

entKOMMEN

**The tri-point border region between
expulsion, flight and arrival**

Concept

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Städtische Museen Zittau // Municipal Museums of Zittau

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Introduction and leitmotif

Flight, expulsion and asylum have become the focus of emotional debates, and not for the first time. Societies are presented with a challenge. Everyone seems to have their own opinion – indeed, one can hardly presume not to have an opinion on this matter. The various political discourses circle around this complex of themes – oscillating uncomfortably between nationalism and universalism, between “My Country first!” and general human rights.

Caught in the middle: “the refugee”. It seems that refugees and expellees are being turned from persecuted subjects to anonymous objects in the public arena (and not only since the 21st century began). They have become the focus of discussions, prejudices, expectations, fears and also a guilty conscience, pointing in quite different directions. Yet the experiences of the refugees themselves are rarely in the foreground.

On the other side: the settled population. From the “worried citizen” to the “do-gooder”, categories that are also new only in name. Newcomers have never been viewed only positively or negatively, whatever their nationality, religion or spatial distance from their country of origin might be. But at all events there has always been an overwhelming sense of being faced with exceptional circumstances.

The project entKOMMEN (Flight and ARRIVAL) aims to address these aspects in a historical context. The questioning of fixed images should be promoted and space opened up for contemplation, reflection and discussion. Individual voices should be heard and the faces behind the destinies made visible. Sober facts to counteract premature generalizations. People who would normally be unlikely to meet will be invited to communicate with each other.

Thematic Framework

Over and again, the themes of flight and expulsion have played a decisive role in Zittau, a city in the tri-point area at the boundaries of Germany/Poland/Czech Republic, from the early modern period to the present day.

The first large group of refugees arrived in 1621 as a result of the Counter-Reformation in Bohemia. Several thousand Protestants were expelled from Bohemia in the wake of re-catholicisation and were forced to settle in Protestant regions in Upper Lusatia and Saxony. This wave of migration continued over several decades and reached a peak during and directly following the Thirty Years' War, with refugees entering areas that were already scarred by losses and deprivation. The decision to admit these so-called exiles was not infrequently motivated by economic considerations. Not a few of them, and their descendants, became well-known names on account of their lasting contribution to the development of Zittau and the surrounding region.

Zittauer Zipfel:

An area of about 145 square kilometres in extent to the east of the Neisse river shaped like an acute triangle, encompassing 22 villages in the city of Zittau administrative area prior to 1945/ The history of this geographically constricted area has been little researched to date and is thus accorded special attention in this project.

The second period on which the project entKOMMEN will focus is the end of the Second World War in 1945. The shifting borders at the end of the war did not only result in the expulsion of millions of people from Silesia, East Prussia and other former German areas in Eastern and Southern Europe. The displacement westwards of the Polish border to the Lusatian Neisse river led to the expulsion of nearly all the German inhabitants of the "Zittauer Zipfel" and – together with treks of refugees from the East – caused the population of Zittau to more than treble. Numerous textual and oral sources testify to this dramatic situation. It was not only the expellees, who had been made homeless, that suffered as a consequence, but also the war-torn settled population. Among the newcomers to depopulated regions there were groups of

expellees who were allocated houses and farms in West Poland that had recently been vacated.

The third group of refugees of relevance to the project reached the region of Zittau in recent times. 2015 can be regarded as the year when most of the applications for asylum in Germany were made. Only a few recognized refugees currently live in and around the city of Zittau as well as people whose applications for asylum are still being processed, from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Russia, India, Kosovo and African countries among others. In purely numerical terms we are dealing with a relatively small group at present; furthermore the host society is neither marked by war or suffering from hunger, in stark contrast to the other historical periods under consideration. And yet the themes of flight and expulsion are now more prominent in the public eye than they have been for a long time – and this is an important reason for the project entKOMMEN.

There are of course several other groups of refugees and expellees who have had a major influence on the history of the region e.g. Silesians, Hungarian Germans.

The project coordinators are aware of these “gaps” in the project and will respond at an appropriate point. The exhibition focuses mainly on the three “flight events” specified here.

Taking these formative events in the region around Zittau as a starting point, questions will also be posed that address the theme of flight and expulsion generally, without a specific time focus. The allocation of many individual stories and experiences into the three temporal categories defined here for practical reasons should not imply that these three groups were homogenous. Neither the exiles of the 17th century, nor the displaced persons of 1945 and today’s refugees were or are themselves all the same in terms of social background, economic situation or personal approach. The deconstruction of labels and inappropriate designations is a particular concern of the organizers of the exhibition for this reason.

