



Deutsches Historisches Museum

Rethinking German History Against the Background of a Burdened Past and New Challenges for the 21st Century

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Abstract

This article reflects on the historical context of the foundation of the German Historical Museum in 1987 and analyses the museum's general approach and its functions against the background of a changing national discussion over the last 25 years. In doing so, the article focuses on the museum's multiple activities, its Permanent Exhibition and on specific examples of thematic exhibitions, chosen from the wide range of more than two hundred exhibitions that the German Historical Museum has presented since its foundation. In the final part, 'Conclusion and Outlook', the German Historical Museum is analyzed as an international point of interest, a reference model for new projects of national museums of history and a study in feasibility. Four principles are defined as constitutive for national museums of history in the 21st century: to meet international scientific criteria and standards of historiography and the representation of history; to open perspectives, by demanding the respect to human rights; to contribute to the conciliation of nations and – finally – to allow visitors to ask questions and to encourage them to rethink their own views and judgements.

The foundation of a German national museum of history in the context of a divided Germany and a burdened past

November 9th, 1989 – more than twenty years have passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Memorial services annually commemorate this event throughout Berlin and other German cities. When walking through Berlin – a city that was once divided in two – the Wall is (except for a number of site memorials) noticeable by its absence. Its former course is merely hinted at by a “discreet” metal strip lining the road surface. Of course visitors to Berlin still associate the city’s image with the Wall, a no-man’s land, the presence of guardsmen and the death strip. The few remaining authentic sites such as the crosses (at the Brandenburg Gate) featuring the names and ages of the fugitives killed at the Wall constitute the urban symbols of the history of a separated world. The authenticity of these sites plays a significant role in public perception.

The fact that the Wall has long since been atomised, its fragments scattered all over the world, is certainly consistent with the dynamic of historical processes. The wall fragments detached from the site are historical material witnesses and as such both the starting point and the object of new cultural appropriations. Take, for instance, Oscar winner Tilda Swinton cycling around the (few) remains of the Wall in Berlin, as documented in her 2009 film “Cycling the Invisible Frame”. The museum conservation of fragments is also part of the cultural practice of new acquisitions. Fragments of the Wall can be found at the Los Angeles “Wende-Museum”, just as they feature in the museum that forms the core of this presentation: the Deutsches Historisches Museum¹ (German Historical Museum) right in the heart of Berlin.



Fig. 1: Fragments of the Wall. German Historical Museum, Permanent Exhibition, area “1949-1994. Divided Germany and Reunification”, Berlin 2012 (© German Historical Museum 2012)

The establishment of the German Historical Museum took place in 1987. Two years prior to the fall of the Wall, the latter seemed unthinkable. The world division into East and West appeared cast in stone, Germany's partition cemented. During this time, the western part of Germany – the Federal Republic – witnessed an increased interest in its own history, in particular the era of National Socialism and the Holocaust. This was the period during which National Socialist memorials were being inaugurated, the period during which history workshops “dug on the spot” and the period during which National Socialist research gained scientific momentum. In addition, there was political interest in a national museum of history being founded (cf. Stölzl 1988). It was not enough to be but an “economic giant” or a “country of export”. The governmental policy of the Federal Republic of Germany (under Chancellor Helmut Kohl) wanted it to be more – it wanted to prove that it was tackling its difficult and burdened past. In this way the founding of the German Historical Museum – as well as the founding of the Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (House of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany) in Bonn at the very same time – was the Federal German Government's political response to the German nation's rapidly growing interest in its own history and its need to examine this history.

