

## From the Margins to the Centre? The Discourse on Expellees and Victimhood in Germany

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### Introduction

At the German Bundestag's commemoration of the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Second World War, Federal President Horst Köhler acknowledged the victims of Nazi aggression and occupation. Yet, he also reminded his audience of Germany's own victims, those who suffered at the hands of the Nazis, and those who became victims of the 'backlash' against Germany. In an otherwise uncommon 'equalisation' of victims, Köhler pointed out the suffering of German civilians, including of the refugees and expellees from Central and Eastern Europe. Publicly drawing an analogy between the victims of German aggression and German victims, the German head of state merely reflected a trend in German public discourse in which the debate about Germans as victims had a much longer tradition.

Between 1945 and 1950, one of the largest forced migrations in European history took place: as a consequence of the Second World War almost 14 million ethnic Germans fled or were expelled from their traditional homelands in Central and Eastern Europe. Of the survivors, approximately two-thirds were resettled in the American and British zones of occupation, and one-third in the Soviet zone. Because of their large numbers and widespread distribution across occupied Germany, the expellees were visible victims whose sense of victimhood, however, differed in a crucial respect from that of the rest of the German population: they had lost their homeland. This loss subsequently provided an additional impetus for a collective identity to be formed among refugees and expellees from very diverse countries in Central and Eastern Europe and remained a potent source of mobilisation through the decades. Yet, the successful political and economic integration of most of the refugees and expellees by the end of the 1950s and a change in the political climate in the Federal Republic of Germany in the mid-sixties meant that these were no longer seen as victims of the Second World War. Instead, their insistence on the right of return to their former homelands, on compensation from the countries from which they had been expelled and on changes to the de-facto borders within Germany and between Germany and Poland were considered obstacles in the 'official' reconciliation and rapprochement process facilitated by the *neue Ostpolitik* and they rapidly became increasingly marginal to public debate.

Against this background, this chapter examines how the refugees and expellees and their descendents, and the organisations representing them, were able to reclaim a significant presence in, and mindshare of the discourse on Germans as victims from the late 1990s onwards, that had been unthinkable only a few years earlier. Considering the perception of the German expellees as victims, and the role and place that they have occupied in the broader discourse on the re-appreciation of victimhood in Germany, we argue that a much broader reconceptualisation of the notion of Germans as victims has taken place since the late 1990s of which the reappreciation of German expellees and refugees is one among several elements. We focus on the catalytic role played by the events in the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s and in particular during the Kosovo crisis at the end of that decade that brought the suffering of German refugees and expellees from Central and Eastern Europe very much (back) into the now broader discourse on Germans' *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Grasped by the expellee organisations as a unique opportunity to re-open the debate on their individual suffering, the conflict in and over Kosovo proved pivotal in sensitising German public opinion to possible historical parallels. Publicised in major media and across the traditional left-right divide, the debate over German involvement

in the NATO bombing campaign against Serbia coincided with the rapprochement between the political left and the expellees that had begun prior to the red-green election victory in 1998, and has seen its preliminary conclusion with the publication of Günter Grass's *Im Krebsgang*. Yet, this renewed debate has also led to controversies—the proposed 'centre against expulsions' has been widely rejected in German and abroad, and the instrumentalisation of the expulsions in the context of the EU accession, particularly of the Czech Republic, has, to some extent, restored traditional left-right divides over how best to deal with this particular period in German and European history, suggesting that the political left's brief flirtation with the expellees rarely went beyond mere expediency. Analysing the interplay of domestic and international events and of political agendas of various influential players in the debate, we conclude however that the discourse concerning the collective victimisation of German expellees and refugees over the past several years has added an important dimension to the gradual change in ordinary Germans' view of their own history.

#### The Discourse on German Victimhood

There appears to be little agreement as to when the discourse on German suffering during World War II begins to assume a more significant role in public discourse in Germany. A number of commentators have argued that the appearance in 2002 of Grass's novella *Im Krebsgang*, followed quickly by the publication of Jörg Friedrich's study of the bombing of German cities *Der Brand* brought the discussion of German suffering to the fore.<sup>1</sup> Literary scholars tend to underline the influence of the series of lectures given by W.G. Sebald in 1997 on 'Luftkrieg und Literatur', recognised primarily after the appearance of the two later publications. Others highlight the discursive change made visible during 1995, the fiftieth anniversary of the war.<sup>2</sup> Position-takings like these tend to suggest that the end of the Cold War made it easier for Germans to challenge the self-image of the perpetrator nation and confront the Allies with the bombings of German cities and expulsions in the East. Those studies that focus primarily on shifts within Germany itself tend to date the change to the first *Wende*, which brought Kohl to power in the early 1980s, or to the arrival in power of the Red/Green coalition in 1998. Here it is argued that German identity politics are at the fore.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the attempts in the 1980s by Chancellor Kohl to reconfigure German national identity, which were ultimately predicated upon a decentering of Holocaust memory that had dominated since the late 1960s, are cited in evidence. Elsewhere, the focus is on the 1990s when the Schröder/Fischer government sought to usher in an era of so-called normalisation that entailed a reassessment of Germany's foreign policy responsibilities. Finally, those anxious to situate the shift within a broader international context highlight the effects of the eastern expansion of the EU, or indeed the war in Kosovo that saw the first out-of-area engagement of German troops.

