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# The German Expellee Organizations

## Unity, Division, and Function

Pertti Ahonen

In the early twenty-first century, the German expellee organizations (*Vertriebenenverbände*) are typically portrayed as a united entity, at least in the wider public realm. The dominance of the umbrella group *Bund der Vertriebenen* (BdV) tends to foster the perception that the German expellee lobby is a homogeneous and cohesive bloc, focused on promoting shared political goals. This has been evident, for instance, in the media coverage of the prolonged controversy about the proposed establishment of a Center Against Expulsions in Berlin, in which the BdV's statements have generally been taken to represent the expellee movement as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

But how correct is that interpretation, particularly in a longer historical perspective, stretching back to the rise of the expellee organizations from the late 1940s? What principal organizations emerged among the German expellees? How united or divided have these organizations been? How representative have they been, vis-à-vis their presumed followers? What broader functions have they served, among the expellees and in wider society? These are the questions that this chapter addresses. It starts with a concise overview of the main German expellee organizations and their development and proceeds to wider observations about the unity, divisions, representativeness, and functions of these organizations. It also attempts to highlight some parallels and contrasts between these groups and the *pied-noir* organizations in France.

### **The development of the main expellee organizations**

The roots of the German expellee lobby lie in a setting very different from that of France's *pied-noir* organizations: the immediate aftermath of World War II and the problems posed by the arrival into what became the Federal Republic of roughly eight million so-called expellees (*Vertriebene*), Germans who had been uprooted from their homes in Central and Eastern Europe. Their very presence in devastated post-World War II Germany was a highly divisive issue, not least because of the additional strains on the extremely limited material resources of a postwar society that they imposed. There was widespread fear among the victorious Allies and local German elites that impoverished expellees could form a base for renewed anti-democratic radicalism, from the left or the right. The emergence of autonomous expellee organizations was seen as a particularly threatening prospect. As a result, the American and British occupation authorities at first banned such organizations, stressing assimilation instead. The expellees were to be treated not as a distinct minority but as citizens with equal rights and obligations who now resided permanently in western Germany.

From the outset, this strict policy of non-toleration of separate expellee organizations proved impossible to enforce, however. Particularly on the local and regional levels, organized groups persevered despite the formal ban, and by 1947/1948 the proscriptions were lifted, in good part because rising Cold War tension caused Western priorities to shift. In the increasingly polarized international setting, German expellee organizations acquired new usefulness. They possessed considerable potential as tools of anti-Communist mobilization among population groups hard-hit by forced migrations that could be blamed on the Soviets and their East European vassals. They could also serve as beacons of the presumed superiority of Western

freedoms, given the fact that autonomous expellee representation was soon prohibited in the Soviet occupation zone and the subsequent East German state.<sup>2</sup>

As a result, a complicated network of expellee organizations arose in the Federal Republic by the late 1940s and early 1950s. The various groups can be divided into three categories. The first – and least significant – were organizations formed to represent specific professional or vocational interests. A wide variety of such groups emerged in the early postwar period, as expellees sought to capitalize on old connections in their struggle to find a new footing in western Germany. Although a few of these organizations, such as the Representation of Expelled Industry and Commerce, gained some prominence, most remained obscure. However, some of the occupational and vocational organizations assumed additional weight through their close association with the second main type of West German expellee representation – the Central Association of Expelled Germans (*Zentralverband vertriebener Deutscher*, ZvD), which was founded in April 1949 and renamed the League of Expelled Germans (*Bund der vertriebenen Deutschen*, BvD) in 1954.

The BvD/ZvD, a major force in West German politics during the 1950s, presented itself as a non-partisan interest group whose declared aim was to unite and represent all expellees on the basis of their current places of residence. It consisted of a hierarchy of member associations, which rose in a pyramid-like pattern from the local and regional levels to that of the Federal Republic's constituent states (*Länder*). The organization's key decision-making bodies were located in Bonn, where an Executive Committee brought together the chairmen of the state associations and a smaller Presidium served as the de facto ruling organ. In addition, a largely ceremonial Federal Assembly convened annually. The BvD/ZvD claimed about 1.7

million members in the mid-1950s, although only about one million apparently paid regular membership dues.<sup>3</sup>

The third main force among the German expellees was that of the homeland societies (*Landsmannschaften*).<sup>4</sup> It consisted of individual organizations formed on the basis of their members' pre-1945 origins, twenty of which had emerged by the 1950s. In their organizational structure, the various homeland societies were very similar, each being headed by a Speaker, who presided over a small Federal Executive Committee, which, in turn, was elected by a Federal Assembly. Despite these structural similarities, however, the homeland societies varied greatly in size and political weight. The least influential were the eleven organizations that claimed to represent uprooted ethnic Germans from parts of Eastern Europe that had never been part of Germany. These groups were plagued by particularism and, more fundamentally, by their small size. Even the largest, the 'Homeland Society of Germans from Yugoslavia' (*Landsmannschaft der Deutschen aus Jugoslawien*), could claim only an estimated 35,000 members. None of these organizations became a significant political force.<sup>5</sup>