Nevertheless, the decision to found a central history museum in (West-) Berlin was undoubtedly the beginning of one of the most challenging cultural projects in West Germany. According to the Basis Law (*Grundgesetz*) of the Federal Republic of Germany (1949) the German *Länder* were granted autonomy in cultural and educational affairs. As a result, the foundation of a museum had become a decentralised phenomenon, in the responsibility of the *Länder* or municipalities. Moreover, a view of history that had been initiated and promoted by the Federal Government had been severely compromised by the “fundamental crisis of fascism” (in the words of historian Wolfgang Schieder; cf. Schieder 1988) and the Holocaust; broad segments of the critical public raised serious doubts about the justification of a central German museum of history. These controversies came to a head in what has gone down in the annals of the Federal Republic as the “Historikerstreit”, or “Historians' dispute” (cf. Habermas 1987, 1988; Diner 1987; Kronenberg 2008): namely, the debates about the classification and interpretation of the Nazi extermination of the Jews and the question of whether – with a view to the centuries *before* the 20th century – the significance of the “Third Reich” needed to be historically and politically relativised and should thus in the end be levelled out in an identity-building understanding of the history of Federal Republic of Germany.

The choice of location for the German Historical Museum reflected the situation of a Germany divided: the new history museum was to be given a home in the Western sector of the divided Berlin, right near the Wall. This was also a statement towards the German Democratic Republic, which – with its (state-owned) Museum of German History – first claimed its own history museum back in the 1950s. And particularly since the 1970s, this museum had committed itself to tackling Germany's so-called “civil heritage” (“bürgerliches Erbe”). German history subjects such as Martin Luther and the Reformation, the Peasant Wars and the 1848 Civil Revolution had been broached by East Germany rather than West Germany. Albeit – it has to be pointed out – always bearing the ideological signature of the official Marxist historiography.

Talk of national museums was barely feasible in Germany against the background of its 20th century history, in particular that of National Socialism. This may seem foreign to everyone

hailing from countries that have a relatively intact national tradition. Until recently, the word “national” – against the backdrop of the National Socialist breakdown of civilisation and the political identification crisis of the young Federal Republic – was considered a misnomer, guilty of ideological overtones (*cf.* Maier 1997; Reichel 2012). Only recently have questions such as “Is there a German national literature?” or “What are in fact Germany’s national symbols?” been possible without triggering immediate suspicion of harbouring ideological beliefs and feelings of revanchism.

This is still a very loaded subject, as could be seen for instance a few years ago in summer 2009, when the Berlin “Tagesspiegel”, a moderate middle-class newspaper, claimed on its feature page: “Black – Red – Gold. The Federal Republic of Germany has had difficulties with national symbols ever since 1949. All the better!” (Fetscher 2009). This reticence to use a term that was “burnt” by National Socialism was also witnessed in 1987 when it came to giving a name to the newly founded museum. Significantly, when the names were chosen for the two key history museums founded during the late 1980s – the German Historical Museum in Berlin and the House of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany in Bonn – the term “national” was deliberately avoided.

Nevertheless, the two newly established museums in Berlin and Bonn were *national* museums from their very beginning. However, the term “national” was not meant to provoke or cause a new nationalism, regardless of the aim. The objective, the challenge even, of both these establishments was to tackle German history in its similarities and differences, its failures, its divisive and unifying aspects – in brief, issues relating to the German nation – and to place German history in its European and international relationships at the centre of its exhibitions. So, both museums are national in so far as, when the Federal Republic created these museum spaces, it wanted them to reflect its national history in supranational and, in particular, European terms: The aim being to examine the relationship between the people and the states, and to answer German questions within a European and global context.

A broad network of historians (from universities and scientific institutes) played a fundamental role – a role which cannot be overestimated and which they still carry out today. A very first memorandum was issued in 1982 (*cf.* Denkschrift 1982), i.e. five years before the founding of the museum. This paper as well as the subsequent conceptions for the museum were written by renowned academics, all pointing out that the museum would have to depict German history in all its ambiguities, including “greatness as well as liability, Weimar but also Auschwitz” (Denkschrift 1982: 61-2). Jürgen Kocka, internationally renowned social historian and one of the founders of the “Bielefelder Schule” (*cf.* Hitzer/Welskopp 2010), emphasized that the new national museum was to be nothing like an armoury of national consciousness (*cf.* Kocka 1986). All statements and memorandums, leading to the final conception from 1987, pointed beyond the boundaries of national history. By placing Germany in the context of Europe, the final conception was implicitly transnational in outlook (something which today may seem self-evident, but at that time was radically new). Neither a “shrine” nor an “identification factory”, the German Historical Museum was to “serve the purpose of enlightenment and understanding in dealing with joint history”, as the mission statement says, pointing out: “The Museum is supposed to be a place of (inward) contemplation and self-recognition through historical memory” (Konzeption 1987: 611).

