the effect of flight and expulsion on later generations. The latter shows two levels of narrative, present day and past history, both of which concern German victimhood.

Session 3 looked at the role of film. Using the three-hour film *Die Flucht* as a base, CHRISTIAN HAASE (Nottingham) discussed how memory became the defining bond of the reconstructed world of the nobility post-flight in his paper "Riding West": Marion

Gräfin Dönhoff, 'Die Flucht' and the Memorialisation of the Expulsion of the East Prussian Aristocracy'. He showed how East-Elbian noble memory was reconstructed over time as part of a pluralistic memory culture. By means of *Heimatreise* and tourism post-Wende, eternal values like nature, social hierarchy and honour were prioritised over suffering. In her paper "Unkenrufe" or Flight and Expulsion as a topic of German-Polish Understanding', KIRSTEN MOELLER (Berlin) argued that the 2005 film *Unkenrufe* calls for joint German/Polish consideration of flight and expulsion; the film's two key protagonists represent national and gender stereotypes in Germany and Poland. At a time when the Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen, EU enlargement and compensation claims were being discussed and based closely on Günter Grass's novel, the film shows clearly the topic is now transnational in nature.

The fourth session considered memorials. STEPHAN SCHOLZ (Oldenburg) spoke about 'Öffentliches Gedenken an Flucht und Vertreibung. Vertriebenenendenkmäler in der Berliner Republik'. His paper investigated how some West German monuments have been amended in the new political climate post-Wende, using examples including Mölln and Osnabrück; how more recently erected monuments have changed their focus from early years' emphasis on victims to issues of integration, and the form of monuments that have been erected in East Germany from 1992. JEN GROGAN's (Nottingham) paper, 'Passive Victim or Active agent? The Female Form in Four Monuments to Expelled "ethnic Germans", 1952-2001' described how, although the female figure was used variably over time in expellee memorials in West Germany, and from 1992 on in East Germany, there is a consistent purpose, namely to personify the lost lands, thereby conveying steadfastness of memory, which keeps the spiritual *Heimat* alive just as tradition indicates the woman maintains the physical *Heimat*. JEFFREY LUPPES (Indiana) presented a paper entitled 'Commemorating the lost *Heimat*: Germans as *Kulturträger* on the Monuments of the Danube Swabians' and analysed some intricately engraved monuments. He argued that the typical narratives found in expellee

memorials of collective innocence and the loss of the *Heimat* were augmented here by the image of Germany as a *Kulturnation* with the purpose of establishing links between the *Urheimat* and the new *Heimat*; in essence to put the *Volksdeutsche* on a level with the *Reichsdeutsche*.

The penultimate session was a case study that considered Romania. In "Everything I own I carry with me': Flight and Expulsion in the Collective Imaginary', IOANA DUTA (Timisoara) compared Herta Müller's novel *Atemschaudel* with oral testimonies regarding the deportation of 75,000 Germans in January 1945. She concluded that oral testimonies are real, they tell the 'truth', unlike the novel; however, they are not as accessible as the novel. In his paper "The only Ethnic Victims in Romania': Ethnic Germans and the Legacy of Deportations' JAMES KORANYI (St. Andrews) argued that these expellees were double victims, firstly of the event and later through a lack of telling of their fate. He traced how the early post-war taboo eventually changed through a parochial to a transnational memory culture, coinciding with Romania's bid to join the EU. ALINA HUGHES (Nottingham Trent) discussed 'Germanicity without Germans and beyond: post-Saxon rural Transylvania'. She firstly portrayed the pre-war history of the Saxons in Transylvania and then showed how conservation of this area, particularly from Anglo-Saxons, is privileging the traditions of a lost ethnic group over current inhabitants. In 'Return from the Archipelago: Herta Müller's 'Atemschaudel' as Soft Memory', BRIGID HAINES (Swansea) distinguished between hard memory, where there is relative consensus in the public realm, for example of the type crystallized into monuments, and soft memory, exemplified by the novel *Atemschaudel*, where raw and contested memories are in evidence. She compared Müller's account of gulag life to Primo Levi's account of concentration camp life in *If This is a Man*. She showed that research into Gulag memories is less advanced than Holocaust memories, and called for German and other European memories to be read together.