Much more importance accrued to larger homeland societies that purported to speak for expellees from regions that *had* belonged to the pre-1945 German Reich. Here, too, heterogeneity remained a problem, however, as different groups faced diverging fortunes, largely depending on when and how their areas of origin had been incorporated into Germany. The five homeland societies whose members stemmed from within Germany's 1937 borders were technically in the strongest position because the Western Allies had repeatedly stated that, in a legal sense at least, Germany continued to exist in these pre-Nazi aggression borders, pending a final peace settlement. Of the individual homeland societies within this category, three

became relatively prominent. The ‘Silesian Homeland Society’ (*Landsmannschaft Schlesien*), which had an estimated membership of 300,000 in the 1950s, was the strongest force, but the ‘East Prussian Homeland Society’ (*Landsmannschaft Ostpreussen*) and the ‘Pomeranian Homeland Society’ (*Pommersche Landsmannschaft*), with approximately 140,000 and 60,000 members, respectively, also featured in the political arena.<sup>6</sup>

The second grouping of homeland societies from within the Reich’s former boundaries represented territories that had been taken from Germany after World War I and then re-annexed by the Nazis. None of the three relevant organizations acquired particular political weight, but the largest, the ‘West Prussian Homeland Society’ (*Landsmannschaft Westpreussen*), at least boasted a membership of 50,000. However, it was eclipsed in every respect by the one homeland society whose claims of belonging to Germany as a political entity were traceable purely to the brutal power politics of the Nazi regime: the *Sudetendeutsche Landsmannschaft*. The Sudetenland had never been part of Germany until the annexation enforced through the notorious Munich Accords of 1938; yet the ‘Sudeten German Homeland Society’ managed to turn itself into the best-organised and most influential of all the *Landsmannschaften*, with a membership of some 350,000 and a regional concentration in Bavaria, which significantly boosted its power.<sup>7</sup>

On the federal level, all twenty homeland societies joined forces in an umbrella group intended to coordinate their interests and policies. Baptized the ‘United East German Homeland Societies’ (*Vereinigte Ostdeutsche Landsmannschaften*, VOL) upon its founding in August 1949 and renamed the ‘Association of Homeland Societies’ (*Verband der Landsmannschaften*, VdL) three years later, the central organization had two executive organs: the Speakers’

Assembly (*Sprecherversammlung*), composed of each homeland society's top leader, and a smaller Presidium, which in practice ran the organization. The estimated aggregate membership of the twenty *Landsmannschaften* amounted to 1.3 million in the mid-1950s, but the VdL/VOL – like its rival umbrella organization, the BvD/ZvD – typically claimed to represent all the Federal Republic's eight million expellees.<sup>8</sup>

Given their sweeping representational claims and conflicting organizational principles, it was predictable that the BvD/ZvD and the VdL/VOL frequently locked horns. Although a 1949 agreement stipulated a division of labour, according to which the BvD/ZvD was to focus on social issues and the VdL/VOL on cultural and foreign affairs, rivalries nevertheless raged across most policy fields. This was obviously problematic, and, following protracted negotiations, in 1958 the two groups finally agreed to merge, establishing a united federal-level umbrella organization, the 'League of the Expellees' (*Bund der Vertriebenen*, BdV), an achievement that has persistently eluded the splintered French *pied-noir* community.<sup>9</sup> The new organization, which was run by a Federal Executive and a small Presidium chaired by a President, claimed a total membership of two million, making it the country's 'strongest pressure group after the labor unions,' as Bonn's politicians quickly noted.<sup>10</sup> With this newly found organizational unity, expellee activists acquired enhanced credibility as spokesmen for the more than eight million people whom they claimed to represent.

As the years passed, the BdV increasingly established itself as the pre-eminent representative of the West German expellee movement. To be sure, the most powerful homeland societies, especially the *Landsmannschaft Schlesien* and the *Sudetendeutsche Landsmannschaft*, still maintained an independent profile and organised various campaigns of their own, particularly in reaction to the new

*Ostpolitik* introduced by Willy Brandt's government in the early 1970s, which the main expellee organizations resisted ferociously – albeit unsuccessfully. But in subsequent years the expellee lobby grew increasingly adept at channeling its actions through the BdV, thereby avoiding public displays of internal strife much more successfully than its *pied-noir* counterparts. The result was the impression of unity highlighted in the recent controversies about the Center Against Expulsions.

### **Unity versus division in the expellee organizations**

When the history and evolution of the expellee lobby is viewed in a longer-term perspective stretching back to the late 1940s, however, unity becomes largely a surface phenomenon, a presentational strategy aimed primarily at external observers, much as it has been among the French *pied-noir* groups too. Internally, diversity and division rather than unity and homogeneity tended to characterize the West German expellee organizations throughout this period. The most obvious dividing lines ran between particular organizations, with the two competing umbrella groups of the 1950s providing the classic case of intense inter-group rivalry. But discord was also rife between various other *Vertriebenenverbände*. The 'Silesian Homeland Society', for instance, repeatedly locked horns with the 'Upper Silesian Homeland Society' (*Landsmannschaft Oberschlesien*), largely because both claimed to speak for many former residents of Upper Silesia. The homeland societies that purported to represent ethnic Germans from beyond the Reich's pre-1945 borders often had difficulty finding a shared agenda with the more powerful groups that claimed to speak for former *Reichsdeutsche*. Sudeten German activists repeatedly crossed swords with their counterparts from other organizations. Nor were conflicts confined just to the inter-group level. Multiple dividing lines also ran within organizations, pitting



particular individuals and collectives against others, with homeland societies frequently exhibiting a particular propensity for internecine feuding. However, these conflicts never reached the level of physical assault and even assassination that buffeted France's *pied-noir* organizations during the 1990s.