Accordingly, the museum aims to depict diverse perspectives, broach controversial themes and question underlying or lost alternatives. This reflects an emerging development which can be described as “the history of culture” – it deals with the “cultural practice” of “coping with the world” (*Weltbewältigung*, as the German philosophy puts it) and “making ourselves understood” (*Selbstverständigung*) – a cultural practice described by sociologists as a “reflexive modernization” (cf. Beck/Giddens/Lash 1994; Beier-de Haan 2005). From this cultural practice a future perspective and ultimately a German identity can be attained within a European context – a development which should be speeded up in the ensuing years.

In this context, specific challenges had to be addressed. Following years of silence concerning Germany’s recent past, i.e. National Socialism and the extermination of the Jews, “dealing with the past” later became a theme in Federal German society. Therefore, in questioning our identity as Germans, this also meant posing questions specifically related to Germany’s twentieth century history: questions concerning the Holocaust, responsibility and guilt. Questions about a nation which was to be split into two separate German states. A museum, which asks itself these questions, is therefore – as the journalist Jürgen Engert put it already in 1973 – “a symbol of a community which is prepared to deal with this problem more than ever before” (Engert 1973). This in effect means investigating the community’s identity.

The end of East-West separation: “German–German” history as a challenge

The German Historical Museum was – in possibly an ironic twist of history – overrun by its own object, history itself and unforeseeable developments. A mere one and a half years after its establishment and the acquisition of a few office rooms in West Berlin, the Wall fell. The project moved from West to East Berlin, into the Zeughaus, the former armoury, which had up until then been the home of the Museum für Deutsche Geschichte (Museum of German History), which was dissolved following a final resolution of the government of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). The reasoning behind this being that if there was to be no more GDR, there was also little purpose in having a GDR history museum. So from one day to the next, the small project group from the West was transformed into a large structure with over one hundred and fifty employees and a collection amounting to almost half a million items.

