

National History in its International Context: the Concept of the German Historical Museum in Berlin

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16 August 2011



In the mid-1980s West German society was gripped by intense discussions concerning the founding of a national history museum. The debate was set in motion by cultural policy actors, historians and museum scholars after several temporary exhibitions of regional history had met with an unexpected public interest in various parts of the country. Evidently the German society was once more ready to engage with history, unlike in the previous decades.

What was the state of the country at this time? Germany was divided. The West German society in the 1970s and 1980s had been shaped above all by the political issues of the Cold War, such as national and international East-West problems, the military rearmament debate, ecological questions, and changes in everyday life resulting from Europeanization and increased immigration of labor, above all from the Mediterranean region.

East Berlin had a Museum for German History, which however offered a one-sided Marxist perspective. In West Germany there was no national history museum.

The West German constitution, moreover, grants jurisdiction over cultural issues to the individual states of the federation, so it was not at all self-evident that a national history museum could be founded at all. In a compromise between the federal government and the states after a long series of negotiations, the German Historical Museum was ceremoniously founded on the 750th birthday of the city of Berlin, on October 28, 1987, in West Berlin – without a building or any collections, but with the political will to set it up rapidly.

At that time, in the discussions about the idea of a history museum for the Germans, carried out in public hearings, in academic circles, and in the national media, some had expressed a worry as to whether the real reason for the planned museum in Berlin was to relativize history. There were accusations that the museum's historical view would relativize the significance of the time of National Socialism and the Holocaust. However, ultimately people were convinced that the remembrance of history should find a permanent place within a national institution.

The intensity of the public debates in Germany suggested that the discussion was a singularly German one.

Today we know that around the same time in other highly developed post-industrial societies, similar historical and cultural museums were being founded at the national level following similar discussions and with structurally similar conceptions: the National Museum of Japanese History, the Museum of Civilization in Canada, the Te Papa-Museum in New Zealand and the National Museum of Australia. And this was not the end of it: in the meantime there have been state resolutions to establish new national history museums in the Netherlands, Poland and South Korea. Discussions are ongoing in France and Austria.

Sociologists have been analyzing this wave of foundings of new museums – as have museological researchers – and have classified it since the mid-90s under the theory of the “second modernity”.

According to this theory the currently ongoing transformation of societies represents a separation from the structures and values that had shaped the modernity of the industrial societies, the first modernity.

Today, and in contrast to the modernity of early industrialization – according to this analysis -- the search for sustainable strategies for development of society, present and future, is determined by growth limits, ecological problems on a global scale, the globalization of the economic and labor markets, the increased significance of recreational and leisure activities outside of gainful employment, the receding significance of the nation-state, the dissolution of old bonds (marriage, household), and the loss of tradition along with greater individualization (economic independence, consumer power).

When visitors to museums can experience what has happened in their past, where they come from, and how other cultures have developed, this should contribute to increased self-assurance in a time of rapid change and thus contribute to the formation of identity. This is an important goal of cultural and educational policy and was certainly one of the reasons for the wave of new history museums starting in the 1980s.

However, since national museums had also been founded in the past, most of them in the 19th century, we might ask: why have the new museums founded in the past 25 years had such great success with the public?

Unlike the older national museums, the new facilities no longer conceptualize history and culture as a “golden past” that visitors, as members of that nation, are supposed to be proud of. At the time this style of presentation made sense, since the aim was to offer people a solid footing through historical and educational policy in a time of massive social upheaval.

Unlike these exhibitions in the 19th century museums, the new museums present a multi-perspectival view of culture and history, often accompanied by international comparisons and more of a focus on political history, while still using the means most particular to museums, the original historical artifacts. However, the presentation doesn't follow traditional criteria of collections; instead objects are juxtaposed so as to make historical connections and situations accessible for the visitor. The consideration of non-material cultural expressions alongside material historical artifacts is also becoming increasingly significant.

The conception for the German Historical Museum emerged from these same premises in the years 1985-1987. It was made a central point of the new approach in Berlin to present German history in its international contexts, to show how other countries and other societies have influenced German history and vice versa, how Germany helped to shape the history of its neighbors for good or bad.

The museum's permanent exhibition was to be designed such that it draws the course of German history through the European and sometimes extra-European history.

For the temporary exhibitions it was important to approach historical topics in such a way that the visions of history held by diverse historical actors become clear, that the visitors are given differentiated information about the past, learn diverse opinions about history and ultimately reflect on history at a higher level of abstraction.

It was also expected that this ambitious level of historical education should lead to more sustainable and longer-term basic attitudes, to more self-assurance in dealing with the past and thus to the stabilization of personal identity – even though the presentation of diverse perspectives can also in a sense have a destabilizing effect, since it can lead the visitors to cognitive conflicts in registering and processing the material that the museum offers. Yet it is precisely this engagement by the visitors with diversity and multiplicity that is expected to help people more sustainably shape their present and future. This multi-perspectival approach also answers the critique of facilitating political identity through cultural work – largely with state financing – which critics often compare to manipulation.