The internal conflicts within the expellee lobby were fuelled by various issues. Confessional differences caused friction, usually across the Catholic versus Protestant divide, but generally more as a background force than an explicit trigger. Personality clashes played a more prominent contributory role, most notably at high levels in the organizational hierarchies, where ambitious personalities vied with each other over leadership posts. Particularly divisive figures, such as Linus Kather, the egocentric East Prussian who headed the umbrella group BvD/ZvD, kept numerous bitter feuds simmering for years, with the result that he was shunted from top-level roles in the united BdV. However, his exclusion did not prevent the BdV's other leadership cadres from continuing to quarrel throughout the following decades.<sup>11</sup>

More distinctively, the far-reaching heterogeneity of the various expellee groups perpetuated deep-seated divisions that proved difficult to overcome, even on issues that the expellee lobby regarded as vital. To be sure, internal discord remained limited in the first of the two policy areas prioritized by the expellee organizations: social policies aimed at providing assistance for their followers. Although there were disagreements about details, by and large the main expellee organizations managed to unite on a set of demands that remained central to their social policy agenda for decades, including government-funded housing and employment schemes, special credit programs, and legislative measures to compensate the expellees for their heavy material losses.<sup>12</sup>

Divisions prevailed, however, in the policy field that the expellee movement in general and the homeland societies in particular viewed as their top priority and that lacks a direct equivalent among the *pied-noir* groups: the so-called *Heimatpolitik*, i.e. all areas of foreign and cultural policy related to the lost homelands and an anticipated return to them. A revision of the postwar territorial status quo that would have enabled a mass return to the old homelands was the key goal of many homeland societies, especially those that claimed to speak for expellees from areas that had been part of Germany at some point before the end of World War II. But this nevertheless remained a conflictual issue. It was obviously problematic on the wider international level, given the Cold War status quo. It was also divisive within the expellee lobby. Some organizations – particularly homeland societies that claimed to represent *Volksdeutsche*, i.e. expellees from beyond the borders of the German state – made clear early on, behind the scenes, that they had no wish to return to their old homelands.<sup>13</sup> More importantly, demands for territorial revisions also caused strife among the more influential homeland societies. Tactical statements issued by the Western Allies during the early Cold War had suggested that, in the absence of a peace treaty, Germany continued to exist within its 1937 borders, legally at least. This meant that organizations such as the Silesian Homeland Society, whose members came from within these borders, were in a much better position than, say, the Sudeten German Homeland Society, whose members did not.

To paper over these rifts, the expellee organizations began by the mid-1950s to couch their demands in abstract, legalistic terms, such as their claim to a ‘right to the homeland’ (*Heimatrecht*) and to self-determination in that homeland. Ultimately, these legalistic constructs were attempts to maintain revisionist demands, in terms that sounded abstract enough to be potentially acceptable to both the various wings of the

expellee movement and potential political backers at home and even abroad. Under the seemingly high-minded legal phraseology, expellee leaders were promoting the idea that they and their followers would first return to their old homelands and then exercise their right to self-determination, deciding about the national affiliation of the territories in question.<sup>14</sup>

This strategy worked well in the West German political arena, where *Heimatrecht* became a kind of political mantra of the 1950s and 60s, endorsed by all the main political parties, primarily for instrumental, electoral reasons. But the strategy could not eradicate persistent divisions among the expellee organizations. The powerful Sudeten German Homeland Society, for instance, remained skeptical of whether its interest in eventually reclaiming the Sudetenland could really be served within the wider expellee lobby's collective strategy. As a result, Sudeten German activists repeatedly struck out on their own in ways that undermined the expellee lobby's united external front. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, they developed independent foreign policy initiatives, including propaganda publications for international audiences and attempts to establish direct ties to conservative American politicians. In the 1960s, Sudeten German leaders often seemed fixated on defending the continued validity of parts of the notorious Munich Agreement, without which they feared that their claims against Czechoslovakia would lose their legal basis.<sup>15</sup> And in the 1990s they made headlines with their provocative interventions during the negotiations that culminated in the Declaration of Principles between the Federal Republic and the Czech Republic in 1997.<sup>16</sup>

