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German Expellee Organizations

Between Revisionism and Reconciliation

Few societal actors in the Cold War West have shown such consistent interest in relations vis-à-vis Eastern Europe during the last four decades as the expellee organizations (*Vertriebenenverbände*) in the Federal Republic of Germany. From the 1960s to the first years of the new millennium, the expellee groups have maintained a high level of activity in this area, observing developments, issuing pronouncements, and trying to influence ongoing events. In much of the public realm, in the Federal Republic and elsewhere, their engagement has typically been seen as revisionism, as interference in Eastern European affairs that serves to promote self-serving goals. But how fair and accurate is that assessment? What has been the role of the expellee organizations in the rise and development of East-West détente, and what have they contributed to the process of reconciliation between Germany and Eastern Europe? In short, where should the groups and their activities be placed on the scale between revisionism and reconciliation? This essay will attempt to address these questions in the period between the 1960s and the first few years of the new millennium. It will focus on the most important and influential expellee organizations during this era: the umbrella group *Bund der Vertriebenen* (BdV) and its key constituent members: the various so-called Homeland Societies (*Landsmannschaften*), each of which claims to represent expellees from a particular area of former German settlement.[1]

I. The Self-Image of the Expellee Organizations

Throughout their existence, the German expellee organizations have viewed themselves as an irreplaceable force in the interaction between Germany and Eastern Europe. Immediately after their founding in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the main organizations began to portray themselves as natural mandate-holders for the lost territories in the East. Thanks to their backgrounds and personal experiences, expellee leaders claimed to possess unique skills and knowledge that endowed them with a special ability to understand and influence Eastern Europe in general and the areas from which Germans had been expelled in particular. As a consequence, expellee activists demanded a central role in formulating and implementing West German foreign policies towards Eastern Europe. Although their calls for an active policy-making role in West Germany were rebuffed, then and later, the organizations established themselves as public pressure groups that sought to induce the main political forces in the country to implement their agenda towards Eastern Europe. That agenda, in turn, consisted of a number of major components that had taken firm shape by the time détente began to appear on the international political scene by the early 1960s and that would remain largely unchanged through the remainder of the Cold War era.[2]

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1 The main focus lies on those Homeland Societies that purport to represent expellees from regions that belonged to the German Reich between 1938 and 1945.

2 The account here draws on *Pertti Ahonen*, After the Expulsion. West Germany and Eastern Europe, 1945–1990, Oxford 2003. See also *Mathias Stickler*, Ostdeutsch heißt Gesamtdeutsch. Organisation, Selbstverständnis und heimatpolitische Zielsetzung der deutschen Vertriebenenverbände, 1949–1972, Düsseldorf 2004.

Revisionism, particularly of the territorial kind, occupied a central place on the expellee agenda. In earlier years, the various *Vertriebenenverbände* had often been very open about their desire to re-annex to a future reunified Germany the territories that had been taken from it at the end of the Second World War. In a typical statement from 1950, for example, Walter Rinke, the top leader (*Sprecher*) of the *Landsmannschaft Schlesien*, had declared that »the German eastern provinces absolutely must be removed from Polish administration and returned under German rule.«[3] By the 1960s such pronouncements had faded to the margins of the expellee lobby's rhetoric, at least in public. To be sure, openly annexationist tones still echoed out occasionally, as when Hans-Christoph Seebohm, the *Sprecher* of the *Sudetendeutsche Landsmannschaft*, in 1963 declared his organization to consist of »revisionists« who »definitely expect […] the return of our Heimat«.[4] But usually the expellee organizations couched their continued desire to alter the post–1945 status quo in different, largely legalistic terms. The typical starting point was to follow the Potsdam Agreement and a number of post-war statements by the Western allies in insisting that, pending a peace treaty, Germany continued to exist within its 1937 borders, which would form the basis for future negotiations about territorial questions. In a further step that opened the door to potentially more extensive border revisions, the expellee groups issued a general condemnation of the »expulsion of peoples or of ethnic, racial, or religious groups« as a »flagrant violation of the right to self-determination« and demanded »compensation«, ideally in the form of a »permission […] to return« to the areas from which they had been forced out.[5] But the most important and most widely used concept through which the expellee lobby sought to promote its revisionist interests by the 1960s consisted of the union of two rights: the *Heimatrecht* and the right to self-determination. The former was defined in a BdV-sponsored publication as »the principle […] that an individual has, or should have, the right to live undisturbed in his homeland (*Heimat*) as long as he wants and that any violation of this right, be it in the form of a forcible transfer of individual people or of an ethnic group from their homeland, or in the form of preventing their return to the homeland, is an injustice«.[6] The right to self-determination, in turn, served as a complement to the *Heimatrecht*, as expellee leaders demanded that their followers be granted both. The point was that a return to the old *Heimat* as a tolerated minority under foreign rule would not suffice. The expellees would instead have to receive the right to determine the modalities of their own return, including, by implication, the national affiliation of the territory in which they would live.[7]

But the expellee lobby's proclamations reached well beyond mere revisionism, whether explicitly stated or judicially clad. The organizations also consistently portrayed themselves as advocates of broader, international causes that stretched across the East-West divide and supposedly served not just German but wider European interests. During the 1940s and 1950s, much of this rhetoric had been dominated by Cold War accents, and many such elements remained in place during the 1960s as well. The expellee groups continued to insist that the West in general and the Federal Republic in particular should not lend legitimacy to the Soviet Union and its East European sphere of influence. Accord-

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3 *Walter Rinke*, Schlesien meldet sich zu Wort, 24.8.1950, an article in the expellee news service hvp, in: Sudetendeutsches Archiv (SDA) Munich, NL Lodgman, V/4.

4 *Hans-Christoph Seebohm*, speech at the 1963 Sudetendeutscher Tag, manuscript in: AdsD Bonn, Parteivorstand, alter Bestand, 01574C, S. 9, 11.

5 BdV press release of a special ›Expertentagung‹ of its Ausschuss für gesamtdeutsche Fragen, 31.10.1961, BA Koblenz, B 137, 1254.

6 *F. H. E. W. du Buy*, Das Recht auf die Heimat im historisch-politischen Prozess, Euskirchen 1974, S. 33. See also the BdV brochure: Das Recht auf die Heimat. Eine Dokumentation zum Ergebnis einer völkerrechtswissenschaftlichen Tagung in Bonn am 28. und 29. Oktober 1961, Bonn 1961.

7 *Ahonen*, Expulsion, insb. S. 39–53.

ingly, the Federal Republic should not recognize the postwar borders in the east, particularly the Oder-Neisse line between Poland and eastern Germany, as only a future peace treaty could decide where Germany's eastern boundaries should lie. Nor should West Germany extend recognition to »the illegitimate regime of the so-called ›DDR‹« or deviate from the Hallstein Doctrine, according to which Bonn was to eschew diplomatic ties to the Soviet satellite states of Eastern Europe as a punishment for their recognition of the DDR.[8] To justify the continuation of these Cold War stances, the expellee lobby portrayed them as beneficial to justice, progress, and peace. In this view, an acceptance of the existing realities would result in the »perpetuation of the division of Europe« and the »definitive handover of the peoples« of Eastern Europe »to the dictatorship of orthodox Stalinists«", whereas the maintenance of a tough posture towards the Soviet bloc would sustain hopes of liberation, particularly among the oppressed peoples of the east.[9] The combination of Western pressure and domestic resistance, in turn, would gradually undermine the foundations of East European Communism and ultimately cause its entire ugly edifice to crumble and collapse. The result would be a new, free Europe – an extension of the democratic principles and freedoms of the West in an easterly direction. Everyone would benefit from such an outcome, including, of course, the citizens of a reunited, democratic Germany, who would discover that, with Communism out of the way, the East European peoples would »be ready […] to pursue understanding and compromise« with the Germans.[10] In such an atmosphere, the expellee leaders believed, even the problems rooted in the expulsions, territorial and otherwise, would soon find acceptable solutions.

The expellee lobby's leaders were aware that the gradual arrival of superpower détente during the 1960s posed a direct challenge to much of their established East-West agenda.

By mid-decade they acknowledged that the Soviet-American »tendency towards a settlement« had become »unmistakable« and anticipated twofold dangers as a result: a tendency by the United States to show less ›consideration‹ for the interests of its partners and a corresponding inclination by the West German government to revise its inflexible Cold War stances towards Eastern Europe.[11] The expellee activists also understood that some political adjustments on their part would probably be necessary in these circumstances, but they proved very inept at implementing such changes. To be sure, the *Vertriebenenverbände* did alter the tone of their programmatic public statements to a degree. From the mid-1960s onwards they increasingly referred to their interest in such vague, détente-like objectives as a »just compromise of interest between West and East« or a »constructive, free, federative and pan-European-oriented policy of Europe.«[12] Elaborating on a theme first introduced during the previous decade, they also stressed the importance of promoting human and cultural contacts across the Iron Curtain, apparently in the hope of building people-to-people links that could bypass the Communist governmental structures, even in the absence of political relations between the Federal Republic and the main East bloc satellite states.