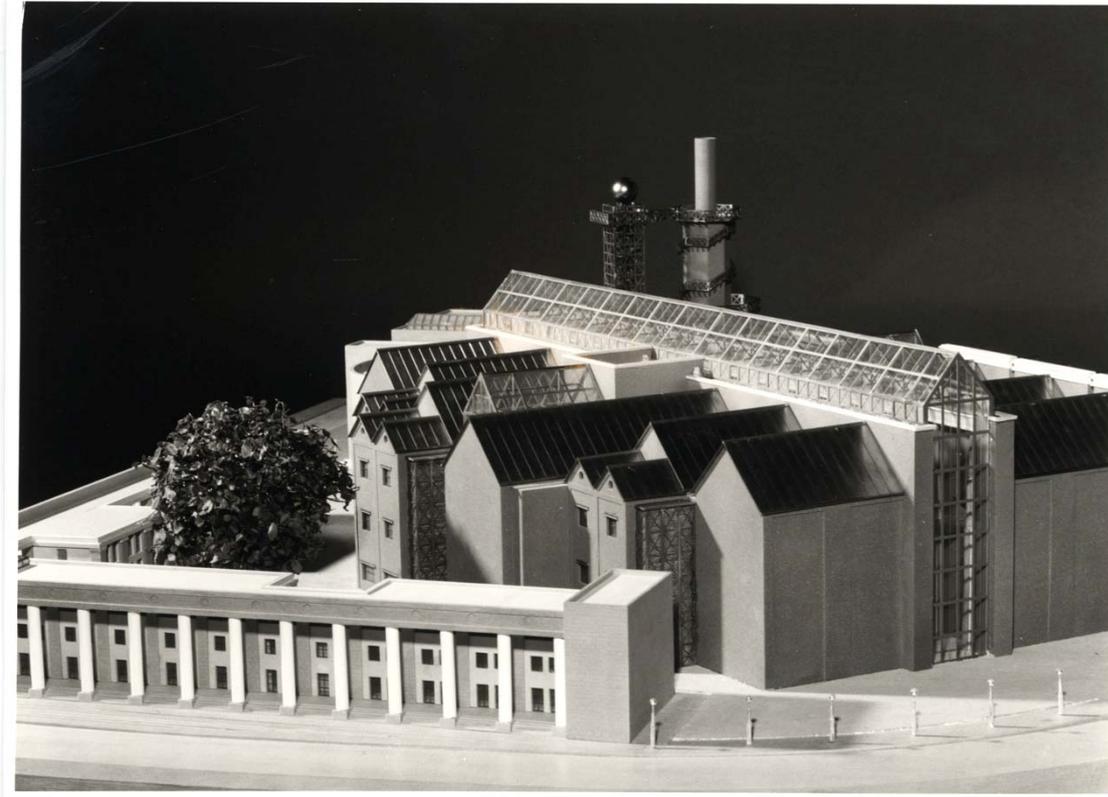


Fig. 2: Aldo Rossi, Milan. Model of the new building for the German Historical Museum, Berlin (West) 1988 (not realized) (© German Historical Museum 2012)



Fig. 3: German Historical Museum. Zeughaus Unter den Linden, Berlin (East). Photo: Ulrich Schwarz/DHM Berlin (© German Historical Museum 2012)

Most important, though, were the exhibitions. A concerted series of temporary exhibitions saw the curators' team launch the museum's activities into the comparison of "German-German", i.e. East-West, history. Specific questions had to be asked: What increasingly separated the Germans in the East and in the West for decades and what continued to connect them despite this separation? Could the German Democratic Republic be characterised as a "state of injustice" and, if so, what did this mean for the retrospective estimation of the "lived life"?

These exhibitions investigated what associated the Germans in the East with those in the West, and what separated them from one another. They focused on the following: State-commissioned art in the GDR ("Auftrag: Kunst. Bildende Künstler in der DDR zwischen Ästhetik und Politik 1949–1990", 1995), State symbols and propaganda means ("Party Order: A New Germany. Toward the Iconography of the GDR", 1997), different social ranks and classes, the pioneering spirit, a sense of new awakenings and beginnings as well as different chapters of life ("Chapters of Life in Germany 1900-1993", 1993). An example is the exhibition "aufbau west – aufbau ost" ("Shaping a new Town. West and East", 1997), which presented archetypes of the embodiment of urban architecture, lifestyle and culture in the divergent, highly competitive ideologies of the West and of the East (using the example of two planned towns, Wolfsburg in the West and Stalinstadt / Eisenhüttenstadt in the East). Certainly, at this time there was no other German museum that dealt so intensively with the interpretation of "German-German" history. The German Historical Museum thus, through the unforeseeable aspects of history, found its very own mission.



Fig. 4: German Historical Museum. Exhibition "Chapters of Life in Germany 1900-1993", view of the area "Germany-East and Germany-West", Berlin 1993 (© German Historical Museum 2012)

Most attentively attended by both, the audience and the media, these exhibitions became Germany's testing ground and – as the Arts Editor of the “Frankfurter Allgemeine” newspaper, Ulrich Raulff, summed it up in 1997 – were “the most remarkable contributions which were made in order to make the two halves of a population stop and think about what it was that had increasingly separated them for decades – and what had continued to connect them beyond this separation” (Raulff 1997). The lively, and occasionally violent, reactions from the visitors mirrored their uncertainty and self-ascertainment. Upon closely looking at and viewing the exhibits, visitors encountered both familiarity and strangeness, thus leading them to contemplate not only what was familiar but also what was unfamiliar or strange to them. The intensity of the visitor reactions, their spontaneous conversations with each other in the exhibitions, as well as their dissent, were probably never so impulsive, so emotional, as during the years that followed reunification.

The significance of the encounter of East and West for the museum curators personally and professionally is a subject in its own right that could take up another entire presentation. The museum became a forum, a forum of encounter, of oral – often breathless – and emotional exchange. It became a place in which strangers spontaneously engaged in conversation – and that right in Berlin on the boulevard Unter den Linden, at the interface between East and West.

