

“Where Race Matters”

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In this article I want to critically analyse the way of exhibiting in the two big German historical Museums, the “Deutsches Historisches Museum” (DHM) in Berlin and the “Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland” (HDG) in Bonn, based on the background of museal history.

“Where race matters”

As opposed to nations like France e.g., the concept of “Nation” is not easy to deal with in Germany. The same is true for naming a historical Museum a “National Museum” due to the role “National Socialism” played in German History and the big influence of NS-politics on the presentation in local, regional and national Museums.

Very early, starting at around 1900, collections of cultural heritage were recovered as media to transport nationalistic ideas. Already in 1914, one of the pioneers (not in a positive way) of these ideas was Wilhelm Peßler, who published a kind of manifesto for a material-based Nationalism presented through folkloristic museal collections: A museum should be a place, where people can recognize the ‘German Character’. Therefore the typical attributes of “Deutschtum” according to other peoples and races should be shown, he wrote. In addition, he wanted to show maps demonstrating the dissemination of the “Deutschtum” and have especially marked “endangered or lost areas”.



Alfred Rosenberg

Peßler’s articles had been published and read 20 years before Alfred Rosenberg became “Agent for the control of the complete intellectual and ‘weltanschaulichen’ education of the NSDAP” in 1934 and defined the museums as places where the ‘blutmässigen Lebensgrundlagen’ of the German Race can lively be cognified.

Caused by the above mentioned facts, national and regional museums became spaces, where ‘Rassenkunde’ and warpropaganda were prosecuted in a massive way. The objects and other materials for exhibitions in this field were partly delivered directly from Rosenberg’s ministry. Especially with the smaller museums of local history the NSDAP-ministry played with the facts, that a) most of the museums had less money to investigate in selfmade exhibitions and b) they were mostly lead by laities, who didn’t have a historical profession and just little education. For employees in bigger museums it soon became the principal condition to be a member of the NSDAP.

Because of this massive heritage of NS-history, a long time had to pass, before new plans for a Museum of German History could be developed. While in the 1970s big discussions of historians banned any idea of building a national museum, in the beginning of the 1980 the plans for even two buildings grew fast – one in Berlin (at that time still divided and capital of DDR), one in Bonn (at that time capital of BRD).

While both museums face NS-politics in a wide, diversified way, they do not deal with the history of German museums and still represent a monolithic vision of history, instead of bringing in a post-colonial view on a multicultural society, as which the German society has to be defined nowadays.



Panel to „Rassenkunde“,
Kulturhistorisches Museum
Dortmund

DHM

At first I want to take the “Deutsches Historisches Museum” (DHM) in Berlin as an example for my argument that the big German museums still act as representatives of the myth of a homogenous nation. Therefore, I have to go a little back in the history of this museum: When the DHM was founded in 1987 through the attempts of chancellor Helmut Kohl, many journalists were critically reviewing this exemplary attempt to give people a national feeling back through a national museum. In fact, the historian Michael Stürmer, consultant of Helmut Kohl (Germany’s chancellor at this time), formulated statements such as: how long the “stony guest of the past” should be allowed to veto over “citizens’ goodness and patriotism”¹. Critical historians managed to prevent this first permanent exhibition from being turned into a nationalistic symbol. Apart from this fact, the former DHM-exhibition was not as sophisticated as written history was at that time, including thoughts of Cultural Studies, Gender Studies and Transnational History.

But these were the 1980s. In 2006 the DHM opened again with a completely renewed permanent exhibition² – a good chance to set an example for a topical exhibition, based on the amounts of current historical debates. Beside a very conservative political influence (under which the DHM always operated), there was no reason, why this should not happen.

Rosemarie Beier-de Haan, curator at the DHM, proves that she realizes the changes in thinking about national history in her book “Remembered History – Staged History”³: “One of the fundamental changes in times of globalization is the dissolving impact of the national states”⁴, she writes. She even gives Arjun Appadurai⁵ as a reference for her scientific research in the field of contemporary mobility and new communication media. Appadurai created the phrase of “global ethnic spaces”, which should be used instead of talking about imaginized space. For the explanation, he takes Africa as example; as nowadays Africa can not only be found in the continent named Africa, but also in the Caribbean, in New York and in London as well as in Hawaii.

Watching the exhibitions she made, one has the feeling, Rosemarie Beier-de Haan reflects this melancholy. Except a pretty small temporary show about “Migrations 1500 – 2005”⁶ (sic!), October 2005 – February 2006 and an exhibition about the ‘Hugenotten’⁷ (Migration of French Protestants 1572) presented at the same time, the permanent exhibition covers not even a little hint about the role immigration and immigrants play for German society nowadays. More about these temporary shows is to follow later.