In the following paragraphs we sketch out the key arguments of a number of analyses of the discourse of German suffering in contemporary Germany. In his analysis of changing memory regimes, Eric Langenbacher argues that what he refers to as German-centred memory was clearly placed on the political agenda in the 1980s by the Kohl government, but has never found broad resonance in the German population.<sup>4</sup> According to Langenbacher, Holocaust-centred memory

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of these two texts see Eric Langenbacher, "The Return of Memory: New Discussions about German Suffering in World War II," *German Politics and Society* 3(2003) 74-88.

<sup>2</sup> Helmut Peitsch, "Introduction: Studying European Literary Memories," in Peitsch, Burdett et al, *European Memories of the Second World War* (Berghahn, 1999) xiii-xxxi, here xv.

<sup>3</sup> See for example, Graham Jackson's introduction to the special number of *German Life and Letters*, 'The End of a Taboo? The Experience of Bombing and Expulsion in Contemporary German 'Gedächtniskultur', 4(2004) 343-55, here 345.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Langenbacher, "Changing Memory Regimes in Contemporary Germany?" *German Politics and Society* 2(2003) 46-68.

remains hegemonic even today, despite such attempts which have intensified during the 1990s. The only recent change, according to Langenbacher, has been the attempt made by the Left to reappropriate German-centred memory as part of a more inclusive narrative of the past.

In his study on the expellee organisations themselves, Henning Süßner observes a new obsession with these in contemporary Germany, which he attributes to a rejuvenation of their leadership in the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> He does at the same time observe the irony of the fact that most members today have no personal desire to return and take up the homeland they so passionately demand. Süßner's analysis begins with the attempts by expellee organisations to raise public awareness for their suffering in the 1950s. He argues that their success then can in part be explained by the fact that the rhetoric surrounding the homeland was also to be found amongst non-expellees, for whom 'Heimat was a prominent element of the reconstruction of the national German community of suffering.'<sup>6</sup> As Süßner is concerned to point out throughout his analysis, the ethno-regional discourse of expellees did not challenge ideas of German nationhood, but could in effect reinforce a cultural vision of the nation, which enabled expellees to develop closer ties with the more conservative Bavarian CSU. Süßner argues that reunification and the end of communism have brought about a memory regime in Germany that has allowed expellee claims to reenter mainstream discourse, for the reason that the two have again become more compatible. He is thus effectively suggesting that contemporary notions of German nationhood have shifted, enabling expellee claims to a German *Heimat* to achieve more resonance in the public sphere.<sup>7</sup>

More implicit criticism of the recent debates has come from critics who challenge the notion that the inclusion of German suffering into debates about World War II represents a normalisation, and thus a positive development. In his recent book Helmut Schmitz argues that the 'belated re-empathising' of German suffering is problematic in the ways that it has ignored the shift from first to third generation.<sup>8</sup> He also suggests tentatively that there appears to be a decentering of the Holocaust as the key event of the Nazi period taking place. Andreas F. Kelletat, in his analysis of expellee organisations, has pointed out that suffering caused by expulsion and bombing, such as that described by Günter Grass in his controversial *Im Krebsgang*, was shared by all sides of the war, including the inmates of concentration camps moved around rapidly at the end of the war, and killed by starvation or Allied bombs.<sup>9</sup> He thus criticises the selective and exclusionary definition of suffering that prevails in the debates:

Würden diese und ähnliche Flucht- und Vertreibungstode stets miterinnert, wenn von den Flüchtlingen und Vertriebenen aus dem Osten im Frühjahr 1945 die Rede ist, so könnte man vielleicht wirklich von einer "Normalisierung" des Erinnerungsdiskurs sprechen.<sup>10</sup>

In other words, the discourse has shifted not to debating suffering per se but onto German suffering as the central focus of the memory politics of the period. This Kelletat argues is also shown by the fact that expellee associations amongst others have readopted the language of the 1950s. There is thus little agreement

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<sup>5</sup> Henning Süßner, "Still Yearning for the Lost Heimat?: Ethnic German Expellees and the Politics of Belonging," *German Politics and Society* 2(2004) 1-26, here 2.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Helmut Schmitz, *On their own Terms: The Legacy of National Socialism in Post-1990 German Fiction* (Birmingham, 2004) 15.