Meanwhile, the perspective on the history of the German Democratic Republic has changed in manifold ways – as much in the scientific approach as in its public perception (*cf.* Sabrow et al. 2007; Bender 2009). That was clearly exemplified in the 2007 exhibition: “Party Dictatorship and Everyday Life in the GDR”. As in previous exhibitions, this exhibition questioned the relationship between individual lives, daily lives and the overriding structures of Party, State and State Security. It questioned the framework of everyday life, thus justice and injustice in a State, which had been characterised by one-party rule and a lack of independent justice. It also raised the question of the “Second German Dictatorship”, a controversial subject of contemporary research. Controversial because it begs the question: To what extent is the first German dictatorship, namely National Socialism, placed under a different light through the addition of a second? Are the scales of the two systems not too different, after all, to simply put them on a par?

It was noticeable that for the majority of former GDR citizens visiting the exhibition, this issue was difficult to bear. To have lived in a dictatorship is an unwelcome acknowledgement, it is something that is lost sight of – or was possibly never seen in the first place. And for the majority of West Germans, such a question was after all always an external one, one that remained abstract, one that hardly touched upon their own living environment. An important function of this exhibition was to launch a question perspective.

Twenty years is a long time in an individual life. For the first time since 1989 Germany is now home to a young generation that no longer sees itself as East or West Germans, but as “Germans”. Only one in ten young people defines him- or herself according to East or West. Nevertheless (or maybe on account of this), knowledge on the GDR is mostly frighteningly sparse and superficial (this, incidentally, also applies to many students). This knowledge has strong individual characteristics and is coloured by the memories and emotions of parents or grandparents. They perceive their own biography according to the past, either as a gain or a loss, as a rupture or even with nostalgia. In this respect, the exhibition also fulfilled an important

educational function. As it does for almost all exhibitions, the museum's educational department provided a comprehensive service for group-specific and age-specific guided tours and workshops. This service receives widespread response. It is an almost fixed curriculum component for teachers in Berlin and the surrounding regions.

Beyond the national borders: German history in a European and international context

From the very beginning, the German Historical Museum – as mentioned above – copes with German History in a European, an international context. But what does Europe mean to us today? Where do we stand with European history acting as the connecting link between the nations (*cf.* Assmann 2012)? On one hand, this is the history of enlightenment, the French revolution, human rights and democracy. On the other hand, however, especially in this century, European history means the history of separation between Western and Eastern Europe; the history of the iron curtain, during which time both sides showed hostility towards one another and stood in opposition; they had two different political systems, as well as two different cultures and lifestyles (although, at the same time, both of them called for enlightenment). Additionally, due to the separate world wars and before them the religious wars and various larger and smaller civil conflicts between the ruling or regency houses and economical-dynasties; different mentalities and variations in the German language developed and emerged. It was these differences which prevented thoughts of European unity.

Many of the German Historical museum's exhibitions have presented examples of the connections and the separations in Europe. Just a few examples in brief: "The Elbe – A life", which was organised in co-operation with the National Museum of Prague amongst others (1992); "A Bitter Truth. The Avant-Garde and the Great War", in co-operation with the Imperial War Museum and the Barbican Art Gallery, London (1994); "Art and Power. Europe under the dictators 1930-45"; a further expanded version of the exhibition on the Council of Europe (1996); "Victoria and Albert. Vicky and the Kaiser Bill. German – English Dynastic Relations" (1997); "Chosen Affinities. Scandinavia and Germany 1880 –1914", in association with the National Museum Stockholm and the Norsk Folk Museum (1998); "Myths of the Nations. A European Panorama (1998); "1648. War and Peace in Europe" an exhibition on the thirty year war (1999), as well as the project "Europe's Centre at 1000" , which included participating museums from Poland, Slovakia, The Czech Republic and Hungary.

It follows from the previous remarks that- at the same time - tackling the subjects of National Socialism and the Holocaust has for many years (and until today) played a significant role in themed exhibitions. In 2002, the German Historical Museum presented an exhibition on the Holocaust, entitled: "Holocaust. The Nazi Genocide and the Motifs of its Remembrance".