1 Cf. Jürgen Kocka: Ein chronologischer Bandwurm, in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 32. Jg. 2006, Vol. 3, S. 388-411.

2 See: <http://www.dhm.de/ausstellungen/staendige-ausstellung/english/index.html>.

3 Rosmarie Beier-de Haan: *Erinnerte Geschichte – Inszenierte Geschichte*, Frankfurt am Main (Suhrkamp) 2005.

4 Beier, *Geschichte*, S. 24f.

5 Appadurai, Arjun (Hrsg.): *Globalization*, Durham 2001.

6 See: <http://www.dhm.de/ausstellungen/zuwanderungsland-deutschland/migrationen/index.html>.

7 See: <http://www.dhm.de/ausstellungen/zuwanderungsland-deutschland/hugenotten/index.html>.



Carolus – Europa: German History in Images and Testimonials from Two Millenia (poster for the DHM permanent exhibition)

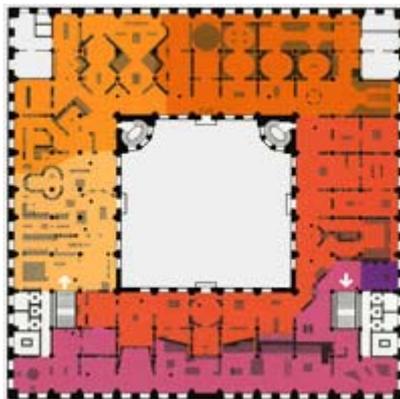
Even Jürgen Kocka, originally one of the historians planning the new DHM-exhibition, criticises that there is no room for people to overthink history and current situations from their own view. However, the time of the NS-regime is reflected in a sophisticated way, but the current situation is not dealt with. As a matter of fact, nobody (except the extreme right wing) has a problem with a critically presentation of the NS-regime in Germany anymore, because this is considered as history – and history can always be reflected as something, you are not responsible for. Even if the curating team talks about Europe – and this is one of

the main focuses – they do this in a historical way.

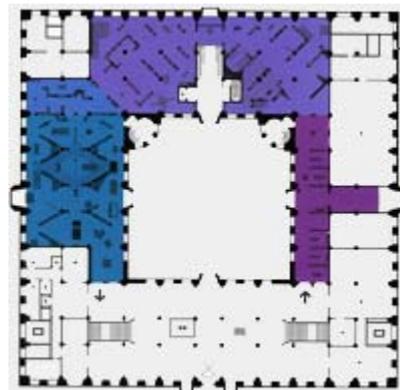
In the DHM I have the feeling that this massive clearing of a problematic historical term shall distract from hidden contemporary situations, like failures in integration of immigrants, dating back to the 1960s – and therefore also considered historical. To say it in hard words (because I am angry): We have such a bad conscience about the NS-regime (although our generation is not responsible for it), so we can't burden ourselves with the current problems of the "wogs" in our country...

The exhibition-plan shows that this is not just a feeling. In the rooms for the 20th century at the ground floor, the focus is on political regimes, 2nd World War and it's impact and the division of Germany. So called 'Social History' doesn't take place and – similar to politics – the show masks entities like the huge amounts of immigrants who settled down mainly in the 1960s-1970s.

second floor: 1 BCE – 1918



ground floor: 1918 – Present



1 BCE – 1500 CE	<u>Early cultures and the Middle Ages</u>
1500 – 1650	<u>Reformation and the Thirty Years' War</u>
1650 – 1789	<u>Supremacy and German dualism in Europe</u>
1789 – 1871	<u>From the French Revolution to the second German Empire</u>
1871 – 1918	<u>The German Empire and the First World War</u>
1918 – 1933	<u>Weimar Republic</u>
1933 – 1945	<u>NS regime and the Second World War</u>
1945 – 1949	<u>Germany under Allied occupation</u>
1949 – 1994	<u>Divided Germany and Re-unification</u>

Surely, temporary exhibitions are a medium to compensate for the deficits in the permanent exhibition. The DHM therefore presented two exhibitions about migration shortly before the opening of the permanent exhibition: “Migrations 1500 – 2005”⁸ and “Hugenotten”⁹ (Migration of French Protestants 1572) , October 2005 – February 2006. Both exhibitions were presented in the same building, one floor each, so the space provided for the themes was the same size. Both exhibitions were mainly focused on the historical occurrences of migration. Especially “Hugenotten” did not give any clue to the influence of that migration on the change of religious stress from Catholicism to Protestantism.