But beneath this thin rhetorical exterior, the expellee lobby's underlying objectives and principles remained largely unchanged. A good illustration of this fact was the ›Peace Manifesto of the Bund der Vertriebenen‹, released in the spring of 1969. This statement of principles, intended to highlight the expellee lobby's goals in the run-up to the 1969

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8 For the quotation, see the BdV pamphlet Friedensmanifest des Bundes der Vertriebenen, 21.4. 1969, Archiv des Bundes der Vertriebenen (ABdV) Bonn, Sitzungen des Präsidiums, 1969, S. 7.

9 Ja Zu Europa. Europa-Kongress der Vertriebenen, Saarbrücken, 1.–2.11.1969, Bonn, 1969, S. 8.

10 *Hans-Christoph Seebohm*, speech at the 1963 Sudetendeutscher Tag, manuscript in AdsD, Parteivorstand, alter Bestand, 01574C, S.12.

11 BdV, Jahresbericht 1966, ABdV, Jahresberichte 1960–1969, S. 4.

12 BdV, Friedensmanifest des Bundes der Vertriebenen, 21.4.1969, AbdV, Sitzungen des Präsidiums, 1969, S. 7 f.

Bundestag elections, did underscore the desirability of an ›enduring peace order‹ (*Friedensordnung*) in Europe, to be achieved through negotiation and compromise between East and West.[13] But it also set very traditional-sounding preconditions for such negotiations: no recognition of the GDR or of the post-war borders by the Federal Republic as well as strict observance of the »principles of progressive international law«, including the granting of an »individual and collective *Heimatrecht*« and of »the right to self-determination« to the German expellees.[14]

Such tensions and discrepancies notwithstanding, the expellee groups presented themselves as contributors to a cause much greater than their revisionist agenda alone. According to their programmatic proclamations, their interests were compatible with a more general East-West compromise and with reconciliation, détente and, ultimately, peace and justice on the European continent. But how realistic were such claims? What role did the expellee organizations play in the development of East-West détente from the 1960s to the collapse of the East European Communist regimes in 1989/1990 and beyond? The pages below will throw light on these matters by examining the expellee lobby's contributions in two crucial periods of transition that provided ample opportunities for translating policy statements into practice: the new *Ostpolitik* of the early 1970s, along with its antecedents, and the reunification settlement of 1989/1990, together with its aftermath.

II. From The Onset of Détente to the New Ostpolitik

As already indicated, the arrival of détente and the subsequent rise of Bonn's new *Ostpolitik* heralded big changes for the expellee lobby. Until the early-to-mid–1960s, the *Vertriebenenverbände* had wielded considerable influence on West Germany's policy options towards Eastern Europe. Although they had failed to reach their goal of active inclusion in Bonn's top-level foreign policy formulation and implementation, the organizations had enjoyed considerable success in shaping the terms of relevant political debate within the Federal Republic. The federal government and all the leading political parties had repeatedly rejected the Oder-Neisse line as the Polish-German border and insisted that final decisions about territorial questions had to be postponed until a future peace conference. They had also endorsed the expellees' presumed rights to their homelands and to self-determination in one public statement after another. The political elites' motives had been overwhelmingly instrumental. Although the vast majority of Bonn's key politicians had realized early on that the border changes advocated by the expellee lobby were not viable or even desirable in the post-World War II context, they had nevertheless cultivated the impression of a far-reaching public consensus vis-à-vis the expellee organizations, primarily because of electoral considerations, although the broader usefulness of the expellee cause for the construction of an anti-Communist, westward-leaning, and forward-looking new policy had also played a role.[15] As a result, the key components of the expellee lobby's Eastern policy agenda had received no direct challenge from Bonn's political elites, and a similar tone had also dominated in the rest of the public sphere. Relevant discussions in the West German mass media during the 1950s had tended to portray the expellees and their Eastern policy endeavours in a positive light, often stressing that their cause deserved support and solidarity from all Germans.[16] Under these circumstances, the expellee or-

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13 Ebd., S. 7.
14 Ebd., S. 7 f.
15 On the broader uses, see especially *Robert G. Moeller*, War Stories. The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany, Berkeley/Los Angeles 2001.
16 For typical press articles, see: Weit dahinter liegt Troppau …, in: FAZ, 27.5 1953 or Heimat, in: Die Welt, 13.9.1958.

ganizations had enjoyed extensive negative influence on the Federal Republic's *Ostpolitik*: through their ability to enforce the loyalty of the country's political elites to stances and demands that were completely unacceptable to the East European regimes, they had prevented the Federal Republic from launching major new initiatives towards Eastern Europe, even after interest in such moves began to grow in Bonn during the late 1950s.[17]

In the course of the 1960s this situation altered dramatically. The international context transformed itself as Moscow and Washington took cautious steps towards a political and military modus vivendi, pulling their sometimes reluctant allies with them. The political atmosphere within the Federal Republic changed as well, in response to both these external developments and to internal stimuli, the most important of which was the erection of the Berlin Wall in August 1961. For many West German observers, the building of the Wall marked a decisive break in their country's postwar history that called for a painful reexamination of its policies and priorities. Such sentiments were expressed with particular vehemence by a motley crew of public intellectuals – journalists, publicists, and church-affiliated activists – who took the lead in shaping subsequent debates. Motivated primarily by a desire to bypass the dead end which the road to reunification appeared to have hit in Berlin, they demanded a re-evaluation of Bonn's policies in several areas in which long-established taboos had in their view impeded rational discussion of policy options. Most immediately, they called for changes in the relations between the two German states. The typical proposal was a package deal of sorts: some level of formal acceptance of the GDR by Bonn in return for political and socio-economic changes in East Germany that would improve the condition of the population and increase its contacts with the Federal Republic, thus preserving at least a minimum of cohesion and shared identity between the inhabitants of the two states.[18] But the reform offensive also extended to the closely related field of Eastern policy, in which the expellee lobby found itself in the direct line of fire, as engaged journalists, intellectuals, and church activists subjected it and its favourite causes to unprecedentedly direct and sustained criticism. They wrote off the Reich's former Eastern territories as lost lands; denounced the *Heimatrecht* as a politically and judicially useless concept; and pleaded for a clear distancing from illusionary revisionist causes as a precondition for what they regarded as the Federal Republic's chief contribution to détente: a political reconciliation between West Germany and the East European satellite states. They also condemned the leading expellee activists as petty functionaries preoccupied with their own careers and out of touch with the millions of average people they purported to represent.[19]

While such interventions provoked repeated controversy in the West German media from the early 1960s onwards, the country's political elites at first reacted very cautiously. To be sure, the government adjusted its approach to East-West relations somewhat, in keeping with the winds of détente, most obviously by establishing trade representations in select East European capitals and building up some basic communication with the rival regime in East Berlin. But the government shied away from a more extensive normaliza-

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17 The paragraph draws on *Ahonen*, Expulsion, S. 54–154 and *ders.*, Domestic Constraints on West German Ostpolitik. The Role of the Expellee Organizations in the Adenauer Era, in: Central European History 31 (1998), H. 1–2, S. 31–64.

18 See, for example, *Golo Mann*, Bestandsaufnahme, Berlin 1962 and *Werner Richter* (Hrsg.), Die Mauer oder der 13. August, Reinbek 1961.

19 For an elaboration of these points, featuring a discussion of the impact of key journalists, including Jürgen Neven DuMont and Hans-Jakob Stehle, and of landmark documents, such as the Tübingen Memorandum of 1962, the Evangelical Church's so-called Expellee Memorandum of 1965 and the Bensberg Memorandum of 1968, see *Ahonen*, Expulsion, insb. S. 164–181, 203–208, 222–227. See also the contributions by *Robert Zurek* and *Karl-Joseph Hummel* in this volume.

tion of its relations with the key countries of Eastern Europe – largely for reasons of domestic politics. At home all the main parties continued to pose as dedicated champions of the expellee lobby's main *Ostpolitik* desiderata, insisting on the continued validity of Germany's claims to its 1937 borders and vowing to uphold the expellees' rights to their homelands and to self-determination, even as their true convictions diverged ever further from these public stances. In the years preceding the Bundestag elections of 1965, the parties' propaganda efforts vis-à-vis the expellees in fact intensified, primarily because of the SPD's drive, evident since its adoption of the Bad Godesberg program of 1959, to widen its appeal among several sections of the electorate that had typically leaned more towards the CDU/CSU, including the expellees. As the SPD's main political rivals responded by increasing their own relevant efforts, the result was a prolonged propaganda battle that precluded the political elites from redirecting domestic political opinion on the question of Eastern policy, despite the opportunities offered by ongoing public debates and the growing interest in such steps among Bonn's elites.[20]

