Germany: The dispute over Erika Steinbach

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Since taking office, the new German government has been involved in a conflict over the filling of one particular post. The roots of the controversy can be traced back to decades-old political and historical issues. It concerns the membership of the supervisory board of the government foundation, "Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation," or, more precisely, the appointment of Erika Steinbach, president of the Association of Displaced Persons (*Bund der Vertriebenen*—BdV), onto the board of this otherwise insignificant body.

Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle (FDP—Free Democratic Party), like his predecessor Frank-Walter Steinmeier (SPD—Social Democratic Party), has rejected Steinbach's appointment to the foundation's board. He fears a serious conflict with Poland, where Steinbach is seen as the embodiment of "revanchist" German claims. ("Revanchism," from the French word for revenge, describes the drive by a particular country or social forces within a country to reverse territorial losses, often following defeat or conquest in a war.)

On the other hand, the right wing of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and, above all, its Bavarian sister party, the Christian Social Union (CSU), are insisting on Steinbach's appointment. They advocate a more aggressive foreign policy, without regard to the sensitivities of neighbouring countries. Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) has so far not taken a clear position.

The fate of approximately 12 million ethnic Germans who were forced to leave Poland, Czechoslovakia and other Eastern European countries, as well as the Soviet Union, at the end of World War II has been misused for political ends for decades. The transfer of the German population from these countries to Germany had been agreed between the Western allies and Stalin, and was carried out with extreme brutality. Millions lost their homes and often all their possessions. Large numbers of people were killed, mistreated or raped.

In this way, Stalin confirmed how far removed the Soviet regime was from the elementary principles of socialism, foremost among which is the international unity of the working class. Ethnic Germans were deported regardless of whether they were workers, capitalists or Junkers (wealthy landowners); whether they had been supporters or opponents of Hitler. The resentment this generated was then exploited for decades by anti-communist forces for their own ends.

Although the displaced were integrated relatively quickly into the economy and society of West Germany in the 1950s and early 1960s (about one quarter remaining in East Germany), influential political circles sought to preserve them as a special interest group. With the aid of various "displaced persons' associations," these circles kept alive the demand for the return of Germany's eastern territories lost in the war and sabotaged all efforts for the recognition of the existing borders.

In the expellees' associations, formed in the late 1940s and heavily subsidised by the government ever since, Social Democrats and Catholic conservatives could be found alongside old Nazis and revanchists by the end of the 1960s. The SPD and the trade unions sought to foster close collaboration with the associations and took advantage of their anti-communism in the fight against leftist movements in their own ranks.

In 1963, for example, greetings from SPD leaders Willy Brandt, Herbert Wehner, and Erich Ollenhauer sent to a meeting in Germany of those expelled from Silesia—a region of central Europe that historically encompassed parts of Poland, Czechoslovakia and Germany—took on clearly revanchist tones. "Abandonment is a betrayal, who would deny that," the greetings say about the "lost" territories.

In 1969, when Brandt's "Ostpolitik" (an effort to improve relations with the Stalinist regimes, including East Germany) meant a change in course by the SPD—and, for all intents and purposes, the official recognition of Germany's existing eastern borders—the expellees' associations reacted with bitter opposition. Since then, they have stood on the right wing of the CDU-CSU.

From 1970 to 1994, the BdV was headed by Herbert Czaja, about whom the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* said the "term revisionism is far too innocuous," when describing his political positions. Shortly before his death in 1997, Czaja summarised his views in a book, in which he called for the restoration of Germany's 1937 borders, and added that this was "by no means the end point."

Erika Steinbach comes from this political tradition. The CDU *Bundestag* (parliament) deputy was born in 1943 in Rumia (called Rahmel in German), which had been part of Poland prior to the German invasion of 1939. Her father came from Hanau in the German state of Hesse, and, as a soldier in Hitler's *Wehrmacht* (army), took part in the invasion of Poland. Her mother moved there from Bremen in Germany. The fact that the daughter of a family that only came to Poland in the wake of the Nazi invasion is now a spokeswoman for the expellees meets with special outrage in Poland.

Steinbach's family background was first made public only some years ago by Polish journalists. She herself had never discussed it, and sought later to justify it with the cynical phrase, "one doesn't have to be a whale to speak up for whales." In Poland, where virtually every family has relatives that were killed, imprisoned or

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forced into hard labour by the *Wehrmacht*, it is regarded as relevant whether someone belonged to the indigenous German minority or to the German occupying army.

In 1974, Steinbach joined the CDU in Hesse, which under Alfred Dregger pursued an extremely right-wing agenda. From 1977 to 1990, she represented the CDU in Frankfurt's city government and has sat in the *Bundestag* since 1990. She consistently campaigns against abortion and same-sex marriage, and was associated with the right-wing grouping "Voice of the Majority," formed at the end of 1996, which agitates "against the epidemic abuse of welfare and asylum."

