

The Eastern Territories and National Identity in Postwar Germany

- A short version -

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Forgetting, I would even go so far to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation.

This is a well-known statement from Ernest Renan's "What is a Nation?" But it is not known so well that today's Germany was "reunified" by the "forgetting" of large territories east of the Oder-Neisse line, which are called the "eastern territories" or the "Oder-Neisse territories." As a result of the Second World War, especially of the invasion of the Soviet Union at the very end of the war, Germany lost the territories east of the Oder and the Lausitzer Neisse Rivers. The territories included the areas of Eastern Prussia, Pomerania, and upper- and lower Silesia (see maps on the screen). These areas, which constituted one-fourth of the entire territory of prewar Germany, i.e., Germany before the expansion of the Third Reich beginning in 1938, were placed under the rule of Poland and the Soviet Union. This massive territorial shift brought about the forced migration of fifteen millions Germans from the eastern territories and other parts of Eastern Europe, which has been called the "expulsion (*Vertreibung*)" (see maps on the screen). The estimate of the total number of the expellees is about 15 million. Two millions of them are said to have lost their lives as a result of the "expulsion."

Despite all of these, postwar Germany abandoned the eastern territories: the government of the Federal Republic of Germany finally recognized the Oder-Neisse line in October 1990 by a treaty with Poland. In this sense, the "reunified" Germany of 1990 was actually a 25%-reduced Germany from the prewar point of view (or a more reduced one from the pre-WWI viewpoint). In the words of Herbert Czaja, a leader of expellee organizations, the "reunification" of 1990 was a "downfall to the smallest Germany (*Unterwegs zum kleinsten Deutschland*)". Indeed, the Germany of 1990 was much smaller than the "small Germany (*Kleindeutschland*)," which had been founded by Bismarck in 1871.

We have to see this development in a global historical context. It could be argued

that the twentieth century was the age of nationalism. Many “nations,” including Japan, have advocated “regaining” or “defending” of their own “proper territories” by invoking their historical memories or records. Some nationalists have even gone back to ancient times to legitimate territorial claims of their own nations. But in the case of postwar Germany, the government of the Federal Republic gave up the former eastern territories just 45 years after the end of the war. It was not so easy for many Germans to accept this territorial loss. Some of them, especially some expellees, have vigorously resisted the “politics of renunciation” carried out by the FRG government. But it is really astonishing that Germany eventually abandoned a fourth of the former territory. Why and how was this massive territorial “renunciation” possible? This is the question I would like to consider in this paper.

Several “objective” factors could be pointed out. Among others, two factors seem to be important. First, as the East-West opposition of the Cold War developed in the 1950’s, the boundaries of the existing states in Europe became consolidated. This “reality” of international politics made the revisions of the borders difficult: in the contexts of the Cold War conflict, a vocal claim to the revision of the Oder-Neisse line meant a challenge to the Eastern bloc. The Western bloc, especially the United States, did not want to take such a risk. The conservative government of the FRG, which was strongly oriented to the West, had to avoid claiming bluntly the return of the eastern territories. Second, millions of the expellees from the east, who constituted a fifth of the entire population of the FRG and were most strong advocates of territorial revisionism, were quite smoothly integrated into the society of the Federal Republic before the 1960s. Compelled by force to abandon their home, the expellees had lost virtually all of their personal belongings in the east. As they settled in Western Germany in the late-40s and the early-50s, most of them lived in devastated and impoverished situation. They were called the “fifth estate” or the “new proletariat,” often facing discrimination from the locals in the region where they settled. However, thanks to the “equalization (*Lastenausgleich*)” policies of the government and, more importantly, the miraculous economic recovery of the FRG, the living conditions of the expellees were greatly improved. Today, it is often said that the integration of millions of the expellees was one of the greatest achievements of the FRG. Of course, all of the expellees were not completely satisfied with the postwar development, but, as a result of their integration into their “new homeland” in the west, revisionist or irredentist claims to their “old homelands” in the east, which were repeatedly propagated by the expellee organizations and their leaders, gradually lost appeals among ordinary expellees.