The positions of the country's political elites began to shift only in the latter half of the 1960s. Once the Bundestag elections of 1965 had passed, the immediate appeal of courting the expellee vote diminished, at least for a time. More importantly, there was growing evidence of broad attitudinal and generational changes in West German society suggestive of rapidly declining popular support for revisionist Eastern policy doctrines, manifest not only in the various overlapping protest movements that culminated in the so-called Extra-Parliamentary Opposition, but – more persuasively – in opinion poll data. The percentage of West Germans who regarded the former German provinces east of the Oder-Neisse line as irretrievably lost rose steadily throughout the 1960s, hitting 60 per cent by late 1967 and nearly 70 per cent two years later.[21] Even more revealingly, the percentage of expellees uninterested in returning to their former homelands in the east also grew rapidly, reaching 60 per cent by the end of the decade.[22]

In the face of such evidence, the country's political elites reacted by gradually shifting towards a more critical stance vis-à-vis the expellee organizations and their pet *Ostpolitik* causes. Significantly, however, they did so in a divergent fashion that by 1969 had created two polarized camps and destroyed the earlier public consensus on the revisionist doctrines associated with the expellee lobby. While the SPD and the FDP distanced themselves from the expellee organizations and – building on earlier behind-the-scenes planning – began to prepare new initiatives towards the GDR and Eastern Europe on the basis of an acceptance of the territorial status quo, the CDU/CSU continued to maintain a relatively close public identification with the expellee lobby's revisionist causes, hopeful that such positions still coincided with those of the majority of the population.[23] By the time of the 1969 Bundestag election the polarization between the CDU/CSU on the one hand and the SPD and the FDP on the other had become abundantly clear. While the Union made an aggressive effort to court the expellee lobby with old-style slogans, the SPD and the FDP did not. As a result, the old pattern of interaction among the expellee lobby, the largest parties, and the government, based on non-partisan pressure group tactics by the expellee organizations and instrumentally driven consensus politics by the political elites, had broken down. Among the main parties, only the CDU/CSU still counted as a more or less reliable ally of the expellee groups, and when the Union soon found itself in opposition for the first time in the Federal Republic's history, a major turning point had been reached. As two major parties openly critical of the backward-looking stances that had hindered West

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20 *Ahonen,* Expulsion, S. 155–81. See also *Stickler*, S. 236–250, 209–230, 294–308.
21 *Gebhard Schweigler*, Nationalbewusstsein in der BRD und der DDR, Düsseldorf 1973, S. 116.
22 Ebd., S. 115.
23 Kiesinger in the CDU/CSU Bundestagsfraktion, 1.7.1969, ACDP Sankt Augustin, I-226-A010, S. 5.

Germany's earlier *Ostpolitik* formed a new coalition, the domestic political base for a new, more constructive Eastern policy had been established.[24]

The expellee organizations reacted to the gradual disintegration of their domestic power base with dismay and incomprehension. Their stock response to the changes around them was loud and sustained protest. The organizations decried the public discussions about the Federal Republic's *Ostpolitik* options as a »second expulsion«, aimed at excluding the »victims of expulsions from the dialogue with the East European peoples«, and accused the SPD and the FDP of »breaking [their] promises« and »recklessly discarding Germany's rightful claims« in the east.[25] But beyond such rhetorical negativism, they had little to contribute. Seemingly lost in the changing political landscape of the late 1960s, the expellee activists failed to live up to their self-proclaimed role as champions of a broader international understanding across the East-West divide. By defining their preconditions to any attempted normalization of relations between the Federal Republic and the key East European states in very traditional and revision-laden terms – no recognition of the territorial status quo or the existing Communist regimes; continued advocacy of the *Heimatrecht* and the self-determination right of the German expellees – the expellee organizations exposed their internationalist rhetoric for what it really was: a thin public facade for the pursuit of self-seeking, nationalistic aims. With their backward-looking nay-saying, they pushed themselves into a corner of die-hard revisionism in the Federal Republic's political life, a corner in which they found themselves increasingly marginalized and irrelevant. As the country moved towards major adjustments of its stances vis-à-vis Eastern Europe, in keeping with the broader trends of détente, the function of the expellee groups became that of frustrated opponents of the new policies: bereft of their extensive negative influence of yesteryear, the organizations nevertheless sought in vain to obstruct new developments, kicking and screaming as they were dragged along by forces too strong for them to contain.

This negative and unconstructive political role of the expellee lobby became even clearer once the Social-Liberal Coalition launched its new *Ostpolitik* from 1970 onwards. While the government pursued the negotiations that were to culminate in a series of landmark agreements expressive of the Federal Republic's acceptance of postwar Europe's political and territorial status quo – chief among them the Moscow and Warsaw Treaties of 1970 with the Soviet Union and Poland, respectively, the Basic Treaty of 1972 with the GDR, and the following year's Prague Treaty with Czechoslovakia – the relations between it and the main expellee organizations grew ever more strained. Although careful to avoid a full break with the new government, the expellee lobby proclaimed its disapproval of the social-liberal initiatives every step of the way. As early as April of 1970, the umbrella group BdV denounced the government's new *Ostpolitik* as a »betrayal of the right to self-determination and the *Heimatrecht*«, and similarly strident protests accompanied each advance in the negotiations between Bonn and the East bloc governments.[26] The agreements themselves provoked even more decisive rejection. The BdV dismissed the Warsaw Treaty, for example, as a dangerous »Diktat«, driven by Polish desire for »revenge and retaliation«, and called upon »the majority of our people« to unite in opposing the Basic Treaty, which it labeled a »serious threat to the nation«.[27]

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24 *Ahonen*, Expulsion, S. 203–242.

25 *Wenzel Jaksch*, Sein Vermächtnis. Patriotische Mitte, in: Volksbote, 3.12.1966; BdV declaration regarding the SPD's Nuremberg Parteitag, 30.3.1968, AdSD: BT-Fraktion, 5. WP. 876; Kopfstand der Logik. Die Stunde der Wahrheit – über die FDP, in: Deutscher Ostdienst (hereafter DOD), 10.4.1967.

26 BdV Bundesvorstand resolution of 26.4.1970, in: Alarmstufe I, in: DOD, 30.4.1970.

27 Das Warschauer Diktat, in: DOD, 27.11.1970; Schwere Bedrohung der Nation, in: DOD, 10.11.1972.

Given the intensity of their discontent, the expellee organizations' overriding objective was to put an end to the new *Ostpolitik*. To achieve that goal they needed political allies, which by the early 1970s proved increasingly difficult to find. To its credit, the mainstream expellee lobby still rejected the option of active cooperation with far-right political forces, much as it had in previous decades. Although individual activists harbored sympathies for right-wing elements, and shadowy, extremist groups such as *Aktion Widerstand* agitated at many an expellee rally, the main organizations carefully distanced themselves from political extremism, most notably from the *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* (NPD), by far the strongest far-right political force at the time.[28] Instead, the expellee lobby placed its hopes in what it regarded as its sole remaining mainstream ally, the CDU/CSU, expecting the twin parties to block the ratification of the relevant treaties in the national parliament. But the activists soon faced a series of further disappointments, as the Christian Democrats failed to rise to the challenge. The Bundestag decisions over the first two *Ostpolitik* agreements – the Moscow and Warsaw Treaties – in May 1972 set the tone: the vast majority of the CDU/CSU deputies abstained in the vote, thus allowing the treaties to pass, and the Christian Democrats failed to block the agreements in the Bundesrat as well, although they held a majority there at the time.[29] The other Ostpolitik treaties were also ratified by the Bundestag, and in the end the expellee lobby could only draw consolation from a number of unilateral West German proclamations that helped to dilute the agreements somewhat. These included the CDU/CSU-sponsored joint Bundestag resolution passed in conjunction with the ratification of the Moscow and Warsaw Treaties in May 1972 and the Constitutional Court's July 1973 decision on the CSU-led Bavarian state government's challenge to the constitutionality of the Basic Treaty with the GDR. But even these consolation prizes – whose main appeal to the expellee activists lay in the legalistic fiction that the new treaties did not prejudice the final settlement of reunified Germany's borders in a future peace settlement – could not hide the fact the CDU/CSU, too, had ultimately prioritized broader domestic and international considerations over loyalty to the expellee lobby. Although relatively close links between the expellee groups and the CDU/CSU persisted, fueling expellee hopes about policy changes under a future Christian Democratic government, the *Vertriebenenverbände* had clearly failed to thwart the Social-Liberal coalition's plans.[30] The *Ostpolitik* train had left the station, despite the expellee activists' sustained attempts to shut down the engines.

The full extent of the expellee lobby's failure becomes clear when the effects of its actions during the late 1960s and early 1970s are measured against its stated intentions. Whereas the expellee organizations had desired influence on West Germany's Eastern policies throughout the previous decades, by the mid–1970s they found themselves more politically sidelined than ever. With their inflexible ways and strident protest, they had burned their bridges to the governing coalition and undermined the support they could expect from the CDU/CSU, all surface appearances notwithstanding. This political marginalization had been exacerbated by the fact that their broader rhetoric about East-West reconciliation had lost the bulk of whatever credibility it might have once possessed. After years of proclaiming their interest in East-West understanding in general and better

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28 BdV, Abschlussbericht über die Kundgebung des Bundes der Vertriebenen am 7. Mai 1972 auf dem Marktplatz in Bonn, BA Koblenz: B 234, 404; Klare Abgrenzung: BdV lehnt Unterstützung durch radikale Kräfte ab, in: DOD, 16.5.1972; *Stickler*, S. 309–346.