<sup>9</sup> Andreas F. Kelletat, "Von der Täter- zur Opfernation? Die Rückkehr des Themas 'Flucht und Vertreibung' in den deutschen Vergangenheitsdiskurs bei Grass und anderen," in anon., *Germanistentreffen Deutschland – Großbritannien, Irland 30.9-3.10.2004: Dokumentation der Tagungsbeiträge* (DAAD, 2005) 167-80.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 179.

as to the significance of the recent shift towards the experiences of ethnic Germans during and after World War II. Rather than focus on the broader issues, we look specifically at how the question of the victim identity of the expellees has reentered mainstream discourse both amongst political elites and the German media, particularly in relation to the situation in Kosovo in the 1990s.

#### Setting Agendas? The Expellee Organisations post-1990

The leadership of the refugee and expellee organisations had for years emphasised the victim dimension in refugees' and expellees' identity and now sought to capitalise on the opportunities offered by the transition in Central and Eastern Europe and the ensuing reconciliation process. Initially, victimhood continued to be framed through specific demands raised by the BdV and individual *Landsmannschaften*. In a time-honoured tradition, these were defined as a right to return (permanently) to their former homelands, and the entitlement to compensation for their suffering and to restitution of expropriated property. This particular conception of a victim identity presented the expellee organisations with unprecedented opportunities to attach their demands to the bandwagon of mainstream (institutional) politics and win some mindshare in the public discourse. The first of these opportunities presented itself in the form of the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, the second in the form of several successful class actions in the United States, and threats thereof, aimed at compensation for forced labourers during the Second World War, and the third in the form of the European Union enlargement process. We shall briefly outline these three instances to set the stage more generally in terms of the German domestic and international environment in which the debate over expellees and refugees as specifically German victims of the Second World War re-emerged, before analysing in more detail the media debate on the subject in the context of the Kosovo conflict.

The conflict in Kosovo with its large-scale population displacements, and subsequent international intervention to reverse them, in more than one way resembled what many expellees had experienced themselves, but also symbolised the hopes of some of them, namely the international recognition and enforcement of the right of people not to be expelled from their homeland, or at least to return to it if an expulsion could not be prevented. Pictures from Kosovo also brought home to many others in Germany, and elsewhere, the horrors of refugee tracks, sparking a broad public debate on an issue that had, for the most part, been deliberately ignored in the German media. By comparing, and linking, their own plight to that of Kosovo Albanians, expellee organisations managed to align themselves with a political strategy that was beyond moral reproach – to prevent, or reverse, ethnic cleansing. By supporting the policy of Germany during the conflict, the expellee organisations sought to prepare the ground upon which they then could reopen the debate on their own suffering more than fifty years earlier. Already in 1995, the expellee organisations saw their cause elevated to higher international levels when the then UN High Commissioner on Human Rights, José Ayala Lasso, emphasised in a speech in the *Paulskirche* in Frankfurt that the right not to be expelled from one's homeland was a fundamental human right and noted that, while the peoples in Central and Eastern Europe had suffered terribly under German occupation during the Second World War and thus had a legitimate claim to reparations, such claims 'must not be realised through collective victimisation on the basis of general discrimination and without the thorough investigation of individual guilt'.<sup>11</sup> Even more relevant to the political agenda of the leadership of the expellee organisations was a report of the UN Commission on Human Rights, entitled *Human Rights and Population Transfer*, which in its Annex II, included a 'Draft Declaration on Population Transfer and the

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<sup>11</sup> José Ayala Lasso, "Address to the German Expellees," 28 May 1995.

Implantation of Settlers' that emphasised the right to return, restoration of properties, and compensation for any property that cannot be restored.<sup>12</sup>

Restitution and compensation remain very sensitive issues, particularly in German-Czech relations. In the eyes of the Sudeten German *Landsmannschaft*, the compensation of forced labourers during the Second World War, and in particular the negotiations between Germany and the representatives of survivors from Nazi labour camps, provided some of the expellees who had suffered particular hardship during the expulsion and/or in labour camps in Czechoslovakia after 1945 with an equally legitimate claim to receive a symbolic gesture of compensation from the German-Czech Future Fund. Arguing that this would be an important contribution to the reconciliation between Sudeten Germans and Czechs, the Sudeten German *Landsmannschaft* submitted a bid to the fund's executive board, where it was promptly, and with great publicity, rejected. At the same time, class action had also been considered as a possible route to realise claims for the compensation of losses resulting from collective expropriation and where possible for the restitution of confiscated properties in this process.<sup>13</sup> Plans for class action in the US, initially against insurance companies that profited from the collective expropriation of the Sudeten Germans, have been officially supported by the leadership of the Sudeten German association.