The *Sudetendeutsche Landsmannschaft* can also illustrate a second area of internal divisions within the expellee organizations: the prevalence of ideological differences within their ranks. The main expellee organizations were 'broad churches'

in the sense that their leadership cadres included people with widely varying political backgrounds, often from prominent former Nazis to committed Social Democrats. But in the Sudeten German Homeland Society these differences were also institutionalized early on through the so-called ideological communities (*Gesinnungsgemeinschaften*), three sub-organizations that brought together like-minded activists on the basis of inter-war traditions. The Ackermann-Gemeinde was a Catholic group rooted in the Christian workers' movement; the Seliger-Gemeinde represented social democrats; and the Witiko-Bund drew on right-wing *völkisch* traditions and included several prominent Nazis. Predictably, representatives of these groups frequently clashed in internal deliberations, and although most of the confrontations could be shielded from external observers, occasionally word did leak out to the media, undermining the façade of expellee unity. Even when that did not occur, internal tensions weakened the expellee leaders' ability to co-operate effectively.<sup>17</sup>

Although the particular conflicts inherent in the Sudeten German ideological communities lost significance as the years passed and allegiances to pre-war political traditions faded, ideological and political differences in the expellee lobby persisted. In the context of the Federal Republic's new *Ostpolitik* of the early 1970s, for example, the obstructionist stances of the mainstream expellee lobby were opposed by less prominent splinter groups that endorsed the government's new policies. At the other extreme, the so-called *Preussische Treuhand*, or 'Prussian Claims Society', which between 2006 and 2008 unsuccessfully sought to get European courts to force Poland to pay compensation to Germans who had lost their possessions in present-day Poland during the expulsions, consisted, in part, of prominent BdV members, even as the BdV as an organization sought to distance itself from the Claims Society.<sup>18</sup> Here,

too, surface appearances of unity in the expellee lobby clashed with the underlying realities of competing and conflicting objectives.

### **Unity and division in key terminology**

Ultimately, the division among the German expellees reach much deeper still, as reflected in the very concept of ‘expellee’. As Mathias Beer has demonstrated, the term was a highly politicized Cold War construct that played an important role in the Federal Republic’s public relations war against the German Democratic Republic (GDR).<sup>19</sup> It highlighted the violent arbitrariness of the expulsions and pointed the finger at the USSR and its East European allies as the primary culprits behind them. It also contrasted with the GDR’s refusal to address the issue of millions of its citizens mistreated and forcibly uprooted with the support of its main ally, except in extremely cautious and euphemistic terms.<sup>20</sup>

Even more significantly, the category *Vertriebene* elided differences and fostered an impression of seeming national homogeneity amongst a population group that was in fact highly diverse and divided, broadly paralleling the similar function served by the term *pied-noir* in France. In part, the terminology had this effect with reference to the notion of ‘expulsion’ as such. The word is suggestive of a planned, unitary process, an organized, forced removal of a population group from a particular region on the initiative of hostile, presumably foreign authorities. When applied to the German ‘expellees’, it cultivated the impression of unity within a massive population group whose members had supposedly suffered very similar fates in the hands of external enemies while being forcibly resettled westwards during or after World War II. That impression was not entirely wrong, of course. Millions of Germans were indeed subjected to more or less systematic expulsions organized by foreign

authorities, particularly from former German territories that became part of postwar Poland or Czechoslovakia, but also from Hungary, Yugoslavia, and other areas during the war's final stages and its early aftermath. But large numbers of the so-called 'expellees' had left their homes under very different circumstances. Nearly a million had first come to the Reich as a result of mass resettlements and population exchanges carried out by the Nazis under the auspices of the *Heim ins Reich* program, often with expectations of personal gain.<sup>21</sup> Additional hundreds of thousands had been evacuated by Nazi authorities as the Red Army marched into areas of German settlement in 1944 and 1945, and millions of others had chosen to flee from the advancing Soviet offensive, enduring a forced migration of sorts, but technically not an 'expulsion.'<sup>22</sup> Upon closer inspection, the seeming unity of experiences among the German expellees during the 'expulsion' thus becomes an artificial construct that masked far-ranging differences in their forced migration experiences.

The wartime fortunes of the 'expellees' had also varied widely. By the end of the conflict, millions had been forcibly removed from territories in which their ancestors had lived for generations. This applied with particular force to many of the so-called *Reichsdeutsche* among the expellees, who had been kicked out of areas that in most cases had been populated fully – or at least overwhelmingly – by Germans and had belonged to the Reich, in many cases ever since its creation in 1870. It also held true for large numbers of *Volksdeutsche*, many of whom had belonged to German minority settlements in Eastern Europe that had existed for centuries. But others had entered areas of expulsion only during the war, sometimes as direct beneficiaries of the Third Reich's policies of demographic re-engineering and exploitation. Prime examples included settlers brought into the parts of interwar Poland annexed by the Nazis, to serve as colonizers of sorts in place of the Jews, ethnic Poles, and others

previously expelled from these areas, or Germans who had entered annexed or occupied territories as the Third Reich's functionaries.<sup>23</sup> Such differences and more were submerged under the general rubric of 'expellees', pushing aside important differences among the affected population groups and helping to elide distinctions in the degree to which particular groups and individuals could be regarded not merely as victims of 'expulsions' but possibly also as agents and beneficiaries of National Socialist rule.