29 See, for example, *Arnulf Baring*, Machtwechsel. Die Ära Brandt-Scheel, Stuttgart 1982, insb. S. 427–447; *Anselm Tiggemann*, Die CDU/CSU und die Ost- und Deutschlandpolitik 1969–72. Zur Innenpolitik der Aussenpolitik der ersten Regierung Brandt/Scheel, Frankfurt/Main 1998.

30 *Ahonen*, Expulsion, S. 243–256; *Timothy Garton Ash*, In Europe's Name. Germany and the Divided Continent, New York 1993, insb. S. 67–83.

contacts to the East European peoples in particular, the expellee organizations had done their utmost to block all practical initiatives that could in fact have led in that direction. With their blinkered view of the larger context, they had failed to acknowledge what even the parliamentary opposition had conceded, albeit begrudgingly and in part only tacitly: that policies akin to the new *Ostpolitik* were necessary for the Federal Republic, given the broad international context of détente, the largely unaddressed legacies of the Nazi era in Eastern Europe, and the continued national imperative of pursuing reunification with the GDR. Through such bull-headedness, the expellee activists imposed major costs not only on themselves but also on Germany as a whole. The stridency of their activities fueled stereotypes of aggressive, expansionist Germans, in part in the West, and – more significantly – in Eastern Europe, handing to the Communist authorities ample material for continued propaganda drives against the Federal Republic and its supposedly fascistic characteristics. Such manipulated rhetoric, in turn, fostered cohesion within the Communist polities and thereby undermined precisely the kind of bridge-building vis-à-vis Eastern Europe that the West German government and the expellee organizations both claimed to want to pursue, albeit in very different ways. In the context of the new *Ostpolitik* and its antecedents, the expellee lobby had therefore played a revision-laden and unconstructive role, even in the absence of any direct influence on Bonn's concrete policies.

III. Reunification – and Beyond

The expellee lobby's next big chance to prove its credentials in promoting reconciliation across the East-West divide came with the German reunification settlement of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The unexpected collapse of East European state socialism created precisely the sorts of conditions of which the expellee activists had been dreaming for decades. The Communist elites had been swept from power, and the door was suddenly open for the promotion of new kinds of East-West ties, which – according to often repeated expellee mantras – should have enabled the German and East European peoples to solve the problems of the past to their mutual satisfaction, given sufficient good will and political imagination.

Unfortunately, however, the expellee organizations had not distinguished themselves with an abundance of either of these qualities during the one-and-a-half decades since the stabilization of the new *Ostpolitik*. They had remained relatively marginalized within the Federal Republic's political system, particularly during the rest of the social-liberal era, and although the switch to the CDU/CSU-FDP coalition under Helmut Kohl in late 1982 had brought about a seeming rapprochement between the expellee lobby and the government, even on *Ostpolitik* issues, that appearance had been deceptive. The CDU/CSU had simply built on decades of political precedent in plying expellees and other similarly minded voters with carefully calibrated, instrumentalized rhetoric suggestive of continued revisionist ambitions that were in fact absent among the party's mainstream leadership. The expellee organizations, on the other hand, had continued to pursue the holy grail of revisionism as true believers, insisting against all odds that Germany's eastern borders remained undetermined, pending a future peace treaty. At times their public activities had provoked widespread concern at home and abroad, as when the *Landsmannschaft Schlesien* proposed in 1985 to hold its biennial rally under the uncompromising slogan ›50 Years of Expulsion – Silesia Remains Ours‹. The ensuing controversy – which owed its ferocity to the fact that the rally's scheduled keynote speaker was Chancellor Kohl himself – ultimately forced the Silesian activists to back down slightly and the Chancellor to engage in damage-control exercises on several fronts.[31] Although the storm blew over

31 See, for example, *Karl-Rudolf Korte*, Deutschlandpolitik in Helmut Kohls Kanzlerschaft. Regierungsstil und Entscheidungen, 1982–1989, Stuttgart 1998, S. 250–264; *Ahonen*, Expulsion, S. 258 ff.

within a few months, it highlighted the disruptive potential of the expellee lobby's continued dedication to a revisionist stance towards Eastern Europe.

Provocations on the scale of the 1985 Silesian rally remained rare, however. Most of the time the expellee organizations couched their revisionist interests in much more veiled language. While the *Heimatrecht* and the right to self-determination remained staples of this discourse, several new items also appeared on the rhetorical repertoire. The most important such element was the legal notion of ›ethnic group rights‹ (*Volksgruppenrecht*), constructed by expellee scholars during the 1960s and early 1970s and employed with growing frequency by activists ever since. The term describes the rights which ethnic groups, particularly ethnic minorities, should enjoy in an enlightened pan-European order, including an updated version of the *Heimatrecht* and extensive self-determination. Its main function was to keep alive the prospect that expellees could return to their former homelands and ultimately re-assume control of these areas, even to the point of re-annexing them to Germany.[32] Another increasingly prominent point – deliberately muted in earlier years for fear that it be interpreted as denoting ›passive resignation to the Oder-Neisse border‹ – was the possibility of demanding material compensation from Poland and Czechoslovakia for the damages caused by the expulsions, even if territorial revisions seemed unlikely for the time being.[33] The long-term damage caused by the expulsions also lay at the heart of the expellee organizations' third new area of engagement, whose implications reached well beyond mere revisionism: the enhanced attention that the activists began to pay to the position of German minorities in Eastern Europe, particularly in Poland. Although this issue had appeared on the expellee lobby's agenda in earlier decades as well, it assumed increased prominence from the early 1970s on, ironically in good part because the very new *Ostpolitik* which the *Vertriebenenverbände* had so fiercely opposed opened up possibilities for greater interaction between the Federal Republic and the ethnic German minorities, ranging from cultural contacts to migration to West Germany.

All such tactical and rhetorical readjustments notwithstanding, the process of German reunification promptly proved that the mental horizons of the expellee activists had not expanded much during the previous two decades. Amidst the dramatic changes that swept Eastern Europe by the summer of 1989, the BdV defined the key task ahead as determining »where [Germany's] borders should be«, and over the following months the expellee lobby followed this guideline with grim determination.[34] The objective was to regain the lost eastern territories, at least those within the boundaries of 1937, now that the long-awaited peace settlement finally lay within grasp. Predictably, the expellee organizations usually dressed their underlying revisionism in an idealistic-sounding garb, speaking in confusing terms about »the free future of all of Germany in a free, pan-European confederation of States« (*Staatenbund*).[35] But their ultimate emphasis remained self-centred and territorial. As the BdV admonished in somewhat mixed metaphors in the autumn of 1989: »If one removes just one stone in the game of dominoes over Germany, the whole building crumbles. Those Germans who believe that they can ›save‹ Berlin by abandoning

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32 See, for example, *Theodor Veiter*, Das Volksgruppenrecht als elementarer Baustein für ein vereinigtes Europa, München 1967; *ders.*, Nationalitätenkonflikt und Volksgruppenrecht im ausgehenden 20. Jahrhundert, 3 Bde., Wien 1978 ff.; and, for a very critical perspective, *Samuel Salzborn*, Heimatrecht und Volkstumskampf. Aussenpolitische Konzepte der Vertriebenenverbände und ihre politische Umsetzung, Hannover 2001, S. 30–57.

33 For the quotation, see Gossing in the BdV's geschäftsführendes Präsidium, 20.11.1969, SDA, NL Becher, 193.

34 *Herbert Czaja*, Falsche Behauptungen über westliche Verzichtsforderungen, in: DOD, 21.7.1989, S. 4.