A number of opportunities on the European stage have also been exploited by expellee activists and their success in this area has boosted the confidence of some of the political leaders of the expellee organisations. In April 1999, a resolution was passed by the European Parliament in which its members called 'on the Czech Government, in the same spirit of reconciliatory statements made by President Havel, to repeal the surviving laws and decrees from 1945 and 1946, insofar as they concern the expulsion of individual ethnic groups in the former Czechoslovakia'.<sup>14</sup> This is another highly sensitive issue not only in Czech-EU relations, but also in Czech-German relations and within the political processes in both countries.

The first European Parliament resolution was immediately seized upon by a group of members of the *Bundestag* who proposed a motion, co-sponsored by the CDU/CSU parliamentary party, in which the federal government was asked 'to take appropriate action in the spirit of the [resolution of the European Parliament] ... on its own and in collaboration with the other EU member states and the institutions of the EU'.<sup>15</sup> A counter-motion was introduced by the parliamentary parties of SPD and Alliance 90/The Greens in October 1999 in which the *Bundestag* was asked to welcome the statement by Chancellor Schroeder and Czech Minister-President Zeman of March 8, 1999, that 'neither government will re-introduce property issues [into their bilateral relationship] either today or in the future'.<sup>16</sup> This motion received a majority vote both at committee stage and after a parliamentary debate in June 2000, while that of the CDU/CSU parliamentarians was rejected.

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<sup>12</sup> UN Commission on Human Rights, "Human Rights and Population Transfer. Final Report of the Special Rapporteur, Mr. Al-Khasawneh" (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1997/23).

<sup>13</sup> Sudetendeutsche Landsmannschaft, "SL für Ausschöpfung weiterer Rechtswege," Press Release, 7 July 1999.

<sup>14</sup> European Parliament, "Resolution on the Regular Report from the Commission on the Czech Republic's Progress towards Accession," (COM[98]0708 – C4-0111/99).

<sup>15</sup> Deutscher Bundestag, "Antrag der Abgeordneten Hartmut Koschyk, Christian Schmidt (Fürth), Karl Lamers, Peter Hintze und der Fraktion der CDU/CSU: Versöhnung durch Ächtung von Vertreibung," Bundestagsdrucksache 14/1311, 29 June 1999.

<sup>16</sup> Deutscher Bundestag, "Antrag der Fraktionen SPD und Bündnis 90/Die Grünen: Weiterentwicklung der deutsch-tschechischen Beziehungen," Bundestagsdrucksache 14/1873, 26 October 1999.

What is interesting in relation to these debates on restitution and compensation in general is that the old left-right dichotomy in the political process in Germany on issues concerning the expulsion of ethnic Germans has been restored. For a period of about three years from the mid-1990s onwards, there seemed to be a certain recognition of the fact that the expulsion had been a human tragedy, and that there had been an unjust neglect by the German left of the suffering of the expellees and their contribution to the reconciliation process with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.<sup>17</sup> This certainly contributed to the fact that issues of and related to the expulsion have recently regained considerable discursive power.

Yet, there has also been a recognition of the fact that these interests could be much more effectively pursued if the expellees received a broader public recognition as victims. In order to achieve this, the leadership of the expellee organisations had to reshape the notion of victimhood of both victims of Nazi Germany and victims of the governments established in Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the Second World War. In doing so, expellee activists did and do no longer aim to deny that groups that have long been recognised as victims have suffered and have therefore every right to claim compensation. Rather, the objective is to achieve for their own members the same international recognition (including from countries like Poland and the Czech Republic) with all its legal consequences. From the perspective of the BdV, the opportunities to do so seemed better than ever. However, it is important to realise that the notion of victimhood as a central part of expellee identity is by no means a new element, nor could it be one given the very real experience of expulsion.

#### The Kosovo Conflict: (German) Expellees as Victims of War

In the next section we look at the ways in which the German media interpreted the conflict in Yugoslavia, particularly during the first out-of-area combat involvement of German military forces in the war against Serbia in 1999. A number of historical analogies were available to legitimise NATO intervention and evoke sympathy for its most visible victims, the refugees from Kosovo, and support for participating governments. German politicians, most notoriously Rudolf Scharping, made much use of the Holocaust analogy, but the debate in Germany was highly contested, *precisely on the level of historical comparison*. Ironically, greater consensus existed in Germany on the role of perpetrator and victim in Kosovo, than did on the responsibility for the expulsions of ethnic Germans. Historical analogies to the German past could and did serve a dual purpose. Rather than the past serving only to illuminate the Yugoslav present, the war also enabled various interest groups and political actors to intervene in a contemporary debate about their own German past. This duality of purpose presented a unique opportunity for the expellee organisations to take their decade-long fruitless struggle for a public acknowledgement and recognition of their constituents' victimhood centre-stage in the public debate without being vilified as *ewig Gestrige*.

