

Historians' report: the brown roots of the Federation of Expellees

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The Institute of Contemporary History in Munich (IfZ) has published a report entitled 'Activists with a past' on the Nazi past of the first activists of the Federation of Expellees (BdV), which was established in 1957. Historians' findings indicate that only two of the thirteen members of the first presidium of the BdV distanced themselves or consistently opposed the Nazi regime. In response to the report's conclusions, the head of the BdV, Erika Steinbach, announced that "a multimillion army of uprooted people were desperately trying to bring their lives back to normal after the war; however, there were no adequate organisation structures; for this reason the reins were taken over by people who had past organisational experience." Steinbach added that the first BdV leaders had been wholeheartedly engaged in building democracy. The history of this report dates back to 2006, when the weekly *Der Spiegel* revealed that over one-third of the two hundred first BdV activists had belonged to the NSDAP and even SS. At that time, the appeal that the federation should come to terms with its past was renewed. The research was entrusted to the IfZ in Munich and 100,000 euros was allocated for the implementation of this research project from the budget of the German Interior Ministry. Initially, Manfred Kittel, the present director of the foundation Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation, was the project's coordinator. The study was completed by the beginning of 2008, but it was only in February 2010 that the daily *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* revealed fragments of the study findings. The IfZ was accused of being unreliable because the report not only contained documentation which proved that BdV members had a Nazi past but also comments from historians who defended the first BdV activists, claiming that there was no evidence proving that they had belonged to the NSDAP due to a shared ideology rather than for opportunistic reasons. This scandal caused the IfZ to recommence its work, as a result of which the latest version of the report was created.

Commentary

- The publication of this report will successfully prevent disputes around the BdV's past, which have re-emerged every few years. The federation can no longer – as before – avoid or protract the process of bringing to light its history or affect it. It also seems that the main conclusion based on the data presented in the report – namely, that Nazis

played a significant part in the establishment of the BdV – will be difficult to contest.

- The report is devastating for the Federation of Expellees and undermines Erika Steinbach's rhetoric on the BdV's past. In 2007, she maintained that more members of the resistance movement than Nazis had been present among the first leaders of the BdV. In the context of the revealed facts, her thesis that the expellees have allegedly greatly contributed to reconciliation between Germans and their eastern neighbours sounds equally untrustworthy. Members of the BdV have appealed against the use of this study as a weapon against the federation.
- The report is unlikely to affect the perception of the expulsions and displacements in any way in Germany because it concerns only the former leaders of the federation. The BdV has been successfully promoting its vision of history, where expellees were innocent victims on whom an undeserved and incommensurately heavy penalty for Nazi crimes was imposed. This approach to the expulsions is becoming one of the pillars of the conservative view of the world in Germany. In turn, some members of the BdV increasingly frequently express the opinion that the main reason for the expulsions of Germans after World War II, from territories now belonging to Poland and the Czech Republic, were allegedly "racism" and "nationalism".