35 *Herbert Czaja/Hartmut Koschyk*, Ein deutschlandpolitisches Konzept, in: DOD, 12.10.1989, S. 2.

the territories east of the Oder and the Neisse are making a dangerous political and moral mistake.«[36]

In the early stages of the reunification process, between late 1989 and early 1990, the activists could draw hope from the fact that Chancellor Kohl and other CDU/CSU dignitaries, within and without the federal government, had adopted a highly ambiguous stance on the border question, implying – at least in front of expellee audiences – that Bonn might press for changes in the territorial status quo. But this posturing was, yet again, purely instrumental, intended, among other things, to placate expellees and other nationalistic elements at home, to siphon off support from the newly resurgent NPD, and generally to force the right-wing end of the West German political spectrum to face the fact that a recognition of the existing borders was the price to be paid for reunification with the GDR. As Kohl and his associates began to backtrack on the border problem by early 1990, having reached most of their goals, the expellee lobby responded by slightly moderating its own stances. Shifting away from their maximum claims to all the former Reich territories beyond the Oder-Neisse line, activists conceded that the situation in the east could »no longer become exactly what it once was« but insisted that »it also must not remain the way it is now because that would mean yet another victory of power politics over justice.«[37] However, at a time when the overwhelming majority of political, social, and cultural forces at home and abroad insisted on Bonn's acceptance of the territorial status quo as a precondition for a union of the two German states, this defensive line could not hold. By the summer of 1990 the expellee lobby found itself in full retreat, unable to stop the agreements that defined unified Germany as consisting of the Federal Republic and the GDR, particularly the so-called 2+4 Treaty – signed by the four victorious World War II allies and the two Germanies in September 1990 – and the bilateral frontier agreement between Germany and Poland, concluded some two months later. Amidst this rout, the expellee organizations retreated to a position of negativism familiar from the previous era of *Ostpolitik* transition. They dismissed the champions of the new policies as »opportunists« and »turncoats« and called in growing desperation for a parliamentary and popular rejection of a »false Eastern policy« aimed at creating »the smallest Germany of the last 1.000 years.«[38]

Ultimately all these efforts were in vain. As unified Germany's Bundestag ratified the German-Polish border treaty and an accompanying bilateral agreement on good-neighbourliness and co-operation between the two states in October 1991, the decades-long strife about Germany's eastern borders had come to an end. The country's acceptance of the territorial status quo was now official and final. In trying to prevent that outcome, the expellee lobby had again played an unconstructive and revision-laden role that belied its claims about wanting to promote the broader good of all Germans and Europeans through transnational understanding. As so often before, the organizations had fixated on their narrowly defined, backward-looking interests, and the predictable failure of such efforts had imposed significant costs on the German policy, particularly in the form of negative publicity and at least potential mistrust abroad, without yielding any obvious benefits.[39]

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36 Ebd., S. 3.

37 Landsmannschaft Schlesien Resolution, Wir geben Schlesien nicht auf, in: DOD, 23.2.1990, S. 3.

38 For the first two quotations, see *Herbert Czaja*, Wendehälse – jetzt als Verzichtler, in: DOD, 2.3.990, S. 1; and for the third, Wir werden Euch nicht preisgeben!, in: DOD, 21.6.1991, S. 3.

39 On the expellee groups and reunification, see *Dieter Bingen*, Die Polenpolitik der Bonner Republik von Adenauer bis Kohl 1949–1991, Baden-Baden 1998, S. 261–284; *Krzysztof Miszczak*, Deklarationen und Realitäten. Die Beziehungen zwischen der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und der (Volks-)Republik Polen von der Unterzeichnung des Warschauer Vertrages bis zum Abkommen über gute Nachbarschaft und freundschaftliche Zusammenarbeit 1970–1991, München 1993, S. 369–461; *Garton Ash*, passim; *Ahonen*, Expulsion, S. 260–65.

With reunification, the immutability of Germany's existing borders became clear to all realistic-minded observers – although not necessarily to the inner circle of veteran expellee activists. In a stubborn display of what one journalist aptly labelled »remarkable historical dreaminess« (*Verträumtheit*), the expellee lobby's top leaders – most of whom were well beyond retirement age by the 1990s – still clung to a chimera of territorial revisions, at least for the long-term.[40] As in previous years, these visions were usually verbalized in an abstract language redolent of harmony, justice, and Europe but actually expressive of self-seeking goals. Herbert Czaja, the long-term BdV President born in 1914, helped to set the tone with his programmatic statements, including a 1993 plea for the faithful to pursue the *Heimatrecht* and the *Volksgruppenrecht* within a »European peace order« featuring »self-government for ethnic groups« as a step towards new kinds of »compromise on questions of neighbourliness and territory.«[41]

Activists also tried to put such ideas into practice, most notably during the negotiations that culminated in the January 1997 Declaration of principles between Germany and the Czech Republic. These bilateral talks sought to expand on the treaty on good-neighbourliness and friendly cooperation between Germany and the Czech and Slovak Federative Republic, signed in 1992, which had stressed both parties' desire to pursue friendly, peaceful relations in a uniting Europe while skirting several fundamental but difficult issues, particularly those rooted in the expulsions and their legacies.[42] As the negotiations between Germany and the newly constituted Czech Republic gained momentum, the expellee lobby, spearheaded by the still powerful *Sudentendeutsche Landsmannschaft*, pressed the *Recht auf die Heimat*, contained within the right of self-determination as the key item that it wanted to see included in the declaration.[43] Predictably, such last-ditch efforts to maintain at least a theoretical legal basis for future territorial readjustments failed. The declaration, signed in Prague on January 21, 1997, did contain expressions of regret by both sides for the »suffering and injustice« (*Leid und Unrecht*) caused by German actions during the Nazi years and the subsequent expulsions of the Sudeten Germans. But, in looking to the future, the two governments ignored expellee dogmas and stressed instead their desire to shape their relations »in the spirit of good-neighbourliness and partnership« without allowing »political and legal questions arising from the past« to burden these efforts.[44]

The expellee activists' contribution to this outcome had been purely destructive. With their loud interventions on behalf of a hopeless but highly inflammatory cause, they had prolonged and complicated the negotiations, particularly as each public outcry about their actions in the Czech Republic had piled pressure on the Prague government not to appear too conciliatory towards the Germans, thereby hindering the search for mutually acceptable compromises. The pursuit of legal dogmas as a backdoor to eventual revisionism had thus become another dead-end for the expellee lobby, although that has not stopped the *Heimatrecht* and the *Volksgruppenrecht* from retaining a prominent place in expellee rhetoric – as mantras increasingly devoid of concrete meaning.

Such rhetorical continuities notwithstanding, the primary focus of the expellee lobby's political activities has shifted in the post-reunification years. In place of border changes, two other objectives have assumed central prominence. The first is a cause broached by activists many years earlier but initially downplayed as potentially inimical to the bigger dream

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40 Totale Preisgabe, in: Der Spiegel, 13 August 1990.
41 *Herbert Czaja*, Europäische Friedensordnung mit Volksgruppenrecht, in: DOD, 27.8.1993, S. 1.
42 Archiv der Gegenwart. Deutschland 1949 bis 1999 (hereafter AdG), Bd. 9, Januar 1986 – Juni 1994, Sankt Augustin 2000, S. 9003–9006.
43 Sudetendeutsche Landsmannschaft, Im Vordergrund steht das Recht auf die Heimat, in: DOD, 19.1.1996, S. 3.
44 AdG, Bd. 9, S. 9587–9591, 9599–9613.

of territorial revisions: material compensation for the expulsions and the various damages associated with them. This shift became pronounced in the latter half of the 1990s and coincided with a leadership transition in the expellee organizations, most significantly in the umbrella group BdV. After unsuccessful attempts by younger activists to seize the reins from men of Herbert Czaja's generation during the early 1990s, the hour of change struck in the spring of 1998, as the organization elected as its new president Erika Steinbach, a 55-year old CDU Bundestag deputy born in West Prussia.[45] The first woman to be chosen to lead a group traditionally headed by middle-aged to elderly men, Steinbach gave the BdV new impetus and direction, steering a less backward-looking and somewhat more realistic course than her immediate predecessors. She sought to rebuild links to the SPD, for example, and often adopted a less confrontational note in public debates than her forerunners. But ultimately she, too, has failed to break the expellee lobby's bad old habit of pushing its own narrow interests with a stubbornness that ultimately tends to redound to the disadvantage of not only the expellee groups but also the Federal Republic as a whole.

This enduring problem is evident in the way in which BdV and the other relevant organizations have pursued their quest for material compensation for the expulsions. Although the issue has arisen in several different contexts, including that of the German-Czech declaration discussed above, the main avenue for its promotion was the recent bargaining about the first wave of eastward expansion of the European Union, completed with the admission of Poland, the Czech Republic, and eight other new member states in May 2004. The expellee lobby's stance towards the new applicants – particularly Poland and the Czech Republic – was steeped in the doubletalk that has long characterized its discourse about Europe and international reconciliation. On the one hand, the organizations underscored their strong interest in facilitating institutional expansion, describing »the incorporation of the eastern states into the hitherto exclusively west-European structures of the EU« as »indispensable.«[46] But on the other hand they sensed a golden opportunity to wrest long-awaited concessions from the new applicants. Accordingly, the BdV pointed out that »the entry of our eastern neighbours to the European Union and NATO will bring them benefits« and insisted that, in order to acquire those benefits, the neighbours would first have to »make certain services in return, also vis-à-vis the Germans.«[47] What these services should be also became clear in expellee rhetoric. Predictably, the perennial favourites *Heimatrecht* and *Volksgruppenrecht* made their appearance, especially under the old guard of Czaja and associates, who eagerly demanded »concrete measures« towards a »realization« of these rights.[48] But from the late 1990s onwards the emphasis changed. Instead of stressing the acquisition of new, expellee-specific rights, key activists increasingly portrayed themselves as guardians of long-established legal norms. BdV President Steinbach set the tone by defining the EU as primarily a »community of values« (*Wertegemeinschaft*) in which respect for »human rights« was »absolutely indispensable« and which would be »damaged« if it accepted new member states »that lack the will to heal

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45 Erika Steinbach, MdB, ist neue Präsidentin des Bundes der Vertriebenen, in: DOD, 8.5.1998; Gedenken mit Schmiss, in: Die Zeit, 27.5. 2004. On earlier leadership strife, see, Vertriebene: Einsamer Wolf, in: Der Spiegel, Nr. 28/1991, 8.7.1991; Parolen oder Trachten, in: Deutsches Allgemeines Sonntagsblatt, 6.9.1991; Vertriebene. Alles erlaubt, in: Der Spiegel, Nr. 33/1992, August 10.8.1992.

