

## Bundestag recognises the version of history promoted by the expellees

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On 10 February the Bundestag adopted a resolution on “60 years of the Charter of the Expelled from the Fatherland – complete reconciliation”. This is not only a communiqué related to the anniversary of the “constitution” of the expelled, which fell on 5 August 2010. This resolution can be seen as a catalogue of the current priorities of the German policy of history. The adopted document is dominated by the point of view promoted for example by the Federation of Expellees, which claims that the German nation belongs to the group of World War II victims.

### Expulsions as an element of national identity

The resolution was passed with the votes of the ruling coalition (CDU/CSU-FDP), whose MPs submitted the draft document in the Bundestag in December 2010. In the resolution the MPs committed to promoting knowledge of the expellees, supporting scientific research on them and making every effort to keep the memory of “14 million German expellees” alive. In German political discourse the collective term “expellees” (*Vertriebene* in German) refers to the Germans who were evacuated (often forcibly), who fled the approaching Soviet army and to those who were forced to leave already before the Potsdam conference or as a result of the implementation of the decisions made at the conference by the great powers regarding displacements of the German population. According to the resolution's authors, the displaced from the East deserve this memory if only for the fact that they worked to reconstruct post-war Germany, contributed to the economic miracle of West Germany, an innovative approach to thinking about a unified Europe and a positive role in establishing friendly relations between West Germany and its eastern neighbours.

The document's authors state straightforwardly that their objective is to find a way to “enable discussion of the Holocaust and expulsions [as two World War II crimes – comment made by the author of this article] without exposing oneself to the threat of revisionism”. In the opinion of MPs, the suffering and experiences of German expellees should also be a “monument to the victims of all expulsions”. In order to achieve these goals the government should follow a host of recommendations presented in the resolution. They include the establishment of the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Expulsions (5 August), dedicating space for commemorating those that died “while fleeing and being expelled” in the Museum of Expulsions, which is under construction, and supporting scientific research on expulsions.

## **Criticism from the opposition and historians**

The resolution was criticised by opposition parties. A fierce debate before the vote in parliament however focused on the demand made by the coalition partners to make 5 August the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Expulsions (on that day in 1950 the Charter of the Expelled was announced in Stuttgart) and not on the whole meaning of the resolution. The SPD attacked the idea by arguing that the Charter features terms that “cannot be said to encourage reconciliation” (such as the declaration of abandoning revenge). As for the Left Party, it drew attention to the NSDAP and SS members who signed the Charter sixty years ago. It was not only opposition MPs who were critical of the resolution. For Stephan Kramer, the president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany (ZDJ), the idea is a manifestation of revanchism. Equally, 68 historians from Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, the US and Israel (including five historians sitting on the scientific council of the Foundation Escape Expulsion Reconciliation) that submitted a protest to the Bundestag argue that glorifying alleged merits of the expelled for the cause of reconciliation is inappropriate.

## **Changes in proportions in the historic narration**

A possible establishment of the Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Expulsions or commemoration of the victims in the Museum of Expulsions will depend on the government's decision. Angela Merkel may ignore the Bundestag's recommendations due to Germany's relations with its neighbours. Nevertheless, the Day of the Expelled and disputes over its date are secondary issues that divert attention from the real meaning of the resolution. The document includes a clear interpretation of expulsions which the Bundestag has accepted and committed to promoting and - in a way - recognised as a binding version of history. The resolution adopted by the German parliament promotes the version of the events where the expellees are innocent victims that suffered undeserved (and disproportionately greater than the rest of German society) punishment for the crimes of National Socialism. From the text of the document it can be inferred that expulsions of Germans should be put in the same category as other crimes of this type such as expulsions of Armenians or Kosovo's Albanians. However, it was Germans from the East that were to be victims of the largest expulsion in history, which imposes a conclusion, not explicitly expressed, that Germans are among the victims of World War II. At the same time, the question of Germany's blame in provoking the war is treated quite summarily in the resolution: merely one sentence in a four-page document.

## **An attempt at mobilising voters**

The resolution is a victory for the circles that promote the vision of history where Germans are above all victims of the war. It is not only the vision held by the Federation of the Expellees (BdV). This approach to expulsions is one of the pillars of the conservative

mindset in Germany. On the other hand, submitting and adopting the resolution just now had an immediate political significance for the ruling coalition: the CDU and FDP are hoping for victory in the approaching local election in Baden-Württemberg scheduled for 27 March. The resolution is therefore a bow in the direction of CDU and FDP voters in this state where traditionally great weight is attached to issues linked with expulsions.