The use of the blanket term 'expellee' also clouded realities in the setting of post-1945 West Germany. It created seeming anti-Communist unity among population groups that often had little in common, except for the experience of having had to desert their places of origin because of the war. The people lumped together as 'expellees' came from a wide variety of regions across the European continent, from the Balkans to the Baltic, with a strong *Reichsdeutsche* majority and a significant *Volksdeutsche* minority. The differences between the various groups of expellees were often much greater than any unifying features, given the geographic, cultural and linguistic contrasts between them. An urban professional from Breslau/Wrocław, a highly developed Silesian city that had been an integral part of the German state, would have had very little in common with a peasant farmer who had lived in the remote Banat region of interwar Yugoslavia, for instance.

Much like the French *pieds-noirs*, the expellees in the Federal Republic were thus not only a highly diverse but also in many ways a very internally divided population group, a fact that was reflected both at the grassroots level and in the organizations that purported to represent the expellee 'masses.'

### **The representativeness and legitimacy of the expellee organizations**

Another key question still remains: how representative were the expellee organizations? Could they legitimately claim to possess a mandate to act on behalf of the population groups whose spokesmen they purported to be?

On balance, the representativeness and legitimacy of the main West German expellee organizations has always been dubious. From the beginning, the leading organizations made far-reaching claims in this regard. The main homeland societies presented themselves as the sole legitimate representatives of their respective population groups, and the federal-level umbrella organizations claimed to speak for all the expellees in the land. The organizations also reported high membership figures, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, with the two largest homeland societies, those of the Sudeten Germans and the Silesians, claiming some 350,000 and 300,000 members, respectively, and the umbrella group BdV insisting on a membership of two million, as we have seen. Although the groups have grown more reticent about their membership numbers since the 1970s, they typically continue to react aggressively to any allegations of diminishing support. As recently as 2010, the BdV officially denied press reports according to which its total membership had declined to some 500,000, insisting on a figure of ‘around two million.’<sup>24</sup>

As with the *pied-noir* organizations in France, the membership data have been – and continue to be – highly problematic, however. The official figures have always been shrouded in secrecy, as public pronouncements without further evidence, and it is likely that most have been over-estimates. There is also little doubt that the membership levels of the expellee groups have declined significantly since the 1950s, all official denials notwithstanding. In 1962, internal BdV records indicated that the total membership of the expellee organizations had slipped to 1.25 million at most, and by the mid-1960s the official newspaper of the Landsmannschaft Schlesien



attracted only 25,800 subscriptions from among the more than 1.5 million people that the group claimed to represent.<sup>25</sup> The downward trend has almost certainly continued since then, and the press reports of the BdV's 500,000 members in the new millennium could well be accurate. However, even if one were to give the official data the benefit of the doubt, at least in the Federal Republic's early years, the fact would still remain that the expellee organizations have never managed to attract more than relatively small minorities of their purported followers. The two million members claimed by the BdV at its founding in 1958, for instance, equaled less than a quarter of all the expellees in West Germany at the time. The two largest homeland societies were even less successful in percentual terms with their roughly 300,000 claimed members, given the fact that some 1.55 million Silesians and 1.9 million Sudeten Germans had resettled in the Federal Republic.<sup>26</sup>

There is also reason to be skeptical about the expellee leaders' claims regarding the motivations of the followers who joined the organizations and attended their events. The most notable such events were the annual summer rallies of the various *Landmannschaften*, which often drew crowds of hundreds of thousands, at least in the Federal Republic's early years. Expellee leaders routinely portrayed the high turnouts as living proof of their followers' enthusiastic support for the expellee lobby's political agenda on issues such as *Heimatpolitik*. But the available evidence suggests that the majority of rank-and-file expellees came to the rallies primarily for more personal, largely apolitical reasons: to meet family and friends, to reminisce, to maintain cultural traditions and connections.<sup>27</sup> The degree to which the expellee organizations could claim genuine popular backing for their particular policies has therefore always been questionable.

The lack of wider popular legitimacy and representativeness has been particularly striking in the composition and behavior of the expellee lobby's top leadership cadres. Particularly during the first two postwar decades or so, the main expellee organizations were characterized by a kind of dignitary politics. The groups were directed in a top-heavy fashion by narrow, self-perpetuating elites that existed in a political bubble, with no direct popular legitimization and little in the way of feedback mechanisms from their members. Almost without exception, the leaders had occupied elite positions in the old homelands, typically as high-level civil servants, large-scale landowners, or salient members of the free professions, and many knew each other from the old days. The majority had engaged in right-wing politics during the Weimar era; many had become active NSDAP members in the Third Reich; and considerable numbers had actively participated in the formulation or implementation of Nazi policies. Of the thirteen members of the first BdV Presidium that took office in 1958, for instance, eleven had been active contributors to the Nazi regime, as Michael Schwartz has shown.<sup>28</sup>

While conservative-minded, even reactionary, leaders set the tone in the early expellee movement, left-liberal voices remained sidelined, a trend that has largely continued to the present day. Another notable feature of the top leadership structure of the early expellee movement was the nearly total absence of women. The severe gender imbalance began to change somewhat only recently, most visibly through the elevation of the CDU politician Erika Steinbach to the post of the BdV president, which she held between 1998 and late 2014. In the post-Steinbach era the organization is again led by a man, however, a conservative member of the Bundestag by the name of Bernd Fabritius, and in 2015 its 15-member presidium contains only two women. In recent years, the BdV – as indeed most of the expellee lobby – has

sought to appear more modern, partly by introducing younger faces to key leadership positions, most of which had continued to be occupied by increasingly octogenarian figures of the founding generation well into the 1990s. In mid-2015, six of the BdV's current Presidium members, for instance, were born in the 1960s or the early 1970s.<sup>29</sup> However, such changes have been more cosmetic than substantive. The expellee lobby's exclusive, non-consultative leadership practices have continued, and the gulf between the leaders and the rank-and-file has remained wide.