46 *Fritz Wittmann*, Aufgaben und Ziele des Bundes der Vertriebenen, in: DOD, 20.5.1994, S. 3.

47 BdV Bundesvorstand resolution, 16.11.1996, reprinted in DOD, 22.11.1996, S. 1.

48 Ebd. See also *Fritz Wittmann*, EU-Osterweiterung. Nicht ohne Wenn und Aber, in: DOD, 29.7. 1994, S. 1 f.

human rights violations«.[49] According to the BdV, the human rights violations in need of the most urgent attention were the various judicial measures used to implement and justify the expulsions of Germans after the Second World War. Although these measures includeed, among other things, a handful of Polish laws, the activists directed most of their ire against the so-called Beneš decrees, a series of 143 executive decisions – a number of them still technically valid – through which Czechoslovak President Beneš had implemented his immediate post-war policies, including the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans.[50] The expellee groups denounced such measures as unacceptable; demanded their formal repeal; and even called for a German veto against the EU membership of any country, particularly the Czech Republic, that failed to comply.[51]

In part, the expellee campaigns against the Beneš decrees and other expulsion-related legal provisions had symbolic character. On this level, the demand for the repeal of 60-year old measures that had helped to pave the way for brutal ethnic cleansing did possess a certain justification and might have helped to provide a sense of closure for at least some of the people still scarred by past traumas. But such symbolism constituted a secondary side issue at best for the activists, whose main motives were of a more material nature. A full repeal of the measures denounced by the expellee lobby, particularly of the Beneš decrees, would have had unpredictable legal consequences and could have opened the door to compensatory law suits by expulsion victims against the states that had expelled them. The German activists understood all this and in their franker moments publicly acknowledged a strong interest in linking the eastward expansion of the European Union to the provision of »compensation for the illegal confiscation of property and the physical harm« suffered by the German expellees.[52]

This campaign, too, proved a losing cause for the expellee activists. Both Poland and the Czech Republic joined the European Union in May 2004 without repealing the contested expulsion-related decrees, and the German government did not seek to link the two issues during the preceding negotiations. But the expellee lobby's interventions wreaked havoc in both Poland and particularly the Czech Republic, where horror visions of returning, property-grabbing expellees rekindled old fears of the Germans and bolstered populists interested in manipulating such atavistic sentiments for anti-EU mobilization and personal gain. For a time in 2002, amidst the delicate final stages of the EU expansion talks, the Beneš decree controversy even escalated into a regional Central European dispute, as the Hungarian and Austrian governments, each for its own instrumental reasons, joined the German expellees in demanding a speedy rescindment of the measures.[53] Despite the symbolic significance of the issue and the undoubted moral dubiousness of the decrees, all this turmoil contributed nothing positive to the interaction among Germany

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49 Steinbach interview, entitled Von den Deutschen ist bei Kinkel nie die Rede, in: Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung (hereafter FAS), 14.6.1998, S. 5; Erweiterung der EU trotz Bedenken, in: DOD, Nr. 8/2003, S. 16.

50 See, for example, *Steinbach*, Aufhebung von völkerrechtswidrigen Dekreten und Rechtsnormen in den östlichen Nachbarländern noch vor deren EU-Beitritt, in: DOD, 5.5.2001, S. 1; *dies.*, EU Staats- und Regierungschefs sollen Anliegen der Heimatvertriebenen zum Verhandlungsthema machen, in: DOD, 15.6.2001, S. 1. See also *Oliver Rathkolb/Barbara Coudenhove* (Hrsg.), Die Beneš-Dekrete, Wien 2002. The BdV had begun to raise similar demands before Steinbach took over as President, albeit not yet as prominently. See, for example, the group's resolution of 25.4.1996, reprinted in BdV appelliert an Bundesregierung, in: DOD, 3.5.1996, S. 6.

51 See, for example, the Steinbach interview Notfalls ein Veto einlegen, in: Focus, 25.3.2002, S. 78.

52 *Fritz Wittmann*, Aufgaben und Ziele des Bundes der Vertriebenen, in: DOD, 20.5.1994, S. 2.

53 See, for example, Vergangenheit, die nicht vergeht, in: Süddeutsche Zeitung (hereafter SZ), 1.3.2002, S. 4

and its eastern neighbours. On the contrary, it highlighted the ample destabilizing potential inherent in the threat of property claims by the German expellees – a point that has been reinforced by the more recent activities of the Prussian Claims Society (*Preussische Treuhand GmbH & Co. KG a. A*).

The Prussian Claims Society is a somewhat shadowy organization, established in December 2000, whose stated goal is to assist German expellees in preparing and pursuing individual property claims against Poland – and potentially against other states as well. Proclaiming the Jewish Claims Congress as its model, the organization seeks not just compensation for past losses but the actual return of properties confiscated during and after the expulsions. In the absence of appropriate political agreements, it intends to resort to legal action, primarily through national and international courts within Europe, although it has also threatened to file class action lawsuits in the United States.[54] The group's links to the mainstream expellee lobby are murky. The *Bund der Vertriebenen* has publicly distanced itself, claiming that it »neither has nor intends to have any personal, material or structural ties to the Preussische Treuhand.«[55] But such denials lack credibility. The Society was jointly founded by the *Landsmannschaft Ostpreussen* and the *Landsmannschaft Schlesien*, and its leadership circles overlap extensively with those of the more established expellee lobby: its chief executive, Rudi Pawelka is also head of the *Landsmannschaft Schlesien* and a member of the BdV Presidium, and his co-deputy, Hans-Günther Parplies, doubles as a BdV Vice President.[56] On occasion,

Pawelka has even argued that the Claims Society and the BdV perform separate tasks in pursuit of a common goal: the former uses judicial and the latter political methods to further expellee property claims.[57] Although such a streamlined view of the relations between the two organizations is an oversimplification, various links do exist, and the rise of the Claims Society may, in part, reflect frustration among right-wing activists with the relatively moderate course pursued by the BdV under President Steinbach.

Be that as it may, the impact of the Claims Society's activities has been calamitous in Eastern Europe in general and Poland in particular, as elites and the broader public alike have reacted with outrage to the prospect of a systematic German expellee campaign to reclaim lost properties. The intensity of the fury is reflected in the potential counter-claims discussed in Poland. In September 2004 the *Sejm*, the Polish Parliament, passed a resolution exhorting the government to explore possible war reparation demands against Germany, and two months later the city of Warsaw waved another potential bill at Berlin: an expert group estimated the city's total wartime damages to amount to no fewer than 45,3 billion US dollars.[58] Such campaigns clearly reflect populist posturing rather than serious political intent, but the fact that the Polish government has had a difficult time controlling these debates is a disturbing indication of the potential effects of the expellee lobby's property and compensation campaigns. The Prussian Claims Society's activities are ongoing, and their precise impact hard to predict. But past patterns of expellee activity suggest

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54 The organization's website URL http://www.preussischetreuhand.de.vu [22. March 2005]; Da müssen sie mit dem Panzer kommen, in: Die Zeit, 27.5.2004, S. 15; *Thomas Urban*, Historische Belastungen der Integration Polens in die EU, in: APuZ 5–6 (2005), 31.1. 2005, S. 36.

55 BdV statement, cited in: Da müssen sie mit dem Panzer kommen, in: Die Zeit, 27.5.2004, S. 15; *Urban*, Belastungen, S. 36 f.

56 See the previous note and: Entrüstung in Polen über die Preussische Treuhand, in: FAZ, 6.10. 2003, S. 5.

57 *Angela Merkel,* Die historische Schuld wird nicht relativiert, in: FAZ, 5.5.2004, S. 4.

58 *Urban*, Belastungen, S. 38 f.; *ders.*, Der Verlust. Die Vertreibung der Deutschen und Polen im 20. Jahrhundert, Munich, 2004, S. 192–204; Entrüstung in Polen über die Preussische Treuhand, in: FAZ, 6.10.2003, S. 5; Da müssen sie mit dem Panzer kommen, in: Die Zeit, 27.5. 2004, S. 15.

that the likely outcome is a failure of the organization's concrete demands – albeit at the cost of prolonged and divisive public debates, within and particularly without Germany.