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<sup>17</sup> In a speech at the commemoration ceremony of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the BdV in May 1999, the German Minister of the Interior noted that '[c]ontrary to frequent prejudice, the ethnic German expellees have, in their overwhelming majority, actively participated in the process of reconciliation between the European nations, and they continue to do so today' (Otto Schily, "Die Erinnerung und das Gedenken findet ihren Sinn in dem Willen für eine bessere Zukunft," (29 May 1999). In her address on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Cultural Foundation of the German Expellees, the chairperson of the Culture and Media Committee of the Bundestag, Elke Leonhard of the SPD, emphasized that nobody had the right to 'discredit as revanchism the legitimate interests of the expellees in the preservation of their culture and the public acknowledgement of their fate ...' (Leonhard, Elke, "Die Verantwortung der Politik für die gesamtdeutsche Kultur," (14 June 1999). Ironically, a dispute with the Secretary of State for Culture, Michael Naumann, over the (under)funding of cultural institutions of the expellees has prompted Leonhard to resign her post on 30 June 2000.

The rehabilitation of the expellees in this period is a complex process, and was in many ways even an unintentional outcome of other key debates of the 1990s. In any case, there were several coexisting strands to the debate that need to be clearly separated. These often served conflicting purposes and, while each contributed to an overall intensification of the resonance of the comparison made between ethnic German expellees and the fate of the Kosovo Albanians, and consequently to the rehabilitation of the expellee, the differing actors and discourses need to be carefully distinguished from each other. The three different discourses are firstly, the rhetoric of the expellee organisations themselves which sought to profit from the dominant media image of the refugee during the Kosovo crisis; secondly, that of proponents and opponents of the NATO intervention in Kosovo who debated Germany's first out-of-area military engagement since World War II; finally, both of these later merge with a third and broader discussion about German suffering and the Left, which appeared to be more concerned with overturning a supposed left/liberal hegemony on the past rather than with rehabilitating the German victims of World War II. These three differing strands cannot be described as different phases, as they overlap and appear to coexist.

#### Expellee Organisations

Diana Johnstone, whose book *Fools' Crusade* explores the geopolitical reasons for the war against Serbia, discusses the links between German expellee associations and Kosovo.<sup>18</sup> In her view these have exerted a decisive influence on our perceptions of ethnic conflict in Yugoslavia. On the one hand, the conflict in Yugoslavia enabled them, she argues, to focus attention on expulsion and ethnic cleansing as a universal phenomenon of the C20 leading to a shift in public sympathy in their favour. On the other hand, she claims that the demonisation of the Serbs as chief aggressor responsible for violent expulsions "constituted an enormous moral victory for the postwar German expellees," for this enabled the identification of the Slavic Serbs with the Slavic Russians, adding "an irrational but emotionally powerful element of 'poetic justice'."<sup>19</sup>

A closer examination of the coverage of the conflict in former Yugoslavia suggests that the situation is more complex than Johnstone suggests. While expellee organisations made much of the comparison in their own literature, it remained contested until after the Kosovo War in 1999. Even then it never became the dominant analogy in use in public debate in the media. Comparisons with German suffering at the hands of the Russians were also certainly not widely in evidence during the first years of conflict, although the early tensions in Yugoslavia were generally interpreted within a preexisting Cold War framework. Thus, the demands by Croatia and Slovenia for self-determination were welcomed as part of the liberation of Europe from communism and compared to the situation in the GDR.<sup>20</sup> The rhetoric of genocide, with comparisons made to the Holocaust, emerged in the mid-1990s, receiving its strongest support from left-liberal circles, particularly after the massacre of Srebrenica, which became a defining debate for the Left launched by Joschka Fischer in August 1995. During the Kosovo War itself conservative observers rejected dominant historical analogies, particularly with the Holocaust, arguing that this was a typically German response, while left-liberal observers rushed to find parallels in German history with both the bombing of Serbia and the expulsions from Kosovo.

#### Left/Green Debates

The use of historical analogies to comprehend and illuminate the situation in Yugoslavia may have been contested by conservative figures within Germany, but

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<sup>18</sup> Diana Johnstone, *Fools' Crusade: Yugoslavia, NATO and Western Delusions* (London, 2002).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 176.