But there is something missing in accounts by such “objective” factors. The latter

indeed facilitated the “forgetting” of their homelands, but did not provide a conceptual basis of *moral or legal validity*, on which Germans could *justify* the loss of their territories for themselves. In the fifties and the sixties the revisionist claims to the eastern territories had substantial legal validity in the FRG, although the reality was that the territories were increasingly difficult to regain. Not only the conservative government but also all major parties in the FRG were unable to dismiss the return of the eastern territories as a national policy aim. Against such a background, an alternative conception of validity would be necessary, in terms of which the German political actors could justify the renunciation of the eastern territories in the public discourse. I argue in this paper that *national identity* offers the repertoire of valid idioms, which was available in the public discourse on the eastern territories.

By national identity I mean an interpretative scheme of national self-understanding, or a framework of seeing how “our nation” is supposed to be or what characterizes “our nation”. National identity shapes and frames judgments of policies and legislation. But it is not a unitary pattern of discourse. National identity is used and invoked by different political actors to justify a policy claim or an opinion in public discourse.

To put it in brief, my argument is that in the Federal Republic there was a shift of dominant pattern of national identity in the late-1960s and the early-1970s from “Reich identity” to a “holocaust identity” and that this “national identity shift” was a crucial cultural or ideological context in which the Oder-Neisse line came to be finally accepted. So my explanation is cultural, though such “objective” factors as I mentioned above are of importance, too.

In the 1950s and the early 1960s, there was a general consensus in the public sphere that “Germany as a whole (*Deutschland als Ganzes*)” or “All-Germany (*Gesamtdeutschland*), which was to be “reestablished,” was a “Germany within the frontiers of December 31, 1937.” It was a national policy aim mentioned in the Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*). Not only the federal government but also most of major political groups somehow laid claims for the regaining of the eastern territories, commonly assuming that the “Germany of 1937” continued to exist in the legal sense after the collapse of the Nazi regime. Moreover, it was generally acknowledged that the massive expulsion of Germans from the east was morally and legally unacceptable and that the expellees had a justifiable right to return to their homelands.

The concept of “Germany of December 31, 1937” originally came from the London Protocol of 1944 and soon became well known among political leaders during the occupation period. I call this self-understanding of Germany a “Reich identity.” Until the late-60s, the government stated over and over again that “the German Reich of 1937

continues to exist.” Major political parties, including the SPD, supported this view.

But in the second half of the 1960s, the political culture of the FRG dramatically changed: the general consensus on the persistence of “Germany of 1937” was weakened and the scheme of a new postwar German national identity provided the repertoire of idioms available for the argument that advocated the acceptance of the Oder-Neisse line. By using a term of the German sociologist Bernhard Giesen, I call this identity a “Holocaust identity”. According to this identity, Germans has, because of Nazi crimes committed in the name of the German nation, a special responsibility to come to term with the “past” by making all possible efforts to contribute to peace and humanity. The left-liberal government of Willy Brandt successfully invoked it to carry out a “new eastern policy (*neue Ostpolitik*)” in the early 1970s. Brandt, his colleagues, and his supporters argued that Germany must accept the loss of the eastern territories because Germany had a “special duty” to contribute to “reconciliation (*Aussöhnung*)” and “peace (*Frieden*).” This pattern of argument was widely accepted in the public sphere in the 1970s. The Eastern Treaties with Poland and the Soviet Union were thus finally ratified in the parliament in May 1972, although the process was very complex. The Federal Republic accepted the Oder-Neisse line as the western border of Poland.

By contrast, the revisionist claims of the expellee organizations and some conservative politicians still opposed to the Eastern Treaties came to be largely marginalized and even stigmatized as “right extremists” or even “Nazis.” For example, the anachronism of the expellee organizations was caricatured by a cartoonist in 1970 (See Fig.)] However, the identity of “Germany of 1937,” or the “Reich identity,” did not simply disappear. Transformed in the contexts of new political reality, the “Reich identity” has continued to work as a frame of argument, which the expellee organizations have used to stake their claims to their “homeland.” Some politicians from the conservative parties, especially the CSU, supported these claims.

Even after the final border settlement in 1990, the “politics of homeland,” or *Heimatpolitik*, of the expellee organizations has continued. But their claims are now *deteritorialized*: the issues of their claims include the “minority rights” of Germans remaining in Poland, the preservation of the German culture in the east, and, among other things, the recognition of the injustice of the German expulsion. The latter topic, the expulsion, is currently an issue of controversy between Germany and Poland. The Polish government strongly opposed the idea of the *Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen*, promoted by the expellee organizations and supported by some other politicians and intellectuals in the Federal Republic. This controversy shows that the legacy of the “Reich identity” does not yet die out.