Fig. 5: German Historical Museum. Exhibition “Holocaust. The Nazi Genocide and the Motifs of its Remembrance”, part of the area “Remembrance”, Berlin 2002 (© German Historical Museum 2012)

The exhibition, product of German and international cooperation, traced everyday Jewish life in the late Weimar Republic as well as the process of social exclusion, which was being initiated at the time, right up until the Holocaust (*cf.* Holocaust 2002). Whenever possible, the exhibition used individual testimonies. This included not only personal documents within the exhibition, but also involved contemporary witness conversations with young people and conversations with survivors. The second part of the exhibition primarily tackled the issue surrounding the origin of the Holocaust and the motives underlying its remembrance to the present day. Parallel to the German development, the creation and significance of key Holocaust memorials was illustrated, in close collaboration with the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum, the Yad Vashem Memorial as well as the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. Further themes included the long-standing discussion surrounding the creation of a central holocaust memorial in Berlin. Today the Field of Stelae created by Peter Eisenman is a key component of the memory landscape of Berlin and Germany.

In 2009 the German Historical Museum presented (among others) an exhibition on Germany and Poland: “Germans and Poles. 1.9.39. Despair and Hope”. The exhibition was created to mark the occasion of the seventieth year of the German invasion of Poland. It showed “the war and period of occupation as the all-time nadir in relations between Germans and Poles. Even before the War, there had been only a few hopeful signs of reconciliation in the conflict-ridden relationship between the two countries. But the German invasion saw the beginning of a cruel war of extermination against the neighbouring country and its inhabitants. With this exhibition, the German Historical Museum wants to recall the memory of the suffering caused by the war

and throw light on the often thorny path to rapprochement between Germans and Poles after 1945” (Germans and Poles 2012).



Fig. 6: German Historical Museum. Exhibition “Germans and Poles. 1.9.39. Despair and Hope”, view of the area “War and Occupation” (© German Historical Museum 2012)

The exhibition also broached the subject of the “expulsion of the German population from areas east of the Oder and Neisse Rivers as well as that of the Polish population from the former eastern Polish regions as the war came to a close in 1945” (Germans and Poles 2012).

The final part of the exhibition showed how the two German States approached the former enemy Poland in different ways: “In the Federal Republic, the loss of the former German eastern regions was not accepted for a long time. The Treaty of Warsaw from 1970 recognizing the existing border along the Oder-Neisse line first created the basis for normal relations. The “friendship” to Poland propagated by the GDR remained largely a façade on the official level. (...) Since 1989, new perspectives have evolved for German-Polish relations. Despite occasional irritations and conflicts of interest the contacts between Germans and Poles has never been more intensive and sustainable than today” (Germans and Poles 2012; for further information *cf.* Łuczewski/Wiedmann 2011).

Initially, the work carried out by the joint commission of historians was characterised by an intense process of communication and argumentative exchange, which was not always easy from an emotional point of view. The end of the path saw the exhibition ‘Germans and Poles’ being opened by the cultural political representatives of both countries: Bogdan Zdrojewski, Minister of Culture and National Heritage of the Republic of Poland, and Bernd Neumann, Federal Government Representative for Culture and the Media.

It is the author’s sincere persuasion that the challenge of such an exhibition project is the opportunity for a forward-looking interpretation of history. A transnational view not only allows

for different viewpoints, it in actual fact requires them in order to achieve a profound understanding of history. A sustainable transnational dialogue can hardly be gained from the emphasis of similarities alone: rather, conflicts, disputes and enmities should be “put to use” – (ideally) with a view to reconciliation.

Permanent Exhibition, temporary exhibitions: Does a historical museum need objects?

From the beginning the museum concept strongly emphasised the need for temporary exhibitions that would complement and enlarge upon the Permanent Exhibition. Since then the German Historical Museum has organised around 200 temporary exhibitions, which were enriched by supplementary programmes and events offered to the general public, including extensive catalogues, lectures and symposiums as well as tours aimed at different age groups, workshops, etc. The coupling of the Permanent Exhibition with temporary exhibitions is one of the fundamental characteristics of the German Historical Museum.