The final session regarded legacies. In his paper 'A 'Century of Expulsions' and 'Ethnic Cleansing'? The German Debate on the His-

torical Place of 'Flight and Expulsion'" INGO ESER (Cologne) discussed how the term 'a century of expulsions' has become a master narrative, of the striving for ethnic homogeneity to explain the history of the twentieth century. Using the planned Berlin Centre against Expulsions as a framework he illustrated the difficulties associated with the term, one of which is the sometimes inclusion of the Holocaust as an example of ethnic cleansing. He argued that the term 'Lexicon of Expulsions', coined recently by historians, is preferable. By looking at children of the flight, INGE WEBER-NEWTN (London) showed in 'The Burden of the Past: Psychological Impact of Flight and Expulsion as a Socio-cultural Phenomenon', how the traumatic experience of war can affect people later in life, and in the generations that follow. She argued that although by the 1960s expellees were regarded as integrated into German society, since the mid-1980s research has challenged this apparent successful assimilation, as large numbers of children of the flight and their descendants have suffered psychological problems, and still, late in life, need help overcoming trauma.

Conference papers highlighted how, over sixty-five years since flight and expulsion, the topic is still widely discussed, dramatised, written about and memorialised. The coming together of a number of factors such as a post-communist Europe, enabling wider debate and release from former repressions, and the urge for commemoration, witness testimonies and historicisation engendered by the communicative memory of the flight generation has resulted in a network of contested public, political and individual memories, all competing for attention before the slide into cultural memory alone. By way of a framing conclusion, the final two papers depicted the objective macro-level of the theme, as debated by historians, and the intimate micro-level, the psychological impact of the event, as experienced by expellees and their descendants. Debate about the controversial *Zentrum gegen Vertreibung*, the topic of which ran like a thread through the conference, illustrates the tensions, from individual memory to national and European. Whatever its final form, discussion that involves all histor-

ical agents during the course of the centre's development must be beneficial and can only assist in the consideration of a difficult past.

Conference Overview:

Welcome: Bill Niven (Nottingham Trent)

Keynote Lecture: K. Erik Franzen (Munich), 'Deutsche Erzählungen von Flucht, Vertreibung und Integration nach 1989: Zurück in die Zukunft?'

Session 1: Museums

Cornelia Eisler (Oldenburg), 'From 'Unforgotten Heimat' to 'Flight and Expulsion' – Representations of Refugees and Expellees in Germany's Regional Museums'

Arddun Hedydd Arwyn (Aberystwyth), 'East and West Prussian *Heimat* Museums in the Federal Republic of Germany, 1950-2010'

Tim Voelkerling (Berlin), 'Die Themen „Flucht, Vertreibung und Integration“ in historischen Wander- und Sonderausstellungen'

Session 2: Literature

Michael Ennis (Cincinnati), 'Toward a Critical Empathy: The Literary History of the 'Wilhelm Gustloff''

Charlton Payne (Erfurt), 'Fictions of the Autobiographical in Contemporary German Literature of 'Flucht und Vertreibung''

Carola Hähnel-Mesnard (Lille), 'Flucht und Vertreibung im Werk zeitgenössischer ostdeutscher Autoren zwischen Opferdiskurs und Distanzierung'

Session 3: Film

Christian Haase (Nottingham), 'Riding West': Marion Gräfin Dönhoff, 'Die Flucht' and the Memorialisation of the Expulsion of the East Prussian Aristocracy'

Kirsten Moeller (Berlin), 'Unkenrufe' or Flight and Expulsion as a topic of German-Polish Understanding'

Session 4: Memorials

Stephan Scholz (Oldenburg), 'Öffentliches Gedenken an Flucht und Vertreibung. Vertriebenenendenkmäler in der Berliner Republik'

Jen Grogan (Nottingham), 'Passive Victim or

Active agent? The Female Form in Four Monuments to Expelled 'ethnic Germans', 1952-2001'

Jeffrey Luppés (Indiana), 'Commemorating the lost *Heimat*: Germans as *Kulturträger* on the Monuments of the Danube Swabians'

Session 5: Case Study: Romania

Ioana Duta (Timisoara), 'Everything I own I carry with me': Flight and Expulsion in the Collective Imaginary'

James Koranyi (St. Andrews), 'The only Ethnic Victims in Romania': Ethnic Germans and the Legacy of Deportations'

Alina Hughes (Nottingham Trent), 'Germanicity without Germans and beyond: post-Saxon rural Transylvania'

Brigid Haines (Swansea), 'Return from the Archipelago: Herta Müller's 'Atemschaukel' as Soft Memory'

Session 6: Legacies

Ingo Eser (Cologne), 'A 'Century of Expulsions' and 'Ethnic Cleansing'? The German Debate on the Historical Place of 'Flight and Expulsion''

Inge Weber-Newth (London), 'The Burden of the Past: Psychological Impact of Flight and Expulsion as a Socio-cultural Phenomenon'

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