The recent controversies about the expellee lobby's property and compensation claims have often interlocked with those surrounding its second major post-reunification project: the widely publicized plan to establish a Centre against Expulsions (*Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen*) in Berlin. The original proposal, unveiled by BdV President Steinbach in mid-1999, was a loose sketch for a Centre that would »use the example of the history, culture, and suffering of the German expellees to oppose expulsions worldwide.«[59] Aiming for an institution of at least semi-official character, the BdV expected the German government to provide some of the funding as well as a suitable location in central Berlin, and it soon broadened its original design, proposing to incorporate into the Centre some level of coverage of other twentieth century expulsions.[60] The initial response in Germany was largely positive, no doubt in part because the Kosovo crisis had made ethnic cleansing an acute issue at the time, and by the autumn of 2000 the BdV had established a foundation dedicated to promoting its plans for the Centre, with support from the CDU/CSU and from a variety of prominent individuals from across the political and ideological spectrum. However, as the project picked up momentum and the foundation extended its activities, controversies promptly flared up, not only in Germany but also in other countries, particularly Poland and the Czech Republic. A wide range of critics denounced the BdV's blueprints as excessively inward-looking and one-sided in their primary focus on the fate of the German expellees.[61] More ominously, such disputes became linked to wider polemics about relative victimization, fuelled by debates in the Federal Republic about the extent to which Germans, too, should be seen not as perpetrators but as victims of the Second World War.[62] Polish and Czech observers in particular took offence to the enhanced victim status that they suspected the German expellee lobby of seeking through its Centre project, and such objections were further strengthened by the widespread suspicion that, once attained, this victim status would be used as a weapon in battles over property issues.[63]

As the transnational strife over the Centre against Expulsions escalated in the first years of the new millennium, the project gradually lost momentum. The increasingly fierce public controversies themselves scared away potential backers, and the support base was reduced further by the appearance of a string of alternative ideas by individuals and groups, within and beyond Germany, that approved of the general concept of a commemorative and educational project against expulsions but not of the BdV's specific ideas. Most of the counter-proposals envisaged an internationally defined approach in which the German case would form just one chapter of a much broader story of forced population movements – a chapter in which the expulsions of Germans would, in turn, be closely embedded in the preceding context of the Third Reich and its policies. Following a similar logic, these alternative blueprints also challenged the BdV's geographical emphasis on Berlin. Some

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59 Erika Steinbach's Tag der Heimat speech in Berlin, May 29, 1999, reprinted in: DOD 4.6.1999, S. 5.

60 Spitzenpolitiker einstimmig für Zentrum gegen Vertreibung, in: DOD, 4.6. 1999, S. 1; Vertriebene applaudieren Schily, in: Die Welt, 31.5.1999, S. 2; Heimatvertriebene planen großes Zentrum in Berlin, in: FAS, 4.7.1999, S. 2

61 *Pawel Lutomski*, The Debate about a Center against Expulsions. An Unexpected Crisis in German-Polish Relations?, in: German Studies Review 27 (2004), S. 449–468; *Urban*, Belastungen, S. 33–36; *Adam Krzemiński/Adam Michnik,* Wo Geschichte europäisch wird, in: Die Zeit, 20.6.2002, S. 11.

62 For contrasting perspectives see *Michael Klundt* (Hrsg.), Heldenmythos und Opfertaumel. Der Zweite Weltkrieg und seine Folgen im deutschen Geschichtsdiskurs, Köln 2004; *Klaus Rainer Röhl*, Verbotene Trauer. Ende der deutschen Tabus, München 2002.

63 See, for example: Špidla gegen Zentrum gegen Vertreibung, in: FAZ, 25.10.2003, S. 7; *Lutomski*, insb. S. 452–464; *Urban*, Belastungen, insb. S. 33–36.

advocated alternative venues for a possible centre, including Wroclaw (Breslau) and Zgorzelec (Görlitz), while others favoured less spatially bound solutions, such as travelling exhibitions or transnational networks of scholars and institutions.[64]

Interventions from the highest political levels also helped to undermine the expellee lobby's plans. The German government, led by Chancellor Schröder himself, expressed clear opposition to the Centre as conceived by the BdV, and in the autumn of 2003 Johannes Rau and Aleksander Kwasniewski, in their capacity as Presidents of Germany and Poland, appealed for an alternative, pan-European approach aimed at »jointly re-evaluating and documenting […] all cases of resettlement, flight and expulsion« in twentieth century Europe.[65] In response, the governments of Germany, Austria, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary agreed in April 2004 to set up a European Network of Forced Migration and Expulsion *(Europäisches Netzwerk Zwangsmigrationen und Vertreibung*), which aims to develop links among relevant existing institutions, such as museums, memorials and research organs, with the obvious additional goal of obviating the establishment of a new Center Against Expulsions in Berlin.[66] In early 2005, the situation remains in flux: the European Network pursues its goal of building bridges among relevant scholars and institutions; the BdV stands by its Centre project, and various other groups and individuals propagate their own ideas and visions.[67] While the end results of these efforts remain unclear, one thing is certain: with its foray into the politics of institutionalized memory, the German expellee lobby has once again provoked a storm of controversy, at home and abroad.

The problem with the BdV's initiative for a Centre against Expulsions is not the underlying idea as such. The documentation and commemoration of forced population movements and their tragic consequences, including those that befell Germans, is a worthwhile and important endeavour that could provide a raison d'etre for the German expellee lobby in future years. The difficulty lies rather in the way in which the BdV has defined and promoted its brainchild. The early blueprints for the Centre suffered from a striking discrepancy between the proclaimed intent to represent – and ultimately proscribe – expulsions in general and the concrete planning that heavily prioritized German content. Although the activists have subsequently adjusted their concepts, making more room for comparative perspectives, even the most recent projections of the Centre's layout and exhibits show a marked imbalance in favour of the German expellees.[68] That remains a problem, given the planned Centre's stated mission as a commemorative and educational site about – and against – expulsions in general and its intended semi-official character, which would imply at least some level of approval of its content by the German state. This striving for a governmental imprimatur – combined with the BdV's insistence on Berlin as the location and German suffering as the primary focus of its planned Centre – also presents another problem: the impression of at least implicit competition with another state-sponsored memory site in central Berlin whose focus lies on suffering caused by Germans – the Holocaust Memo-

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64 For good insights into some of these efforts see *Dieter Bingen/Włodzimierz Borodziej/Stefan Troebst* (Hrsg.), Vertreibungen europäisch erinnern? Historische Erfahrungen – Vergangenheitspolitik – Zukunftskonzeptionen, Wiesbaden 2003, insb. S. 277–318; *Jürgen Danyel/Philipp Ther* (Hrsg.), Flucht und Vertreibung in europäischer Perspektive, Berlin 2003.

65 Schröder würdigt die Arbeit der Vertriebenenverbände, ist aber gegen eine Gedenkstätte, in: FAZ, 4.9.2000, S. 5; Deutsch-polnischer Händedruck Auf Schalke, in: Die Welt, 23.9.2003, S. 6; Rau gegen deutsches Vertriebenen-Zentrum, in: SZ, 30.10.2003, S. 1.

66 Schön reden, in: FAZ, 24.4. 2004, S. 36; Netzwerk statt Zentrum gegen Vertreibung, in: taz, 24.4.2004, S. 3.

67 On the European Network and the Centre against Expulsions, see, respectively, URL http://library.fes.de/library/netzquelle/zwangsmigrationen/en.html [22. March 2005] and URL http://www.z-g.v.de [22. March 2005].

68 See the plans for the Centre on the web: URL http://www.z-g-v.de [22. March 2005].

rial currently under construction. The BdV has tried to avoid open comparisons between its own project and the Holocaust Memorial, even to the point of recently suing a journalist who dared to draw such parallels.[69] But the dynamics of the expellee enterprise do suggest an ulterior motive to build an »alternative or counter-narrative to the memory of the Holocaust at a concrete location«, aimed at a relativizing »the question of quilt« and establishing the BdV as »an equally legitimate and representative actor in the politics of memory as the Central Council of Jews« (*Zentralrat der Juden*), to quote one astute observer.[70]

More fundamentally, the passionate objections to the planned Centre against Expulsions can be seen as the predictable result of the expellee lobby's own past practices. In part, the BdV's stated intent to transform itself into an official guardian of the memory of twentieth century expulsions rings hollow against its previous record of selective and tendentious portrayal of recent history. The narratives of the postwar expulsions propagated by the BdV and other German expellee groups have consistently played up German suffering while glossing over the preceding brutalities of the Nazi regime, as various studies have shown.[71] Expellee activists have also frequently tried to relativize Germany's responsibility for the transgressions of the Third Reich with suggestive statements that stop just short of open revisionism. For example, the BdV's official press organ, *Deutscher Ostdienst*, has claimed, even in recent years, that the Second World War was »launched jointly by Hitler and Stalin«; described the consequences of the bombing of Dresden as resembling the »mass burning [of bodies] in a gigantic fire oven«; and insisted that »the crimes of the National Socialists on Polish soil« began only after thousands of Germans had first been murdered by Poles in September 1939.[72] Even more importantly, the expellee organizations' long-standing practice of using terms like Europe, reconciliation, and cooperation as a cover for revisionist goals has backfired on them. If their current rhetoric about the pursuit of noble, transnational goals through the Centre against Expulsions often lacks credibility and instead feeds suspicions about ulterior motives involving property claims and other self-seeking interests, a good part of the reason lies in the long tradition of double-faced expellee discourse.

