

# Right-wing German expellee gathering in the Czech Republic: A political provocation

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27 May 2026

For the first time, the *Sudetendeutscher Tag* (“Sudeten German Day”) gathering took place in Brno, in the Czech Republic, rather than Germany. Following the Second World War ethnic Germans, many of whom had supported the Nazis, were expelled from the former Czechoslovakia.

Held in Brno, the country’s second-largest city, and not in Germany as has been customary, this meeting of right-wing revanchists, staged allegedly as a “sign of reconciliation,” was a political provocation that is in turn being exploited in the Czech Republic primarily by the far right.

Formally, the meeting took place within the framework of the “Meeting Brno” cultural festival. This has been organised for years by the association of the same name to commemorate the expulsion of the German-speaking population after the Second World War. This year, as in the previous year, Czech President Petr Pavel assumed patronage over the event.

The opening event on Friday was marked by heavy security precautions. It was accompanied by protests called by Tomio Okamura’s far-right Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD) party. Protests against the meeting had taken place earlier in Brno and the Czech capital, Prague.

Following a motion submitted by the SPD, the Czech parliament condemned the event and demanded its cancellation. SPD leader Okamura is Speaker of the Parliament, and his party belongs to the governing coalition alongside Andrej Babiš’s ANO [Action of Dissatisfied Citizens] and the far-right Motorists party. Their foreign minister, Petr Macinka, threatened: “Brno will burn!” The opposition left the chamber en masse during the vote.

The Communist Party (KSCM), which is not represented in parliament, also joined the protests against the gathering. Some 13,000 people signed an open letter online condemning the event as an attempt to relativise responsibility for Nazi crimes. Ex-President Miloš Zeman warned against “revising the results of the Second World War” and against a new wave of property claims and restitution demands.

In parliament, government leader Babiš agreed to the resolution against the event but backpedalled immediately before it began, declaring he had “not really” read the text of the motion properly, and that the event was “not a good idea.” He said he had agreed with his governing partners to resolve the issue within the coalition. “Germany is our important partner, but that’s just how it went,” Babiš said. Apparently, he was anxious to avoid conflicts with Berlin.

The German government did not publish an official statement. A statement from the Foreign Ministry was also very brief and general. But the fact that incumbent Interior Minister Alexander Dobrindt

(Christian Social Union, CSU) and Bavarian Minister President and CSU leader Markus Söder participated in Brno as guest speakers makes clear that the German government stands behind the provocation.

Bavaria has held the patronage over the Sudeten German ethnic group since 1954, and the CSU parliamentary group in the Bavarian state parliament provided €300,000 [US\$349,000] to support the event in Brno—out of “deepest conviction,” as state parliamentary group leader Klaus Holetschek asserted. In his speech, Söder spoke of a “great festival of peace.” Dobrindt called the initiators “true bridge-builders” and described the event as a “bulwark against any new nationalism.” This is turning the truth on its head.

## The role of the expellee associations

For decades, right-wing forces have exploited the fate of German expellees from Czechoslovakia, Poland and other Eastern European countries for revanchist purposes, seeking to reclaim lost lands and property.

At the end of the Second World War, more than 2.5 million ethnic Germans were expelled from the former Czechoslovakia. Corresponding plans had been drawn up by the Czechoslovak government-in-exile in London under its president Edvard Beneš, a veteran bourgeois politician, the so-called Beneš decrees. They were then also implemented under Beneš, who was president of Czechoslovakia from 1945 to 1948.

The expulsions were justified by the role of the Sudeten Germans in the Nazi terror in Czechoslovakia, to which at least 350,000 people, the majority of them Jews, fell victim. Hitler had used the Sudeten Germans as a lever to secure control of the Sudetenland in the Munich Agreement and then to violently conquer Czechoslovakia.

In the last pre-war elections in 1935, about two-thirds of Sudeten Germans had voted for the Sudeten German Party (SdP), which was closely linked to the Nazi Party and supported the Nazis’ brutal occupation regime, including the 1943 massacre in the mining village of Lidice. This saw 192 men executed, 196 women sent to concentration camps, and children deported to extermination centres. The Nazis then razed the village to the ground.

Although the expellees were rapidly integrated economically and socially in Germany after the end of the war, influential political circles sought to preserve them as an interest group. In the state-funded expellee associations that emerged in the late 1940s, Social

Democrats and Catholic conservatives were active alongside old Nazis and revanchists until the late 1960s.