Since 2006, the former armoury has been home to the comprehensive Permanent Exhibition on German history (*cf.* Asmuss 2007). In the first three years after its opening, it welcomed more than two million visitors. The Permanent exhibition takes up some ten thousand square meters of exhibition space on the two floors of the Zeughaus, displaying about 4000 artefacts and documents of German history that can be seen in as varied a reference frame as possible. The basic principle underlying the permanent display is to exhibit in two different types of rooms, in which German history is presented within its European context and its regional diversity. The real core of these display spaces are the *period rooms*, in which visitors walk through the periods spanning the beginnings of German history to the present day.

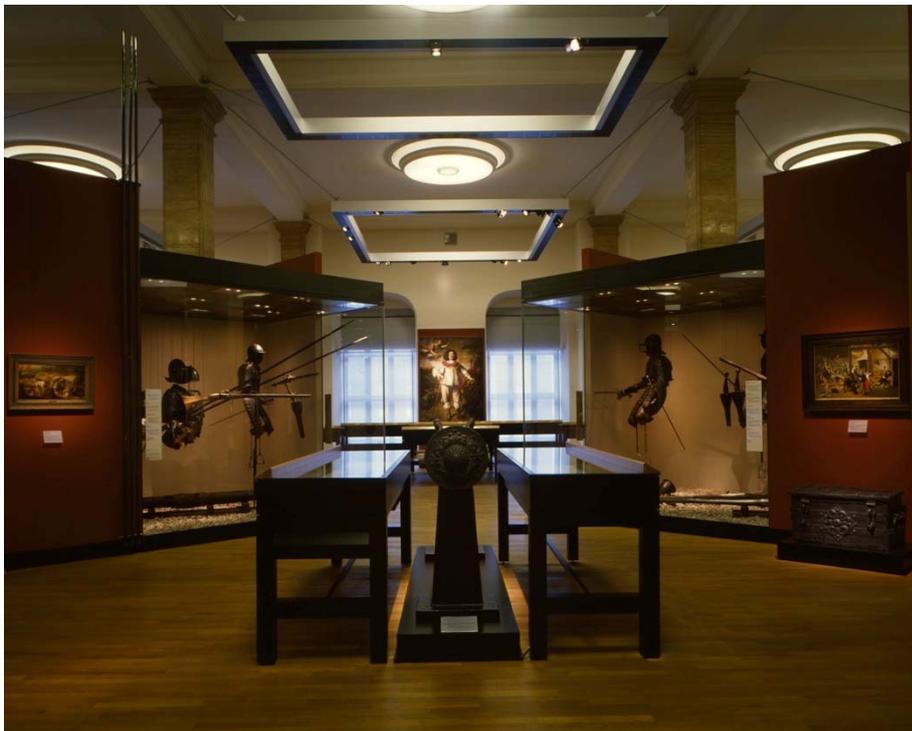


Fig. 7: German Historical Museum. Permanent Exhibition, part of the area “1500-1650. Reformation and the Thirty Years’ War”, Berlin 2012 (© German Historical Museum 2012)

If visitors wish to explore the chronologically arranged events in more depth and learn more about the history of their causes and effects, they can enter *intensive information rooms* for a more thorough review and reflection of the topics. The sweeping historical survey concentrates on focal points of German history, which correspond to the crucial developmental periods of European history.

The entire ground floor, consisting of approximately five thousand square metres, has deliberately been reserved for the history of the 20th century to the present. This design decision is validated on a daily basis by the requirements and questions voiced by the museum's visitors. Germans – as well as international visitors, adults and school classes – dedicate most of their attention to the 20th century.

The makeup of the Permanent Exhibition as well as the numerous temporary exhibitions would hardly be possible without the museum's own collections. The German Historical Museum meanwhile has nearly a million objects at its disposal, including the extensive collections of the former East German Museum für Deutsche Geschichte, whose properties and stocks were transferred to the German Historical Museum after German reunification. In times when politicians are often only interested in attractive architecture when founding a new museum, the German Historical Museum is an example not only for the necessity of a museum to have its own collections, but also for their quality and relevance: Many of the museum's objects have enriched and “brushed up” the canon of historical pictures on the feature pages of the newspapers, on television and in schoolbooks. At the same time, a museum's collections improve its position towards other houses, as it forms the basis for the “give and take” in participating in the (inter)national exchange of loans.