“Migrations 1500 – 2005” of course didn’t give much room for all the migration-processes , which happened in more than 500 years, either. The entering text informed visitors about the new Immigration Statue as motive for the exhibition, which shall show migration as a long-term-phenomen. But evidently the historians started their research in 1500, because of the great appearance of even the smallest and partly only regional migration-process until the First Worldwar, while the section for the “Gastarbeiter” (foreign workers) is just divided into Western- and Eastern-Germany (BRD and DDR) and not into the different conditions for workers from the different countries and their different agreements¹⁰. Anyhow, this great process of immigration is researched and presented in a short but scientifically correct way. Same with the presentations of migration in Germany after the Re-Unification 1990. “New motors” of migration are picked out as the central theme here, which are not so new in many cases, e.g. for “flight and asylum” and seasonal workers from Eastern Europe.

However, although this part of the exhibition was not really provocative, it didn’t hide problems of nowadays immigrants after all. There was an example of an assault of Right-wing Extremists (in Rostock), a documentary film about and made by teenagers who where raised in Russia and an interview with an asylum seeker about the long procedure for his acceptance.

HDG



Rodrigues’ Moped

The “Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland” (HDG) broached the issue of immigration from its first day on in the permanent exhibition. As main object they presented (and still do) the moped which was given as a welcome-present to the millionth foreign worker, the Portugese Armando Rodrigues de Sá, who was celebrated like a working-class hero when he arrived in Germany 1964, right before the “economic miracle” slowly came to an end. The text next to this object was always sceptically disputed, because it describes only the moment of welcome and celebration, but doesn’t tell the whole story of the moped-owner (who didn’t have a driving-licence, by the way), who soon got

health-problems, like many foreign-workers in their exhausting jobs, and died in a holiday in Portugal, because he was not sure, if his German health-insurance would pay for the doctor.

8 See <http://www.dhm.de/ausstellungen/zuwanderungsland-deutschland/migrationen/index.html>.

9 See <http://www.dhm.de/ausstellungen/zuwanderungsland-deutschland/hugenotten/index.html>.

10 See 360°-Panorama DDR (Room 6): <http://www.dhm.de/pano/showpano.php?p=migration/migration6> and: 360°-Panorama BRD (Room 7): <http://www.dhm.de/pano/showpano.php?p=migration/migration7>.

Just a while ago, the HDG extended the presentation-area for migration by an Italian ice cream parlour from the 1950s. The object stands for two forms of migration: Italians, who came to Germany to open restaurants and for the increasing tourists who wanted to flee from post-war-Germany and were looking for the “dolce vita” in (post-war) Italy.

In addition to this merely superficial presentation of migration in the permanent exhibition, the HDG organized temporary exhibitions in this subject area from time to time. The first one was in 1998, when photographs were shown by Mehmet Ünal, who shot portraits of Turkish people who live in Germany.¹¹ “I cannot live without Germany, but I can’t stand Germany, too” was the subtitle of the exhibition, shown in the subway-gallery. The aim was to show all the feelings between love and hate of the Turkish people for the country they were living in. A second example is a very successful travelling exhibition called “Everybody is a stranger – nearly anywhere”¹², in which Europe is described as ‘transit-continent’ which makes it necessary for people to deal with strangeness. This exhibition was realised together with eight Partner-Museums in Europe (Arbejdermuseet in Kopenhagen, Bujbelsmuseum in Amsterdam, DHM in Berlin, Helsinki City Museum, National Historical Museum in Athens, Swiss National Museum in Zurich, Musée d’Histoire de la Ville in Luxembourg) and was shown in all of these eight countries and other countries as well. Fortunately, the HDG officially dissociated from the presentation of a foreign worker in its 1989’s exhibition “40 years Federal Republic of Germany”



“Gastarbeiter“ in the exhibition “40 years Federal Republic of Germany”

11 See <http://www.hdg.de/index.php?id=291>.

12 See <http://www.hdg.de/index.php?id=3822>.

* All photographs in the article are taken from the museum's websites, except the "Gastarbeiter", page 6, taken from: Klein, Hans-Joachim / Wüsthoff-Schäfer, Barbara: Inszenierungen an Museen und ihre Wirkung auf Besucher. Materialien aus dem Institut für Museumskunde Heft 32 - Berlin 1990, p. 67