In Berlin the 1987 resolutions could not be implemented as quickly as was hoped when the museum was founded. An international architectural contest had already premiered a design by the Italian Aldo Rossi in 1988 with a planned 21,000 square meters of exhibition space in a new building. The preparatory layout work had begun on the building site across from the Reichstag and the first large exhibition on “Bismarck, Prussia, Germany and Europe” was in preparation when the Wall fell in November of 1989 and the question of the museum had to be reconsidered.

In the time from the fall of the Wall on November 9, 1989 to the German reunification on October 3, 1990 it was resolved, politically, that the reunited country needed this new national museum more than ever. But its location across from parliament

in the western part of the city had to be given up, since the building site would be needed for the new chancellor's office following the relocation of the government from Bonn to Berlin.

The final and democratically elected government of East Germany dissolved the East German national history museum in Berlin prior to reunification. Shortly thereafter the government of the united Germany decided that the German Historical Museum was to be headquartered in the 300-year-old baroque armory building in the center of Berlin.

The dissolved East German history museum was only past in a legal sense, since a large part of the museum personnel found positions in the new German Historical Museum, so the preconditions were good for working together in the future to present different visions of history in accord with the museum's conception. It was quite fortunate for the exhibition to be prepared on German-German issues that museum colleagues from the East and the West were able to work together.

The reunification was also beneficial as far as it concerns the museum's collections: the armory building housed the collections of the earlier Prussian army museum as well as collections of the East German history museum on the political and social history and the history of political parties. These were supplemented by the significant acquisitions that the museum had been making for several years, such that today – many collections and objects have been added in the past twenty years – our inventory includes over 800,000 objects. More than half of them have already been digitalized.

In the 1990s the German Historical Museum showed a series of temporary exhibitions that fit the museum's original conception perfectly. Offering German-German issues was just as important as international collaborations reflecting the Germans' relations to their neighbors. Naturally there were also exhibitions on the more charged issues of 20th century German history – this was even a point of focus – whether the colonial era, the First World War, National Socialism and the Holocaust, the Second World War or the Cold War-era division of Germany.

The new concept of multi-perspectivity found great resonance with the public and the media, and the museum succeeded in quickly becoming one of the most-visited museums in Berlin. Today the museum is still at second place, after the Pergamon Museum, with around 800,000 visitors annually.

However, the permanent exhibition could not be realized right away, since first the armory building had to be technically modernized and a new building had to be constructed to house the future temporary exhibitions, which began in 1999.

The chancellor at the time, Helmut Kohl, succeeded in bringing one of the great builders of our time, I.M. Pei, to Berlin in order to construct a modern building for temporary exhibitions next to the armory building. Pei described it as an honor for him to be able to build next to the famous architectural works of the 19th century, above all by Schinkel. The result was a characteristic Pei building as we know them from Paris or Washington: the same light and friendly stone, the large glass windows that take in the surroundings, and an imposing entrance hall as well as the necessary temporary exhibition space, which in his Berlin building comprises around 2,500 square meters across four stories. The museum's temporary exhibitions have been shown here since 2004. The architecture is now considered an expression of the new modern Berlin at the beginning of the 21st century.

The main building of the museum, the baroque armory building, only looks like it's 300 years old from the outside. In fact it was considerably bombed in the Second World War and in the 1950s the East German government restored its internal design in the contemporary style of the time. The East German building is now classified as a protected

monument, so it took quite a bit of effort during the renovations to continually have to fight for the museum's interests as opposed to the preservation of the monument. However, ultimately compromises were made such that the structure of the building remains visible and the museum is able to present the permanent exhibition, which was ceremoniously opened by chancellor Angela Merkel in 2006.

This permanent exhibition, with over 8,000 objects across 8,000 square meters, presents German history from its earliest beginnings to today. It is clearly divided into sections on two stories of the armory building. A chronological circuit allows the viewer to get a quick overview, while side paths branching off from the main circuit offer more in-depth presentations. The original objects dominate here as well. In addition visitors can access a wealth of more detailed information with the help of so-called media stations, so that, for example, they can follow the development of the medieval city in all its spatial, social and architectural particularities, or study the biographies of parliamentary delegates, victims of persecution, soldiers, etc.

The objects in the individual sections are arranged, without regard for the material value of the objects, such that the visitors can quickly take in the social or political structures, commonalities and contradictions in history. The objects are made to talk, so to speak, as we like to say in museum jargon.

The multiplicity of perspectives quickly becomes apparent to the visitor when it comes to the following themes:

Upper class and lower class

Rich and poor

Country life and city life

Violence and resistance

East and West

Revolution and counter-revolution

War and peace

...and many more.