<sup>20</sup> See Andrei S. Markovits/ Simon Reich, *The German Predicament: Memory and Power in the New Europe* (Ithaca, 1997).

on the left there was no shortage of attempts to (de)mystify the situation with reference to the German past. In left-liberal circles the massacre in Srebrenica in 1995 marked a turning point in the discussion. Markovits and Reich have argued that the debates about military intervention that ensued, particularly in the Green Party, articulated 'the clashes and conflicts of history, collective memory, guilt, responsibility [...] – in short, the key issues of contemporary Germany' acutely and urgently.<sup>21</sup> What many observers failed to notice is that a leading Green Party figure had launched a second, closely interlinked, debate in the same anniversary year. In the same month that Fischer made his plea for support for military intervention in Bosnia, Antje Vollmer gave a speech in Prague in a Bertelsmann' series entitled "Gespräche mit den Nachbarn". Intended as a positive reply to a speech given by Vaclav Havel in January 1995, Vollmer called for a new partnership between the two countries. Havel's January speech had made a similar point, but had received a surprisingly muted response from the German government.<sup>22</sup> Throughout 1995 Vollmer and others had worked towards encouraging reconciliation by calling for an end to recriminations, although this was not always welcomed by expellee associations who refused to let Vollmer speak at one of their meetings in May 1995.<sup>23</sup> Even her presence at the meeting in Munich in June 1995 led to protests from participants, a meeting which also provoked controversy when a public declaration compared Havel to Karadzic "weil es [Tschechien] die Benes-Dekrete bestätigt habe."<sup>24</sup>

In October 1995 Vollmer's speech 'Ende der Zweideutigkeit – Offene Antworten auf offene Fragen im deutsch-tschechischen Verhältnis' was provocative.<sup>25</sup> She adopted the careful position of condemning the expulsions but pointing also to the legitimate reasons for the action. More significantly, however, Vollmer pronounced a very public mea culpa on behalf of the 68er generation for having ignored the plight of the Vertriebene, a mistake that, she felt, had led to the continued problems between Germany and the Czech Republic. She argued that while the millions of expellees had received 'bedeutende materielle Hilfen [...]', their 'persönliches Schicksal' had only met with 'mitleidloses Desinteresse und [auf] die Unfähigkeit zum Hinhören, Mitleiden und Mittrauern'.<sup>26</sup> For this she particularly blamed 'die deutsche Linke und die Studentenbewegung', who she claimed had cultivated 'eine unausgesprochene Kollektivschuldthese', which had led to this one-sided interpretation of victimhood. It was, she argued, time to abandon this position.<sup>27</sup> In this self-critique Vollmer does not make any direct reference to events unfolding either in the German Green Party or in Yugoslavia, although the parallels are evident. In the same period that Fischer asked his colleagues to rethink the foundational principle of antimilitarism, Vollmer effectively began to question the memory politics of the 68er generation, oversimplifying the position that these had taken vis-à-vis the concept of collective guilt from 1968 onwards. It is only in 1999 that the two events become linked and the expulsions from Kosovo become the supposed catalyst of a leftist reassessment of the postwar expulsions of ethnic Germans, which had clearly begun much earlier. In May 1999 *Die Welt* could nonetheless observe contently that the war against Serbia had been an important learning process for the Left.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 145.

<sup>22</sup> Vollmer's response in March 1995 in which she interprets the silence as opportunistic electioneering is revealing for its silence on the expellees themselves. She points out that Havel is willing to use the term 'expulsions', but focuses on the need to complete the policy of 'Ostpolitik' by overcoming old patterns of accusation and suspicion: "Appell zum Aufbruch aus der Vergangenheit," *Focus Magazin*, 13 March 1995.

<sup>23</sup> Anon., "Vertriebene vertreiben Antje Vollmer," *die tageszeitung*, 29 May 1995.

<sup>24</sup> Anon., "Havel mit Karadzic-Regime verglichen," *die tageszeitung*, 6 June 1995.

<sup>25</sup> Her speech was not published but widely cited: See, for example, anon., "Frau Vollmer ruft Tschechen und Deutsche zu einem mutigen Neuanfang auf," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 6 October 1995.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid..

<sup>27</sup> Ibid..