What these people had and have in common was and is their involuntary departure from their home country on account of real or perceived danger. For all the groups of relevance to this project forced migration applies, resulting from government directives, violence, or the threat of or fear of violence.

Standpoint

Given this approach, the exhibition organizers find it important to make the following three points: these concern the use of historical sources, thoughts on the incompleteness of the picture and the need for transparency.

“History teaches us that...!”

Undoubtedly history is instructive – but sentences that begin this way usually end in simplification, to say the least. This aspiration not only courts the danger of making a false statement, but even worse of not stating something really important, leading to hurt feelings and, in the worst case, to exploitation of people’s historical memory. A “comparison of the fates” of refugees and expellees in different periods should not culminate in renewed “competition between victims”, should not relativize experiences, and especially not their suffering.

At the same time the comparative approach adopted in this project offers the opportunity to avoid a one-sided perspective limited to that of the victims, by going beyond the level of the individual experiences of the sufferers and including the reactions of the affected societies in the comparison. Making a connection between historical experiences and contemporary problems can often arouse emotions – after all, for many Germans the theme of flight and expulsion is part of their own family history. If anything can be learned from history then it is the depths to which humans can sink, the complexity and the unpredictability of situations. What people have done in the past can be inspiring or moving. The juxtaposition of different events and experiences can sharpen our analysis and help us to appraise and order current events.

Therefore, in order to avoid simplistic analogies being concluded about the periods in comparison with each other on the one hand, and fragments of experience being dealt with out of context on the other hand, the focus of the exhibition and also the events in the public space is on crosscutting themes bridging the periods, as will be discussed further below.

For the exhibition and the parts of the project planned for the public space, the aim is to incorporate and communicate the perceptions, reactions and thoughts of the visitors and participants. Our presentation of history and the present is not absolute. What is shown can be augmented and is open to commentary – dialogue is an explicit aim of this project. The aim is to address a broad public, so that contemporary approaches can be brought together with classical formats. “Spaces for thought” will be created for encounters, reflections and moments of individual insight. Ultimately, the general heated debate about flight and expulsion should not be further aggravated. Where applicable opinions can be adjusted and respectful discussions conducted.

Who is behind this project?

The project team is concerned to clarify the biographical backgrounds that inform their work and will make this apparent in the exhibition. We were born in Upper Lusatia at around the time of reunification, are German citizens and thus without experience as refugees. After leaving school and before taking up employment we have lived and travelled for many years in Germany and worldwide. We know about stories of flight and being driven out in the first instance from our own families’ histories and those of our friends. We are well aware of the privileges that our backgrounds, our socialization and our education have made possible.

Language. Power. Reality.

Language is power and the person who can dominate the public and political discourse with their interpretation of things can have a decisive influence on the dynamics of a society.

When considering flight and expulsion and especially the refugees and expellees themselves, and this in different historical contexts and with varying conditions applying in the recipient communities, then we face a number of discourses and discursive threads from a theoretical point of view: How did the social strata in Upper Lusatia view the exiles? To what extent was the reason for their intake communicated, if at all? How did the refugees fleeing religious persecution see themselves? How did the governmental administration talk about the expellees from former East German territories? How did the expellees achieve a public voice after a while? How are refugees exploited in inner political debates? Who talks about refugees today and in what manner and for what reason? And: how do these discourses shift in the course of time?

The project cannot possibly answer all these questions in detail.

Rather than trying to give a seamless picture of “how to talk about” flight and refugees at a particular point in time what is important is to reflect on how language can influence how we see things and how people involved in such a process can be turned from protagonists into objects. The use of particular terms (refugee, emigrant, expellee, re-settler...) carried and often still carries markedly political connotations – in many cases people and their personal experiences are turned by such labels into abstract figures in contrast to the settled citizens. Faceless and de-individualized, they obviously become more vulnerable to be used for projections of prejudices, assumptions and expectations...

Deconstruction of labels:

It is not only the attributions such as “re-settler” or “refugee” which should be critically appraised in the project. Other labels applied within the host society, such as the current “do-gooder” or “worried citizen”, can be the objects of analysis.

The project organizers are aware that there is always a danger that the labels will be reconstructed during the course of being criticised. Making such labelling processes visible and their effects on the persons concerned and on society is nonetheless an important goal.

A side effect: the own is defined as “normal” leading to a strong distinction in identity between “us” and “them”.