### **The expellee lobby's wider societal role and functions**

What can be said about the wider societal role of the German expellee lobby? How closely have the organizations been able to meet their goals, and what functions have they served, among the expellees and in broader society? The overall objectives of the main expellee groups, as laid out in internal deliberations from early on, were ambitious. The most fundamental goal was the development and maintenance of a separate expellee identity, with particular long-term objectives. In the short term, the expellees were to establish a secure basis of existence in West Germany, through self-help and governmental assistance. But the material improvements were to be the means to a much more far-reaching end: an eventual return to the old *Heimat*. The expellees were supposed to retain a close affiliation with the lost homelands and be prepared to reclaim them when a suitable opportunity presented itself, by exercising their self-proclaimed *Heimatrecht*. In other words, societal integration in West Germany was supposed to be only an interim stage that enabled the expellees to re-establish themselves in the present in order to prepare for their ultimate goal: an eventual return to the territories from which they had been forcibly uprooted.

These ambitious long-term objectives proved to be a pipe dream. The expellee lobby's efforts to cultivate a lasting, separate identity among its presumed followers failed dramatically. By the mid-1960s at the latest it had become obvious that visions of the old *Heimat* were fading fast in most expellees' minds. Opinion polls showed that a steadily growing majority of the expellees in West Germany had no desire to return to their former homelands.<sup>30</sup> Instead of obsessing about their presumed separate identities and continuing ties to the 'lost German East,' most expellees were increasingly integrated into the Federal Republic and preferred to focus on their lives in the realities of the present. To be sure, the integration process was far from complete. Expellees still typically lagged behind longer-standing residents of western Germany in their living standards, but the gap was closing, particularly for the younger generations, whose members had experienced the old *Heimat* only as small children, or not at all. In the stability of postwar West Germany, everyday routines were taking over, and the process of adjustment to the new circumstances kept advancing a bit further each year.<sup>31</sup> Strong proof of this state of affairs emerged in the early 1970s, when the expellee organizations' attempts to mobilize the expellee 'millions' against the Brandt government's new *Ostpolitik* failed decisively, with the vast majority refusing to heed the call to protest and resist. The long-term result was the relative political marginalization of the expellee groups, broadly similar to that of the *pied-noir* organizations in France, a situation from which they have never really recovered.

The causes of the expellee lobby's failure to meet their ambitious objectives were manifold – and mostly external to the expellee groups themselves. The Federal Republic's singular economic and social trajectory, as embodied in the so-called Economic Miracle and its far-reaching integrative and legitimizing effects, was

undoubtedly the most important factor. A variety of other external forces also made significant contributions: policies pursued by the Allied occupiers and native West German elites; social, generational and attitudinal changes in West German society; the efforts and adjustments of individual expellees; even the simple passage of time. But, paradoxically, the expellee organizations themselves played a major role in undermining their own wider project. In two different contexts, their actions helped to defang the separatist, revisionist potential of their own presumed followers, thereby significantly facilitating the long-term societal integration of rank-and-file expellees. In the final analysis, the West German expellee lobby therefore made its most far-reaching societal contribution by unwittingly subverting its own underlying objectives, giving rise to unanticipated consequences.

The first of these contexts was the early postwar period, a time when the emerging West German state still lacked sovereignty and concerns about a mass radicalization of the expellees were widespread. As millions of impoverished, demoralized and homesick expellees eked out a precarious existence, typically facing prejudice and discrimination from the native population, the expellee lobby's rhetoric provided psychological succor for the uprooted newcomers. The prospect of an eventual return to the old homelands, fostered by the expellee lobby's revisionist proclamations, provided a source of hope and motivation for large numbers of expellees. A Silesian woman gave apt expression to the inspiration which this vision of a better future could provide: 'One day we'll return to our land,' she assured an interviewer. 'We all firmly believe that. Until then we don't let ourselves get downhearted.'<sup>32</sup> As the hope of a mass expellee exodus also appealed to many native West Germans, who would have been happy to see the backs of unloved strangers amidst overcrowded conditions of scarcity, the rhetoric of the expellee activists helped to

defuse social tensions and thereby served the broader interests of postwar reconstruction in western Germany. In the longer term that rhetoric also undermined the revisionist long-term objectives that it was supposed to promote. By building the lost *Heimat* into an idealised, mythical entity and the return to it into a near-millennarian solution that would fix all imaginable ills, expellee functionaries helped to create a dualistic mindset among their followers. The increasingly distant paradise of the lost homeland contrasted sharply with the realities of daily life in the Federal Republic, and as the years passed, a compartmentalized outlook grew ever more evident among the expellees. While many, at least among the old and middle generations, continued to pay limited, highly ritualised homage to the beloved old *Heimat* at expellee rallies and other in-group events, in their everyday lives a growing majority increasingly accommodated themselves to their surroundings, accepting West Germany as their de facto new *Heimat*.<sup>33</sup> The unrealistic rhetoric of the expellee elites contributed significantly to that outcome.