At last, the conservative broadsheet suggests, the 'Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen' could unite those "die von Auschwitz her denken und begründen", and those 'die von der Vertreibung her denken und begründen.'<sup>28</sup> In June 1999 the left-wing *tageszeitung* agreed, '[j]etzt beginnen die erstarrten Fronten aufzuweichen,' it proclaimed cheerfully, also pointing to the suffering in former Yugoslavia as a reason for this development.<sup>29</sup>

Die Massenvertreibungen zuerst in Bosnien, dann im Kosova, haben die Emotionen aufgerührt, für das Schicksal der Flüchtlinge neue Sensibilität in Deutschland wie in Osteuropa geweckt.<sup>30</sup>

During the actual campaign fought against Serbia in 1999, historical analogies became the terrain on which the war was fought at home between pro- and anti-war supporters. From the beginning of the military conflict *Spiegel*, for example, adopted a vigorous anti-war, and increasingly anti-American position, reflected in its harsh criticism of the use of historical analogies by the warring parties. It is in a context of this increasing anti-Americanism that the most explicit reference is made to the 'Vertriebene',. In a piece, entitled "Krieg für das gute Gewissen", the magazine makes it usual jibe at the new moral foreign policy of the German government, and at the dominance of the Americans in the conflict: "die unbeirrte Supermacht USA zeigt, wo's langgeht."<sup>31</sup> Yet the article moves beyond its usual position comparing the situation to that of the immediate postwar period. More perniciously, it suggests that just as the US did nothing to prevent the expulsion of Germans after the war, it is now failing to provide ground troops to prevent the expulsion of Kosovar Albanians. *Spiegel* therefore draws a highly problematic comparison between the American position in 1945 and the present-day intervention:

Diese Vertreibungen blieben ungesühnt und irreversibel. Sie wurden fast zu einer Art Völker-Gewohnheitsrecht: Die Ausweisung der Deutschen aus Polen, der Tschechoslowakei und Ungarn wurde 1945 auf der Potsdamer Konferenz von den Großmächten ausdrücklich gebilligt.<sup>32</sup>

Unlike its usage in the rhetoric of expellees therefore, historical analogy does not here serve to criticise those who carried out the expulsions, but to remind readers of the fact that the Allied powers condoned them. The conclusion of the article, which points to half-hearted US attempts to prevent the expulsions, appears to show sympathy for expellees in general, but then immediately lists only the cases of Palestinians, Kurds and Pakistanis:

Wenn jetzt zum ersten Mal in der Geschichte die stärkste Militärmacht dafür kämpft, daß eine vertriebene Minderheit wieder in ihre Heimat ziehen darf, könnte dieses Grundrecht anderen eigentlich nicht verwehrt werden. Kann Vertreibung verjähren?<sup>33</sup>

There is no suggestion that the authors of this text wish to support the claim for compensation of German expellees, for their intention appears to be mainly to attack the United States. Arguably, this has everything to do with German foreign policy and the new red/green government, and little to do with German suffering. Yet, such rhetoric strengthened, inadvertently, the argument of the expellee organisations that they had been victims, too, of the Second World War. Almost ironically, given the *Spiegel's* general political outlook, the magazine's condemnation of the Allied approval of the expulsion of ethnic Germans after 1945 is echoed in President Köhler's explicit acknowledgement of German victims

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas Schmid, "Linke Selbstkritik," *Die Welt*, 31 May 1999.

<sup>29</sup> Christian Semler, "Kalte Herzen, kalte Heimat," *die tageszeitung*, 19 June 1999.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>31</sup> Anon., "Krieg für das gute Gewissen," *Der Spiegel*, 17(1999) 36.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 37.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 38.

of the Allied war effort during the commemoration ceremonies for the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Second World War.

#### After the War

It is not until after the war in Kosovo that the *Spiegel* plays a dominant role in the rehabilitation of the Vertriebene in mainstream debate. In 2002 the magazine famously published a series of articles focusing on the expellees, which began with an article illustrated with a picture of a Kosovar Albanian woman juxtaposed with a photograph of a German expellee.<sup>34</sup> Despite the use of such explicit visual comparison, the *Spiegel* hesitates in making the comparison in the accompanying text. Instead, the link construed between the two historical events is a more subtle one, and here is more concerned with the advent of the 68er generation to power than with either anti-American or anti-Serb rhetoric. The article traces the integration of the Vertreibene in the Federal Republic and their dwindling significance, until, the magazine claims, the conflict in former Yugoslavia provoked a political turnabout amongst the Left:

Im Angesicht der im Kosovo fliehenden und gejagten Menschen setzte bei der lange unwilligen deutschen Linken ein allmähliches Umdenken ein. Waren das nicht die gleichen Bilder wie vor mehr als einem halben Jahrhundert auf der Kurischen Nehrung oder im Stettiner Haff?<sup>35</sup>