In 1991, Steinbach voted in parliament against the "Treaty of Good Neighbourship and Friendly Cooperation," which confirmed the Oder-Neisse line (established after World War II) as the definitive German-Polish border. In 1997, she also rejected the Czech-German Declaration, in which both sides said they would "not burden their relations with past political and legal issues." To this day, she justifies her earlier voting record with reference to "open questions, such as the compensation issue," thus deliberately leaving open the question whether she will continue seeking the return of expropriated property. That is the major reason for the massive opposition she encounters in Poland and the Czech Republic.

With her appointment as president of the BdV in 1998, Steinbach gained greater prominence. At that time, openly revanchist positions, such as those expressed by Czaja, were regarded as outmoded. The state borders of Poland and the Czech Republic had also been recognised by Germany under international law. Both countries joined NATO in 1999 and, in 2004, the European Union (EU).

Steinbach tried to block this, too. She spoke out against the EU accession of Poland and the Czech Republic, as long as the demands of the German expellees were not met. In 2002, she said: "There is no need for fighter aircraft. A simple veto against unrepentant candidate-states is sufficient."

Even now, BdV staff work closely with the "Prussian Trust," seeking the return to their former German owners of properties that were expropriated after 1945 in Poland. An (unsuccessful) appeal was also submitted to the European Court of Human Rights. Although Steinbach has distanced herself from this case, she has not done so in court actions brought by individual plaintiffs.

Steinbach systematically uses the fate of the expellees to push the government to adopt a more aggressive line against Germany's eastern neighbours. Although she does not deny the crimes of Nazi Germany, she relativises them by placing the suffering of the expelled Germans on a par with that of the Nazi regime's victims.

In a 2008 speech, she accused Tito's partisans, who fought in Yugoslavia against the German occupiers, of having "committed genocide" against Germans.

For years, Steinbach has sought the erection of a memorial to the German expellees, much like those honouring victims of the Holocaust and other war crimes. In the end, the government gave way. To placate Polish and various other reservations, a "Centre Against Expulsions" was agreed, dedicated to all displaced persons of the twentieth century. The initiative for this can be traced back to the period when the SPD-Green Party government of Gerhard Schröder, sent German troops to Yugoslavia under the guise of combating "expulsions" and ethnic cleansing.

So, finally, the "Flight, Expulsion, Reconciliation" foundation was created, with an exhibition and a documentation centre to be built in Berlin. Officially, the purpose of the foundation is to "keep alive the memory of flight and expulsion in the 20th century in a spirit of reconciliation." According to the words of Culture Minister Bernd Neumann, thus "the fate of millions of displaced persons in Europe and especially the displacement of 14 million Germans are to be commemorated appropriately and with dignity."

The foundation's supervisory board includes, in addition to the BdV, the churches, the Jewish community, parliament and the government. The individual organisations nominate their own representatives, but they are subject to approval by the government. It is the nomination of Steinbach for membership of this body around which the current dispute now revolves. The BdV and the right-wing forces that stand behind it are using Steinbach specifically to put the government under pressure.

BdV officials want Steinbach to take one of the three seats in the 13-member board to which their organisation is entitled, but has so far not officially nominated her. In March, Steinbach described the vacancy of "her" seat as a "wonderful sword of Damocles" and left open whether she would be nominated "in three weeks, three months, three years." This question can always be harnessed for nationalist campaigns, as the need arises.

Thus, during his first visit to Poland, Westerwelle, the new foreign minister, attempted to dampen fears of Germany's claims and strengthen the country's pro-EU prime minister, Donald Tusk, against the Polish nationalist opposition, when he declared: "We want it [the "Centre Against Expulsions"] to be a project that will bring our countries together, a contribution to reconciliation. We will refrain from anything that precludes this notion."

On the other hand, quite different noises can be heard from the BdV. Steinbach's nomination campaign is meant to send a signal that other countries' political concerns should not be taken into account in the formulation of policy. "It is the responsibility of the new foreign minister to set a new course here, rather than buying the trust of neighbouring countries through the sacrifices of his own citizens or organisations," the BdV president told *Bild Zeitung*.

Other conservative newspapers and politicians from the CDU-CSU similarly declared that Westerwelle should be representing Germany's interests and not Poland's. For example, the domestic policy spokesman for the CDU-CSU parliamentary faction, Hans-Peter Uhl (CSU), declared, "Westerwelle must seriously ask himself whether he is foreign minister of Germany or Poland." This controversy has ominous political overtones.

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