Political exploitation extends beyond mere labelling. The withholding of information (from the new arrivals as well as the settled population) or deliberate fake news, the denigration as scapegoats or the euphemistic reinterpretation of forcefully expelled persons (into “re-settlers”) are examples.

Discourses can shift with time or change and they can be cross-referential. For example in recent years it has been claimed that the people expelled at the end of the Second World War came from the same “cultural sphere”, and that this is what distinguishes them from the refugees of today. Supposedly the “cultural strangeness” of refugees arriving now automatically leads to fear of “foreign infiltration” – this being the decisive difference between the two epochs. As a matter of fact such fears can be shown to have existed in the early years of the Federal Republic. A comparative approach and critical analysis of the respective narratives is called for, given the emotional reactions of the host societies.

The flight of the others

Who is “affected” by flight?

At this point this question is deliberately not directed at the “victims”. It is precisely when looking back at German memories of flight and expulsion that a not uncontroversial comparison between the expellees and the settled with regard to their wartime suffering is often made. Such “competition between victims”, and the envy associated with it, is to be avoided.

However, flight and expulsion always involve interaction with other people. In transit or on arrival in the “new home” at the latest, refugees meet and have met people, families and communities, that had established themselves over the years at that place over their lifetime, or at least for longer than the newcomers. There are often substantial differences between the settled inhabitants and the newcomers, as was also the case in the past, ranging from personal relationships, collective traditions and norms to the legal system, the organisation of public life, and language.

The experiences made in this connection – by both sides – differ according to context. The 17th century exiles were received into areas where the resident population were themselves suffering the effects of the Thirty Years’ War. In 1945 the Germans expellees arrived in regions with which they were somewhat familiar and where the same language was spoken, but their arrival exacerbated the shortages that the resident communities living to the west of the river Neisse had to endure after the Second World War came to an end. Hunger and overcrowding in flats and houses affected both “sides” of this migration history. The refugees now arriving in Germany no longer encounter a society suffering from economic shortages; the current situation makes abundantly clear how confrontation with foreigners seeking asylum can bring

The people who resettled in the “Zittauer Zipfel” after 1945 came from different regions and brought varied experiences with them:

- 1. Those driven out of the former Polish area east of the Curzon Line.*
- 2. People returning from Siberia, who had been deported on Stalin’s orders from the Polish Eastern regions from 1939.*
- 3. Immigrants from the densely populated areas of central Poland.*
- 4. Polish-speaking repatriates from other European countries.*
- 5. Greeks who had fled from the Civil War in their own country.*

mistrust, fear and prejudice to the fore. It is only possible to offer a comprehensive picture of the theme if both refugees and the native population are taken into account.

It is a different matter when on arrival the newcomers find only vacated houses.

Following the shift of the Polish border westwards to the Lusatian Neisse river at the end of the Second World War not only were thousands of Germans driven from their home villages, but also the Polish administration settled other people in the depopulated areas in this region directly afterwards. People who had been deported to Siberia for example, found themselves standing – bringing their own history of expulsion with them – in front of farms and empty villages that had been hurriedly abandoned. The patchy or complete lack of information provided by the local authorities only served to make the overall situation even more insecure.

In this case flight and arrival are interwoven in a special manner. Here too the question of who is affected by an exodus and in what way needs to be illuminated from different perspectives.

Cross_Border_Home

The word “Heimat” (home) has been on everyone’s lips for quite a time. The term evokes a subjective feeling of security, notably often attached to a particular place. Home as a phenomenon, and memories are interlinked – a landscape, a street, a house, a person, particular surroundings. Even a dialect can constitute a “home”. Home starts where people understand each other and ends when they do not, with a feeling of not being understood. This exclusion and inclusion demonstrates the ambivalence of the concept of home.

“What does home mean to you?” – this question often leads to portrayals of “nicer, intimate moments”. The concept often evokes feelings in us of a homely, romantic nature. But why is the concept of “home” back in fashion just now? Since 2018 at the latest, the home country has become a political concept, with a Ministry of Home Affairs being established, not only in Bavaria and North Rhine-Westphalia but at a national level as well. What goal is this intended to fulfil?

Is the general debate just a reaction to the loss of control felt by people in “turbo modernity”, longing for the “personal”, familiar and manageable at complex times marked by globalization and digitalization? Or have we started to talk about the longing for “home” since 2015 when more refugees arrived in our “home”, and now aspire to make it their own?