*Spiegel* welcomes the end of "die Wortführerschaft derer, die sich nahezu ausschließlich auf die Schandtaten der Nazis und ihrer Mitläufer fixierten."<sup>36</sup> At issue here again is, it seems, not so much the rehabilitation of the Vertriebene, for the *Spiegel* is in no doubt that they were also partly responsible for their fate. The purpose is twofold. On the one hand *Spiegel* insists that different narratives of World War II could coexist, and that the German victims of WWII should be remembered as well. On the other hand, the supposed hegemony of the 68er narrative is rejected as an anachronism that has outlived its function. Not only had Kosovo enlightened the Left to the suffering of expellees, but a new generation of children were also asking about the suffering of their grandfathers. Within the context of a series focusing on the expulsions therefore, the analogy with Kosovo serves to underline the gradual normalisation of a supposedly abnormal 68er generation whose pathological fixation on Nazis had finally been overcome. The war therefore enabled Germans to naturalize a political shift as an outcome of the wars in Yugoslavia, ignoring the fact that it had been taking place since the late 1980s, and was closely connected to the Cold War politics of commemoration.

#### Conclusion: Reckoning with the Past

Identity is a complex and multi-dimensional notion. In the case of the German expellees, it has primarily manifested itself in terms of an ambiguous and contested relationship with their own status as victims of the Second World War. This has not only divided the domestic public discourse in Germany, it has also had significant implications for the Federal Republic's bilateral relations with Poland and the Czech Republic, and also affects on the dynamics of EU enlargement.

The reason why the expulsion of the ethnic Germans more than fifty years ago still gives rise to heated debate and has a bearing on institutional processes at German and European level can not only be seen in the magnitude of the expulsions and the suffering they inflicted on those affected by them. It has also

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<sup>34</sup> Anon., "Die Deutschen als Opfer," *Spiegel* 13(2002) 36-64, here 37. All the following citations are taken from the first article. The other parts of the series were entitled as follows: anon., "Schrecken der wilden Vertreibung," 14(2002) 65-73; anon., "Eine teuflische Lösung," 15(2002) 56-74.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 39.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 37.

to do with the fact that this particular aspect of the Second World War and its consequences has never been properly dealt with by means of a broad and open public debate in Germany or Poland or Czechoslovakia/the Czech Republic. More than thirty years after the advent of the new *Ostpolitik*, the political left and right continue to be divided over this issue, raising the political profile of, and stakes in a debate that should essentially be about reconciliation and forgiveness. More often than not, radicalisation and alienation inside and outside Germany have been the result. Although the majority of expellees and refugees, and of their descendants, has reconciled itself with the fact that a return to their lost homelands and compensation for their suffering is unlikely, the failure and denial to recognise the injustice of collective victimisation remains a potent mobilisation source. It also enables political activists to manipulate remotely related issues and to continue to incite debates on the expulsion and their consequences, often with no positive results at all for either the expellees or their descendants on behalf of whom they claim to act.

At the same time, we must not forget that the rehabilitation of the German victims of World War II is undoubtedly part of a broader reassessment of the past which began in the 1980s and continues to the present-day. The war in Kosovo enabled Germans to debate a number of defining questions relating to their own past including the history of German expulsions from Central and Eastern Europe after World War II. As a result of such a discursive shift, there is little doubt that the expulsions attracted renewed interest in the German media, which led to an equally re-invigorated political debate in Germany about the meaning of victimhood. While the outcome of this ongoing debate is still not clear, it nevertheless indicates a profound re-appreciation of German identity as a whole.

From the present perspective it would seem as if the 1990s have finally enabled the expellees to become part of national collective memory. For this, the link made between conservative parties such as the CSU and expellee organisations had to be weakened, a process that was much facilitated by the advent to power of the 68er generation. Once the Left, motivated both by political expediency and by ideological shifts post-1989, declared expellee suffering to be of relevance to Germany's national memory, the reassessment of the theme of German suffering could begin. At the same time, expellee associations also mindful of the need to appeal to a broader constituency appropriated the language of human rights and successfully linked their experience to that of the Kosovar Albanians. However, This comparison between German and Yugoslav suffering remained contested throughout the decade in the public sphere. There is no doubt that both the expulsion of Kosovar Albanians and the experience of participating in warfare again brought debates to the fore that had remained on the margins of public debate for many years. As we have highlighted in this chapter, both national and international factors were therefore responsible for this repositioning of the discourse of German suffering from the margins to the centre. For the expellee associations this has meant broader societal recognition which may ultimately mark the beginning of the end of their role as an institution in the Federal Republic. For memory politics in Germany this repositioning may yet prove to be as far reaching. Although not in all cases, it is certainly often the case that this shift is intended as a deliberate counterbalance to the supposed dominance of Holocaust-centred memory in the Federal Republic. Whether it will be successful in actually decentering the Holocaust as the prime event of the Second World War remains to be seen.