However, although the bulk of the expellee lobby's high-political activities has been detrimental to East-West reconciliation, during both the post-reunification years and the previous three decades, the organizations have also made a number of positive contributions. Most fundamentally, and in a long-term perspective, they played a key role in facilitating the societal integration of millions of expellees into post-war Germany. The expellee organizations made a difference in a variety of ways: by giving a voice to a large mass of uprooted and discontented people; by lobbying on their behalf and securing various benefits for them; by providing opportunities for social interaction; and even by pushing revisionist demands, which, at least in the early post-war years, arguably helped to defuse social tensions between the newcomers and their more established neighbours by sus-

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69 Dressur-Versuch, in: Frankfurter Rundschau, 18.2.2004, S. 21; Polen solidarisch mit taz, in: Tagesspiegel, 18.2.2004, S. 11.

70 *Heidemarie Uhl*, Hitlers letzte Opfer?, in: SZ, 29.10.2003, S. 14. See also *Constantin Goschler/Philipp Ther*, Nach jüdischem Vorbild, in: SZ, 1.12. 2003, S. 17.

71 For different perspectives, see *Pertti Ahonen*, The Impact of Distorted Memory: Historical Narratives and Expellee Integration in West Germany, in *Rainer Ohliger/Karen Schönwälder/Triadafilos Triadafilopoulos* (Hrsg.), European Encounters. Migrants, Migration and European Societies since 1945, London 2003, S. 238–254; *Samuel Salzborn*, Grenzenlose Heimat. Geschichte, Gegenwart und Zukunft der Vertriebenenverbände, Berlin 2000.

72 1945 bis 1995. 50 Jahre Vertreibung, in: DOD, 6.1.1995, S. 1; Die Bombardierung Dresdens, in: DOD, 10.2.1995, S. 5; 1939: Die deutsche Volksgruppe in Polen, in: DOD, 3/2004, S. 11. For a notable exception see *Herbert Czaja*, Auch über Untaten Deutscher muss man sprechen, in: DOD, 6.8.1993, S. 1–5.

taining hopes of a large-scale expellee return to the old homelands. The ease with which the vast majority of average expellees ultimately accepted the social-liberal new *Ostpolitik* owed a good deal to the integrative role played by the expellee groups in the previous decades, even if the bitter political confrontations between them and the government obscured that point at the time.[73]

Since the dawn of the new *Ostpolitik*, the expellee lobby's interventions in high politics have generally served a destructive role in East-West relations, as the previous pages have tried to show. But at somewhat lower levels, away from the main diplomatic and political limelight, the organizations have made a range of useful and constructive contributions, especially since 1989/1990. One key area of engagement has been their work with the German minorities of Eastern Europe. Well before 1989, as soon as the new *Ostpolitik* had begun to open opportunities for increased interaction with these minorities, expellee activists seized upon the issue. They kept the position of the German minorities on the Federal Republic's political agenda, and although their interventions were sometimes unnecessarily confrontational and in part driven by residual revisionist interests, their persistent promotion of further humanitarian concessions to the minorities did make an impact. Most concretely, the expellee groups played a key role in championing and facilitating the immigration into West Germany of members of these German minorities. The organizations lobbied for increased levels of such immigration and provided various kinds of social, economic, and cultural assistance for these so-called Aussiedler after their arrival in the Federal Republic. These activities have continued, and in some ways even intensified, since reunification. The expellee lobby has particularly distinguished itself by championing the cause of the *Aussiedler*. The organizations have defended the newcomers against popular prejudice; advocated various kinds of public and private integration assistance for them; and established an array of measures and programs to facilitate their adjustment to life in the Federal Republic.[74] In different ways, the expellee groups have thus made constructive contributions to the interaction among Germans, East Europeans, and ethnic German minority groups.

Another important area in which the expellee lobby has played a positive role since reunification is what a key activist once labelled ›people's diplomacy‹ (*Volksdiplomatie*): the building of human links between Germans and their eastern neighbours, across political boundaries.[75] In part, top activists have tried to lead from the front by making semi-official visits to Poland and the Czech Republic as representatives of their organizations. However, these efforts – which have included trips to Poland by BdV President Fritz Wittmann in 1996 and to both Poland and the Czech Republic by his successor Erika Steinbach in subsequent years – have proved a mixed success at best, with plenty of negative publicity and controversy arising out of each visit.[76] Better success has accompanied

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73 For more development of some of these points, see *Pertti Ahonen*, Taming the Expellee Threat in Post-1945 Europe. Lessons from the Two Germanies and Finland, in: Contemporary European History 14 (2005), S. 1–21.

74 See, for example, Keine Propaganda auf dem Rücken der Aus- und Übersiedler, in: DOD February 2, 1990, S. 4; *Fritz Wittmann*, Aufgaben und Ziele des Bundes der Vertriebenen, in: DOD, May 20, 1994, p.2; Spätaussiedler brauchen unsere Solidarität, in: DOD, 2/2003, S. 20; Landsmannschaftliche Integrationsarbeit, in: DOD, 2/2004, S. 28.

75 BdV President Fritz Wittmann, in: Schlußstricherklärung darf nicht zur Grabplatte für berechtigte Anliegen werden, in: DOD, 25.10.1996, S. 2.

76 Dr. Fritz Wittmann von den Deutschen in Schlesien begeistert aufgenommen, in: DOD, 14.6. 1996, S. 1–4; BdV-Präsidentin Erika Steinbach, MdB, spricht vor Studenten in Prag, in: DOD, 26.3.1999, S. 1–5; BdV-Präsidentin Erika Steinbach, MdB, in Warschau – ein notwendiger Besuch, in: DOD, 5.11.1999, S. 1–6; Gefährliche Phänomene, in: FAZ, 18.9.2003, S. 8; Schwerer Stand bei der Herzenssache, in: SZ, 18.9.2003, S. 8.

the less conspicuous efforts at bridge-building arranged by lower-level sub-groups and individuals within the expellee lobby. A whole panoply of initiatives has seen the light of day over the last one and a half decades, ranging from discussion groups and seminars to youth exchanges and children's summer camps, each enterprise involving select groups of Germans, particularly expellees, and East Europeans, especially Poles and Czechs. A good example of an organization engaged in this sort of transnational exchange is the *Deutsch-Europäisches Bildungswerk*, a cultural group established by the BdV's regional branch in the state of Hessen in 1990, whose self-proclaimed goal is to promote German-East European »reconciliation through contacts in seminars.« By the end of 2001 the Bildungswerk had organized no fewer than 77 such seminars, in which East Europeans and German expellees could build personal ties and exchange views about a wide range of political, social, historical, and cultural issues.[77] The activities of this group – and of several others like it – are ongoing, and their contribution to a gradual process of bridge-building between Germans and East Europeans at the grassroots level is indisputable. To be sure, such achievements are hard to quantify, and many of the activities on offer only reach a rather limited and self-selecting target group. But even so, these efforts show that the expellee lobby's long-proclaimed goal of promoting people-to-people relations as a step towards a broader international reconciliation is finally being filled with increasingly tangible content.

IV. Conclusion

The German expellee lobby's role in the development of East – West détente since the 1960s is characterized by a high level of continuity, partly in aspirations and rhetorical practices but even more markedly in functions and effects. Throughout these years, the expellee organizations have sought political influence on the interaction between Germany and its eastern neighbours. They have couched their demands in a rhetoric of international reconciliation, with a particular emphasis on such tropes as justice, rights, and European unity. But their underlying goals and interests have remained revisionist, or at least inward-looking and self-seeking, and the strong discrepancy between the universal rhetoric and the underlying parochial interests has badly dented the credibility of their pronouncements. Their direct influence on German policies towards Eastern Europe has been small, but their actions and interventions have caused repeated disturbances in the broader policy environment, complicating the gradual process of East – West détente, often in unanticipated and even unintended ways. At the level of high politics, their role in German – East European reconciliation since the 1960s has been overwhelmingly negative.

But at lower levels the organizations have also made many positive contributions, primarily since 1989. Through a wide range of small-scale initiatives, they have promoted social and cultural contacts across the former Iron Curtain, building a basis for what could become more extensive bridge-building between Germans and their eastern neighbours. This is also where the future direction of the expellee lobby's activities could lie. If the organizations were to rein in their political ambitions and to invest more in social and cultural activities and in memory-work that focuses on the better utilization of existing institutions and resources rather than on the promotion of tendentious new projects, they could perhaps discover a renewed sense of purpose and play an increasingly constructive role, both within Germany and in the interaction between the Berlin Republic and its eastern neighbours.

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77 Eine Brücke zu den östlichen Nachbarn. Das Deutsch-Europäische Bildungswerk, in: DOD, 1/2003, S. 33.