The second context in which the oratory and actions of the expellee functionaries backfired with similar consequences was the late 1960s. By this time, West German public debates and attitudes about the Nazi past, World War II, and its consequences, including the expulsions and the accompanying border changes, had changed significantly. There was a growing willingness among mainstream political and opinion-making elites, as well as among the population at large, including a rising majority of the expellees, to accept the postwar realities and to view the recent past through an increasingly self-critical lens. However, the main expellee organizations still refused to budge from their hardline stances. In the face of rising public challenges to their established doctrines, they instead added radical-sounding accents to their political repertoire, typically attacking journalists, politicians and other critics

with derogatory epithets reminiscent of the destructively polarized political debates of the Weimar era. The ominous-sounding term *Verzichtpolitiker* (abandonment politician) gained particular notoriety as a pejorative employed by expellee activists against politicians deemed hostile to their cause.<sup>34</sup>

Through their inability to adjust to the social, political and attitudinal changes of the 1960s, the expellee organizations again made a positive contribution to expellee integration and broader social stability in West Germany, albeit in a paradoxical fashion: by alienating the majority of the people whom they purported to represent. After having proclaimed for years that a governmental recognition of the territorial status quo in Eastern Europe would provoke massive expellee protests and risk large-scale political radicalization, expellee leaders were now forced to recognize that the bulk of their supposed followers refused to conform to such stereotypes. Far from rushing to the barricades to demand continued hardline policies, growing numbers of expellees explicitly rejected the popular legitimacy of their self-proclaimed representatives, publicly accusing them of ‘fanaticism’ and ‘dangerous illusions.’<sup>35</sup> Many others backed away from the organized expellee movement with less fanfare. This trend was evident within the organizations from the mid-1960s. By that time, ranking Silesian leaders admitted in private that ‘the mass of the Silesians [did] not belong or no longer belong[ed] to the Homeland Society’ and that the level of interest among youth was ‘minimal.’<sup>36</sup> Internal Sudeten German records told a similar story, and the general picture within the expellee lobby was one of steady shrinkage, funneled around a hard core of ageing and increasingly embittered devotees.<sup>37</sup> The broader impact of these developments became clear as Willy Brandt’s Social-Liberal coalition began to implement its new *Ostpolitik* in the early 1970s. Although expellee activists continued to protest vociferously, most of the public supported the

government's Eastern policy, and political radicalism remained confined to small fringe groups, even among the expellees. Early postwar fears about the dangerous, destabilizing potential of the expellees had proved unfounded, thanks to a combination of fortuitous factors, one of which had been the unintended long-term societal consequences of the *Vertriebenenverbände* and their political activities. Despite all their internal divisions, hidden agendas, and problems of legitimacy and representativeness, the expellee organizations' most far-reaching and lasting societal function had been to undermine the potential dangers inherent in the millions of German expellees, albeit unwittingly and even unwillingly.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, *Spiegel Online*, including "Einigung mit Vertriebenenverband: Sieg der Unvernunft," February 11, 2010, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/einigung-mit-vertriebenenverband-sieg-der-unvernunft-a-677350.html>, accessed April 30, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Sylvia Schraut, "Die westlichen Besatzungsmächte und die deutschen Flüchtlinge," in Dierk Hoffmann and Michael Schwartz, eds., *Geglückte Integration? Spezifika und Vergleichbarkeit der Vertriebenen-Eingliederung in der SBZ/DDR* (Munich, 1999), 33-46.

<sup>3</sup> Pertti Ahonen, *After the Expulsion: West Germany and Eastern Europe, 1945-1990* (Oxford, 2003), 28-29; Matthias Stickler, „Ostdeutsch heißt Gesamtdeutsch“: *Organisation, Selbstverständnis und heimatpolitische Zielsetzungen der deutschen Vertriebenenverbände 1949-1972* (Düsseldorf, 2004), 33-69.

<sup>4</sup> Ahonen, *Expulsion*, 29-37; Stickler, „Ostdeutsch“, 33-69.

<sup>5</sup> See Hans W. Schoenberg, *Germans from the East: A Study of Their Migration, Resettlement and Subsequent Group History since 1945* (The Hague, 1970), 37.

<sup>6</sup> The estimates are from Schoenberg, *Germans*, 94-5, 316.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 316-7.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

<sup>9</sup> Stickler, „Ostdeutsch“, 69-97.