Those who expect to find a German national history in the permanent exhibition will be surprised to find Louis XIV or Napoleon, the German-language Pennsylvania edition of the American Declaration of Independence from July of 1776, a Turkish tent from the siege of Vienna, a painting of Kilimanjaro, once known during the colonial period as Germany's highest mountain, or a presentation of the Spanish civil war in the 20th century. German history in its international context is brought close enough to touch.

To take just one typical example: at first one would hardly expect to find any connection to German history in the chapter "the discovery of the world in 1492". Yet the connection is there upon closer inspection.

The permanent exhibition features the "Behaim globe" and the "Cape Cross pillar". The history of both pieces connect German and international history.

Behaim was a German cartographer serving in the Portuguese court. His 1492 globe showed the earth without the Americas for the last time, a historical break. However, the museum piece is in fact a reproduction from the second half of the 19th century, which for that reason has its own history as well.

The Cape Cross pillar is a Portuguese royal emblem. One might stop and ask oneself how such an object, erected by Portuguese merchants at African trade stations for the king, has anything to do with German history. The pillar in the museum's permanent exhibition was found at Cape Cross north of the Namibian city Swakopmund at a time when Namibia was the German colony "German Southwest Africa". It was brought to Germany at this time and joined the collection of the imperial marines in Kiel. In 1906 it was loaned to the museum of marine science newly founded in Berlin. From there it landed in the East German historical museum after the Second World War and now belongs to the collections of the German Historical Museum. Thus the object has a very international history that exemplifies how interwoven European and even world history is. Incidentally, there were some efforts on the part of Portugal and Namibia for the return of the pillar, but the German museums were also able to provide reasons why the pillar properly belongs in their collections.

Some remarks on the concept of the temporary exhibitions: for all mid-sized or larger exhibition plans the museum conducts an academic symposium around a year before the planned opening in order to come up to date on the current state of national and international research. Many of the lectures end up in the exhibition catalog. These conferences with high-ranking scholars offer the curators conclusive certainty in preparing the exhibitions.

The planning also involves work on a visual concept of the exhibition from the very beginning. The exhibition architects are involved in the process very early on and thus put in a position to first develop a thematic model of the exhibition and then translate the idea into exhibition architecture. Sometimes it is museum employees who do this work, but sometimes renowned exhibition architects are commissioned to accompany the preparations and then develop an architecture that reinforces the theme of the exhibition.

The German Historical Museum seeks to hold as many cooperative exhibitions as possible in order to ensure together with their partners that they uphold the founding conception of the museum: to present diverse views of history. This includes both bilateral and multilateral cooperations.

Bi-lateral cooperation have produced exhibitions on German-British ruling families, on German-Chinese colonial history, German-French perspectives on the Other in both societies, and Polish-German history during the Second World War, for example, and the list could go on. In a sense the many exhibitions from the 1990s on German-German themes can also be included here.

Multilateral projects included, for example, the exhibitions on the German-Scandinavian cultural exchange in the 19th and early 20th century, on art and propaganda during the clash of the nations from 1930-1945, or the European comparison of the icons that shape our image of the nation and propagate national myths. Another example is the year 1945: 28 countries were invited to present their view of the year 1945 in an exhibition. The great diversity of historical perceptions of the end of the war, the overcoming of the Holocaust, the liberation of the country, and new democracies or new dictatorships offered the visitor a broad palette of different experiences and thus led to new insights about European differences in the view of history.

The question of the target audience of museums is often raised. Fundamentally the exhibitions are intended for all potential visitors.

The main groups of visitors include school groups especially, since many topics are relevant to the curriculum. Museum educators offer preparatory seminars for teachers, both for the permanent exhibition and for many of the temporary exhibitions. In addition supplementary educational material related to the exhibitions is available for a greater depth of classroom instruction. Besides the classic museum tours for all visitors, age-

specific tours are also available, along with workshops, some of which are interculturally structured when dealing with topics such as migration and integration.

Tourists represent another group of visitors and a consistently growing one. Berlin changed enormously following reunification. This can be seen outwardly in the many new buildings and the restoration of the historic structures. Many young creative people moved to Berlin as well, which gives the city a positive image, which in turn draws more tourists to Berlin. The museums profit from this considerably. The number of museum visits in Berlin has risen from 5 million in 1990 to over 13 million. Since the German Historical Museum is located on the main boulevard for tourists, the street “Unter den Linden”, many visitors to the city come into the museum.

Exhibitions that offer multiperspectival presentation of history and culture quickly take on a character of authenticity among international tourists, since with this form of presentation people come to see it as part of the own history in its international context, no matter where they come from.

It took around 25 years to turn a cultural policy ideal into a new type of national museum represented by the German Historical Museum. From the perspective of the museum, it was worthwhile, since it was work on a very fertile soil. What else can we ask for?

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