In the 25th year of its existence in 2012, the German Historical Museum is well positioned. It has gained international attention and recognition and is a valued partner for conferences as well as exhibition projects. The house cooperates with academic institutions and specialists as well as with associations of museums and other establishments. With around 800,000 visitors a year (including many foreign guests and young people), the German Historical Museum is among the most popular museums in Berlin and Germany. A recent article in the feuilleton of the perhaps most renowned German newspaper, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the German Historical Museum characterized it as “a house which – if the Greens, large parts of the Social Democratic Party and many West German historians had had their way, never would have existed – and which today no one wants to do without” (Kilb 2012).

New topics for temporary exhibitions reflect new conditions in society: these range from ecological aspects such as the forest (not to forget that “*Waldsterben*” has become an international word) to migration and encounters with “the other” as well as contemporary art as an expression of individual sensitivities (as can be seen in the exhibition of the Council of Europe, “*Verführung Freiheit*” – “The Desire for Freedom”, which opened in October 2012). It remains to be seen how the German Historical Museum – working with other international museums – can and must react to current socio-political processes in Europe: catchwords in this respect include “re-nationalisation” and national stereotyping in the face of the “Euro crisis”.

Conclusion and Outlook

After the international museums boom of the 1970s and 1980s, a renewed boom of new national museums seems to be announcing itself in Europe and worldwide (*cf.* Hinz/Beier-de Haan 2011). Plans for new establishments are in any case underway in the Netherlands, Austria, Spain, Poland and most recently also France (the project was cancelled by the French government in 2012 at an early stage). To them the German Historical Museum has become a point of interest, a reference model and a study in feasibility – one in continuous operation. They welcome the Permanent exhibition of the German Historical Museum as a place in which visitors' fragmented, often atomised, knowledge on the history of the nation is presented in a systematic manner and placed in a greater, transnational context. They welcome the diversity of the themed exhibitions with their flexible reference to current issues and their close cooperation with scientific experts.

In the author's opinion, the conceivable new creations should be used to respect four principles, and that significantly more strongly than before. Firstly, national museums must, in their design and presentation, be truthful, that means meet international scientific criteria and standards of historiography and the representation of history. Secondly, national museums should not provide conclusive and precast perceptions of the nation's history. A statement of "this is what it was like" misses the point that there cannot be any prefabricated answers. Exhibitions must open up perspectives – and these include transnational perspectives –, which also focus on the divisiveness, the persisting "hurt" of a society or between societies. I formulate this second principle while contemplating the renationalisation processes in Middle and Eastern Europe, such as Russia or the Baltic States, where the imposed perception is often that of a national narrowing of history.

The third principle is that of "reconciliation". In an ever-shrinking world, in a world of "us", in a world demanding the respect of human rights, national museums can and must contribute to the conciliation of nations. Certainly, "conciliation" is still a long way off. The path leading there is a long one and must be characterised by historical veracity and scientific methods, by the presentation of openness and multiple perspectives. A national museum must – and this is the fourth principle – allow visitors to ask questions. Exhibitions must encourage visitors to rethink their own views and judgements regarding their own history and that of others. They must encourage dialogue. Provided these four principles are respected, it is the author's belief that national museums are ready to tackle the future.

Notes

¹ Annotation of the author: The perspective from which I am writing is inextricably linked to this establishment, its foundation and its activities. During the late 1980s, I witnessed the beginnings of the establishment – back then in the West – as a member of its first scientific development team. As a head of collections and the exhibition curator of many social and cultural history exhibitions, I have been involved in a wide variety of the museum's activities. At the same time, I have lectured as a professor of history at the Free University of Berlin and at the Technische Universität Berlin for a number of years now and, as such, am one of those people who continuously and repeatedly reflect upon their own practice in a theoretical manner (RBdH).

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