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- <sup>10</sup> Minutes of the SPD's Arbeitsausschuss für Vertriebene, Flüchtlinge und Kriegsgeschädigte, December 5, 1957, Archiv der sozialen Demokratie der Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (AdsD), Bonn: BT-Fraktion, 4. WP, 327.
- <sup>11</sup> Linus Kather, *Die Entmachtung der Vertriebenen*, 2 vols. (Munich, 1964-1965).
- <sup>12</sup> Reinhold Schillinger, *Der Entscheidungsprozess beim Lastenausgleich, 1945-1952* (St. Katharinen, 1985).
- <sup>13</sup> Rat der Südostdeutschen, "Bericht über die Tagung der Delegierten am 23./24. Juli 1955," Sudetendeutsches Archiv (SDA), Munich: NL Lodgman, XI-93.
- <sup>14</sup> "Die außenpolitische Linie der Sudetendeutschen Landsmannschaft," *VdL-Informationen*, May 10, 1954: 3.
- <sup>15</sup> Ahonen, *Expulsion*, 48-51, 172-5, 194-200.
- <sup>16</sup> Pertti Ahonen, "German Expellee Organizations: Between Revisionism and Reconciliation," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 45 (2005): 353-72, here 364.
- <sup>17</sup> Richard Eberle, "The Sudetendeutsche in West German Politics, 1945-1973," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Utah, 1986, 111-21.
- <sup>18</sup> Ahonen, "Organizations", 366-8.
- <sup>19</sup> Mathias Beer, "Flüchtlinge – Ausgewiesene – Neubürger – Heimatvertriebene: Flüchtlingspolitik und Flüchtlingsintegration in Deutschland nach 1945, begriffsgeschichtlich betrachtet," in Mathias Beer, Martin Kintzinger, and Marita Krauss, eds., *Migration und Integration. Aufnahme und Eingliederung im historischen Wandel* (Stuttgart, 1997), 145-67.
- <sup>20</sup> Michael Schwartz, *Vertriebene und „Umsiedlerpolitik“: Integrationskonflikte in den deutschen Nachkriegs-Gesellschaften und die Assimilationsstrategien in der SBZ/DDR 1945 bis 1961* (Munich, 2004).
- <sup>21</sup> Isabel Heinemann, "„Volksdeutsche“ Umsiedler in Deutschland und in von Deutschland besetzten Gebieten im zweiten Weltkrieg," in Klaus J. Bade et al., eds., *Enzyklopädie Migration in Europa. Vom 17. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (Paderborn, 2007), 1081-87, here 1082-3.
- <sup>22</sup> See Bernadetta Nitschke, *Vertreibung und Aussiedlung der deutschen Bevölkerung aus Polen 1945 bis 1949* (Munich, 2003).

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- <sup>23</sup> R.M. Douglas, *Orderly and Humane: The Expulsion of the Germans after the Second World War* (New Haven, 2012), 39-64.
- <sup>24</sup> BdV, "Der BdV hat zwei Millionen Mitglieder," news release, January 7, 2010, accessed August 7, 2014, <http://www.bund-der-vertriebenen.de/presse/index.php3?id=971>.
- <sup>25</sup> BdV, "Vermerk, Betr: Mitgliederzahlen der Landsmannschaften," July 18, 1962, Bundesarchiv, Koblenz (BAK): B 234/361; Kempe in the Schlesische Landesversammlung, October 9, 1965, BAK: B 234/596.
- <sup>26</sup> Gerhard Reichling, *Die deutschen Vertriebenen in Zahlen*, 2 vols. (Bonn, 1989), 2:30.
- <sup>27</sup> Stickler, „Ostdeutsch“, 155-72; "Fanfaren vor dem Torso der Nazi-Kongresshalle," *Frankfurter Rundschau*, May 19, 1964.
- <sup>28</sup> Michael Schwartz, *Funktionäre mit Vergangenheit: Das Gründungspräsidium des Bundes der Vertriebenen und das „Dritte Reich“* (Munich, 2012).
- <sup>29</sup> The BdV's official website, accessed August 4, 2015, <http://www.bund-der-vertriebenen.de/strukturen-organisation-aufgaben/der-praesident.html>.
- <sup>30</sup> Elisabeth Noelle and Erich Peter Neumann, eds., *The Germans: Public Opinion Polls, 1947-1966* (Allensbach, 1967), 483; Silke Jansen, *Meinungsbilder zur deutschen Frage* (Frankfurt, 1990), 152.
- <sup>31</sup> Ahonen, *Expulsion*, 224-5.
- <sup>32</sup> Rainer Schulze, "Growing Discontent: Relations between Native and Refugee Populations in a Rural District in West Germany after the Second World War," in Robert G. Moeller, ed., *West Germany under Construction: Politics, Society and Culture in the Adenauer Era* (Ann Arbor, 1997), 65.
- <sup>33</sup> For interesting observations, see "Wer möchte zurückkehren," *Badische Zeitung*, June 20, 1953.
- <sup>34</sup> "Gefängnis für Verzichtspolitiker?" *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, July 3, 1962.
- <sup>35</sup> "Sprechen nicht für uns," *Die Zeit*, May 29, 1964.
- <sup>36</sup> Walter Rinke to Willi Rasner, November 23, 1964, Archiv für Christlich-Demokratische Politik, Sankt Augustin (ACDP): I-294-076/2 (NL Gradl).
- <sup>37</sup> Membership data of the Sudetendeutsche Landsmannschaft, December 31, 1965, SDA: NL Becher, 227.