Undoubtedly home has a lot to do with identity: the definition of “our own” can only be demarcated through a boundary to “the others”. Newcomers were and are often used as projection screens, in order to strengthen a collective identity while enhancing a feeling of “them and us”. Refugees and expellees also find solace in thinking about their “old home”. Rituals they have brought with them, traditional structures and religious everyday practices

Border-crosser

With regard to the 20th century the border is a theme of particular relevance. People who were driven from their homes in 1945 to the east of the Neisse often fled only a few kilometres to the west bank of the same river. In the months following their expulsion, “border-crossers” often smuggled goods across the newly-drawn border in covert operations. Years later the expelled were still confronted with their old farms and villages in front of their very own eyes – only a stone’s throw away, yet irretrievably lost.

The whole political and ideological impact of the concept of "Heimat"/home was (and in part still is) manifested in the concept of the "homeless journeymen". The accusation of no longer having a home is linked here to the accusation of lacking loyalty to a group. This formula is uncomfortably familiar in connection with Jewish European history above all. But expellees from earlier epochs were also faced with such criticisms. Nowadays the reproach can be found in the calls to "Go back to Syria! Your home country needs you!" This exploitation of the emotionally-loaded word "Heimat"/home makes evident that its relevance reaches far beyond personal feelings and orientations.

can offer supportive orientation in an unfamiliar environment. On the other hand there may be a demonstrative adoption of the habitus, symbols and customs of the "new home".

Can you "make" yourself at home? How does the adoption of a new home function? Why does it work or fail?

The search for self-definition and self-determination are normal processes. But where definition slips into devaluation peaceful coexistence becomes problematic. It would be reactionary to offer "our home" as an answer to "xenophobia" and as a synonym for "nation" or "the people". Being at home in a country would then not be accessible to all but biologically inherited. Such instrumentalization would imply that the home would need to be protected from the "foreigners". New borders would be erected.

What would this mean for our tri-point region? This border area that to us is part of a free Europe has been experienced by refugees and expellees as a forbidden zone that cannot be entered or crossed without being accused of breaking the law. Borders can mean security – or become an insurmountable danger and source of (legal) uncertainty.

The world would become smaller, easier to survey and with it the collective feeling of freedom. We do not entertain self-doubts when we are foreign somewhere else and we like to go on holiday in foreign places, so why are we not prepared to share what we have with foreigners?

Flight and Gender

Sexualised violence, above all against women and girls, was and is a reason to flee as well as a traumatic experience, a dreadful event during expulsion or flight that is still often a taboo subject. Women who are fleeing today are sometimes offered special protection from some party – but very often the need for this is ignored. Rapes have only recently been officially outlawed as being wilful and systematic means of warfare. In the context of war or in the immediate post-war period maltreatment and rapes have long been regarded as collateral damage. Sexualised violence fulfils the function not only of making the vanquished experience their inferiority and subjection, but of making plain their lack of rights – given that the perpetrators usually get away without punishment. However, during flight many migrants experience exploitation of their vulnerability by soldiers, representatives of State power or others on whom they depend. In addition to the traumatization and social consequences that accompany the victims throughout their lives, there are those who choose or chose to commit suicide as the ultimate way out. This thematic section should offer scope to the victims for their experiences and draw attention to the special vulnerability of refugees and expellees.

On the other hand nowadays there is considered to be a frequent danger of bias, whereby women of former epochs are seen as mainly unable to speak for themselves and severely restricted by their menfolk in their scope for action. This assumption does not accord with historical realities – especially in the case of flight and expulsion. Women have not only been primarily responsible for the survival of their families while fleeing in the absence of men fighting in a war or taken prisoner. Biographical accounts have survived from the 17th century showing that women fulfilled far more than the role of victim. A focus on these experiences and on strong women protagonists should not be absent.

“Integration through Performance?”

The theme of integration brings and has brought together different approaches and needs. Indeed, this host society often has different expectations of the newcomers to those the latter have of their new environment. Looking back over the centuries, it becomes clear that granting asylum to asylum-seekers has often been tied to utilitarian considerations, meaning that the refugees were expected to integrate quickly and successfully into the local economy. Admission and protection in return for performance and a contribution to the welfare of society – that seems to be the deal. Thus in Saxony it was hoped that the Bohemian exiles would offer a positive economic stimulus in a region devastated by the Thirty Years’ War. War damage and population loss were immense. In fact many exiles soon managed to gain a foothold and set up their own businesses. In the longer term they made a decisive contribution to economic, scientific and artistic developments, so that in retrospect their transfer of knowledge and culture can be seen as invaluable for the region.