The Federation of Expellees (BdV), an umbrella organisation of various expellee associations, came directly out of this tradition. The association was led until 1994 by Herbert Czaja, who demanded the restoration of Germany's 1937 Reich borders. Subsequently, the notoriously right-wing Erika Steinbach continued the association in this spirit.

By the end of the 1990s, openly revanchist positions were no longer judicious, as Poland and the Czech Republic became integrated into NATO and the European Union (EU). However, Steinbach continued to use the fate of the expellees to push the German government for a more aggressive stance toward its Eastern neighbours, equating the suffering of the expellees with that of the Nazi victims. As late as 2008, she accused Tito's partisans, who had fought against the German occupiers in Yugoslavia, of having committed a "genocide" against Germans.

Steinbach's insistence on a memorial site for German expellees was finally answered by the federal government. Agreement was reached on a "Centre Against Expulsions," dedicated to all expellees of the 20th century. As Steinbach drifted even further to the right, she eventually had to hand over the BdV chairmanship to her previous deputy, Bernd Fabritius. In 2017, she resigned from the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) due to its "failed refugee policy." In 2022, she joined the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD).

Under Fabritius, the BdV presented a more liberal image without abandoning its revanchist positions. Officially, territorial claims on neighbouring Eastern countries were abandoned, but the "right to homeland" remains a component of its programme.

The Sudeten German Homeland Association (SL) only removed the demand for the "recovery of the homeland" from its statutes in 2015, a move that was legally challenged by many members and led to fierce internal conflict within the SL. The demand for the repeal of the Beneš decrees continues to exist. The SL had even attempted, unsuccessfully, to make this a condition for the Czech Republic's accession to the EU.

Exemplary of the personnel of the expellee associations is the highest representative of the Sudeten Germans, Bernd Posselt (CSU). From 1978 to 1994, he was a close associate and press spokesman for Otto von Habsburg, eldest son of the last Austrian Emperor Karl I.

With the Paneuropa-Union, Habsburg campaigned for a Europe based on Christian-Western culture and vehement anti-communism. He was a member of right-wing clerical networks, such as the Cercle Pinay, an informal network of anti-communist conservatives with intelligence links. Later, he caused a stir with antisemitic remarks about the influence of Jews on American politics. In the spirit of Habsburg, Posselt founded the Paneuropa-Jugend Deutschland (Pan-European German Youth) in 1975.

## German militarism and Eastward expansion

More than 80 years after the Second World War and expulsion, the Sudeten German Day has essentially lost all significance. In 1955, an estimated 100,000 took part in its event in Nuremberg. Last year in Regensburg, it was a few thousand. In Brno, only around 1,300 remained.

That this gathering in the Czech Republic launched a provocation, risking conflicts with an EU state, must be seen in connection with the militarisation and renewed drive of German imperialism to the East.

The Federation of Expellees and the Sudeten German Homeland Association speak for those sections of the government that most ruthlessly advocate for the interests of German imperialism in Eastern Europe. It is no coincidence that the Sudeten German Homeland Association awarded Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky their Charles Prize in 2022 (not to be confused with the Aachen Charlemagne Prize). Zelensky had not fled following the Russian attack on Ukraine but was fighting to lead his country into a European future, Posselt said at the time.

Both Fabritius and Stephan Mayer (CSU), who replaced him last year at the head of the expellee association, stand for a hardline policy against Russia and demand more military commitment. Mayer recently declared that he was firmly convinced that Russian President Putin only understood "tough language."

Last year, Mayer demanded the cancellation of welfare payments for Ukrainian refugees of military age. This was intended to force young people fleeing the war to return, where they would face their deaths as cannon fodder in the war against Russia.

Eighty-five years after the start of Hitler's war of annihilation against the Soviet Union, Germany is de facto at war with Russia again. It supports Ukraine massively with weapons and war goods and is developing long-range weapon systems together with Kiev, with which Russia is being attacked deep in its hinterland. This is part of the new military strategy of the German government, making Eastern Europe the staging area for a military confrontation with Russia.

In this context, Berlin is not only striving for leadership of the EU but also is demanding the other member states subordinate themselves to its war course. In Hungary, it supported the election campaign of right-wing conservative Peter Magyar because his predecessor Viktor Orbán repeatedly stood in the way regarding the Ukraine war.

Czech government head Babiš supports the EU's Ukraine policy but conflicts over the extent of Ukraine aid persist within his three-party coalition. The majority of the Czech population has long rejected the war against Russia.



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