The acknowledgement of performance against the backdrop of difficult circumstances – as is also true of course for later generations of refugees and expellees – is certainly of great importance. Precisely those who were forced to leave their homes after 1945 were denied this recognition for a long time and it is high time to make amends.

On the other hand: performance should not be the only criteria for recognition! The focus on the (economic) worth of people is fundamentally problematic, given that it once opened the door to a division of life into “worthy” and “worthless” – with terrible consequences. What about the old, sick or weak? Do they not deserve protection? The value of a human being cannot depend on his or her usefulness and performance capabilities. Life achievements and experiences should be honoured and respect shown for a life lived in difficult circumstances.

R.E.S.P.E.C.T.

Intolerance, rejection, denigration and prejudices can be hurtful or even traumatic. This applies not only between people born here and foreigners, but is true of any interpersonal encounter. For any person it was and is important to experience respect and recognition. How we treat each other is prompted by how we see ourselves and the pulse of our times.

In the 17th it could still be said that, “this man must be shown respect” and it was advisable “to treat one’s subordinates with respect” (*Grimm’s Lexicon*). Fixed hierarchies, inherited status, the office and power of a person automatically determined – as if God-given – the respect a person could command. Has the society of the 21st century liberated itself from this conformism oriented towards the opinion of the majority or are we currently reverting back to an authoritarian mode that is becoming attractive again? Respect only shown to the like-minded? Respect for those who are higher in the ranking system?

It is often easier to become mutually hostile rather than to tolerate contradictions and contrary opinions. Furthermore there is a tendency to prefer discussing a theme with the like-minded and to avoid confrontation with opposing views. So for whom do we have any respect left at all and why is it – and here the social media come into view – that there is a clear problem within our culture of respect when people are blatantly slandered, threatened or defamed and this is greeted with Likes? When the feeling of being controlled by the other evokes frustration and hatred leading to a search by the loud-mouthed self-appointed victim for culprits to blame. How and where were such emotions channelled when there was no such thing as the Internet?

The opposite of respect is provocation. The opposite of respect is rejection. The opposite of respect is ignorance. Respect requires curiosity!

“Our imagination is unable to count. And a feeling is not strengthened by numbers. It can only ever count to one.”

[Remarque]

Facts, facts, facts

Alongside the crosscutting themes not linked to specific periods of time the project entKOMMEN aims to offer a fact-based orientation in terms of the historical and contemporary backdrop. This will be treated separately from the topics outlined above (this applies especially to the exhibition) and each “flight epoch” described will have its own presentation. This will enable testimonies, experiences and exhibits to be integrated into the correct context.

The following key questions will be posed:

- What reasons for flight and expulsion were operative? What historical and political framework shaped the situation?
- How was the intake of refugees and expellees organized? What were the reasons for granting asylum and how were these justified?
- What efforts at integration were made? Was there in fact any agreement about what integration should mean?
- How did the host society treat the newcomers?

In addition statistics and figures will make clear the dimensions of manmade flight destinies.

Realization

The project will be realized in two temporally distinct phases:

Phase 1 involves events in the public space in Zittau and environs. External partnerships will be cultivated through an open call for subject matter and formats. **Phase 2 is the exhibition in the municipal museums of Zittau.** Elements from Phase 1 will be integrated into this second stage. The detailed conception of both phases will come later and evolve with the project. The project team adopts a step-by-step approach to the natural development of a project in order to ensure systematic rigour while leaving space for creativity and spontaneity.

AIMS

The exhibition and the events in the public space aim to offer ways to promote a differentiated individual view of the theme complex of flight, expulsion and asylum. The individual should examine and further inform their own viewpoint through:

- 1) the grounded communication of historical basics and classical and contemporary forms
- 2) actions and events at various locations in the region in order to address various target groups directly in their own living environments
- 3) invitations to listen and exchange in aesthetically and atmospherically designed spaces for thought and discussion, with selected themes/questions/speakers.

Heffterbau

The site of the exhibition also represents a piece of flight and expulsion history: as part of the former Franciscan Monastery the Renaissance building was used as a church for exiles from 1691, i.e. for the Protestants fleeing from Bohemia, where they could organize their own congregational life.

4) promotion of active public participation and interest through a balanced mix of explanatory, inspiring and provocative methods and formats

5) generate materials by schoolchildren, creative artists and cultural actors, organizations, private individuals, so that differentiated access is provided for a diverse public

6) prepare the theme and raise interest in visiting the museum through events in the public space

7) create open-ended spaces for crosscutting themes about regional flight and expulsion history with which the public is familiar/can identify

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