

Disasters, then, now, and in the future

On May 8, 2006, the 61th anniversary of the end of World War II (1939-45), the Exhibit "Flight, Banishment, and Integration" was opened in the German Historical Museum in the old center of Berlin. It had earlier been shown in Bonn and assembles the images burnt into all of our minds from the time when so many Europeans were forcibly displaced, among them 14 million Germans. Readers can find some images from the exhibit at:

<http://www.hdg.de/index.php?id=4949>



*Die Herzen bluten uns,
wenn wir sie sehen.
Verhungert, ermattet,
mit abgerissener Kleidung,
zerfetzten Schuhen,
schmutzige Bündel auf dem
Rücken oder mit dem von
Wind und Wetter
verdorbenen Rest ihrer
Habe auf Handwagen - so
ziehen sie ihre Straße, als
Wegweiser die letzte kleine
Hoffnung, dem Schwersten
entkommen zu sein und
eine neue Heimat zu
finden.*

Leaving their home and most belongings behind without knowing what the future might bring, was a trauma whose full impact can gradually be gauged. Johannes Rau, (1931-2006) the President of the German Republic until 2004, recognized in a speech to refugees on September 7, 2003, that "many questions have been researched very little or not at all" "including the close connection between the expulsion policies and the Holocaust," all Nazi Germany's policies without regard for human rights, called by first Federal President, Theodor Heuss, the common "criminal principle."



German Laender with Proportion of Refugee Populations and Areas of Origin

For many years, affected Germans seem to have repressed their sorrow while addressing the challenges of day-to-day survival. Later participation in the country's economic recovery was a welcome diversion. Rau told the audience that he knew how many of them understand how unrealistic hope for border changes is. Since 1990, European politics has been founded on this, because issues of the eastern territories are "liberated" from the constrictions of the four decades of "cold" east-west conflict. Rau continued: "The great majority of the expellees want normal relations with Poland, the Czech Republic and the other middle and eastern European nations" and the national leadership, not necessarily everyone personally, has achieved this. "Germany and its eastern neighbors direct their cooperation to the common future, rather than burdening it with ... issues of the past."

Rau then recognized the great effort by the generation who survived 1945 and helped build the republic. He called them the "quiet generation ... that grabbed the helm and helped to pull the cart out of the mud, accepting that in a certain sense they had together gotten themselves into this mess, so they had to spoon it out together." Rau, having grown up in an actively protestant home, also specified that the "lasting psychological and social influence of expulsion and

banishment on both victims and perpetrators and on the societies and the ... relationships between populations need to be researched.” Recent calamities in this country have charged us to ponder similarities with the traumas of WW II and to look for lessons.

Lessons on what?

Lee Clarke’s book “Worst Cases: Terror and Catastrophe in the Popular Imagination” (2005, University of Chicago Press) lists a number of “possibilities for accident and attack, disease and disaster” within the foreseeable future. This puts great urgency behind pondering how the world dealt with earlier calamities and searching for lessons.

For the first time since the Civil War, American towns and villages have faced a catastrophe in which entire populations were made refugees by uncontrollable events. It is generally recognized that after times of such upheaval and loss, the human coping reactions are similar to mourning. Psychologists say that losing is an experience healed easier when the loss is accepted as inevitable and not as directed against the individual. Therefore, a widespread calamity, an act of nature, such as a hurricane or a tsunami, is less stressful than one caused by negligence or ill will. It is also overcome easier together by just picking up the pieces and getting back into active living.

When exhibits and memorials of European suffering now bring the millions of individual stories back to mind, it is clear that Germans understood that they were in this together. Knowing little else than the end of the “War”, I innocently assumed that this was life. Listening to displaced Germans’ tales, I noticed that, without obvious sadness, they revolved around the things left behind. When I learned about the other losses, I decided never to hang my heart on things that can be replaced. Today I know that thoughts of lost linens, table china and silver and the family heirloom furniture were, even if pondered in times of scarcity, instead symbolic for loss of community, family tradition and identity and that mourning them is a necessary first stage. Have those of us who lost things advanced beyond this stage? Are we not still nursing loss by accumulating things, for example when we seem to have become, in anticipation of “bad times”, pack rats?

Another stage for many has been visiting the “Heimat.” Many gained solace from taking a look at the “old home,” generally only to find that—even though the chance to say goodbye was good—it had changed so much that the home we knew was really “no longer there.”

With experiences of mourning, solace and energetic new beginnings, can the survivors of the German disasters teach a lesson in coping to people in catastrophes elsewhere in the world? The attacks of 9-11 and the hurricanes cry for healing of traumas in this country. When entire communities, such as some firms in the twin towers or the neighborhoods in the lower 9th ward of New

Orleans, are destroyed or dispersed forever, it is beginning to look a lot like the disasters in Europe at the end of WW II. In his introduction Lee Clark discusses how we presently ignore our fears of unspecific disasters because of their low probability, sensing that there is nothing we can do. He lays out that, instead of idly hoping we will be spared, we need to strategize about the worst cases and plan for them. He says:

Worst case thinking is different. It emphasizes consequences over probabilities: what if terrorists commandeer four airplanes simultaneously, what happens if the power-grid goes down for six months, how many might die if a chemical plant explodes? Conceptions of "the worst" permit exploration of how culture and society shape the imagination. Designations of the worst involve both prospective and retrospective viewpoints. As such they tell us about people's orientations toward the past and the future, as well as toward self, others, and society. Disasters, even worst cases, are normal parts of life. They are prosaic. The rules that govern social life in non-disastrous situations are reproduced in disastrous ones, because disasters are not special. We can lead safer and more interesting lives by coming to grips with living and dying in a worst case world.

According to this, the calamities were not only made worse by insufficient preparation but also harder to accept. Unfortunately, the ability to move on seems to decrease as revelations make events like the New Orleans disaster seem more avoidable. From this perspective, can we still learn from the survivors of WW II and can we shape their experiences into lessons on the challenges to come?

Bureaucratic organization

When in 1944/45, evacuation of civilians was needed, announcements were made in one area at a time, albeit often on very short notice. People were told how much luggage to take and where and when to assemble. Railroads and sometimes ships, carried most of the city people west. In the country, evacuees who left with their own horse and wagon got official documents permitting them to leave, rubber stamp and all. This organization existed and provided the outlines for the exodus. It was also made known that people who left before the evacuation order or without official exit papers were executed as deserters. There were few men of military age, so that a large role fell to the young, the old and to women. Through all this, it was stressed over and over that Germans were all in this together and, incredibly, that victory was still the goal.

Some country populations were lucky enough to travel in community groups with an experienced leader who knew established distribution points for supplies and directions to their next destination. If they moved fast enough to these points and escaped the fighting, safety could be reached with little harm. Farm people were well prepared if they had family memories of their settler ancestors and how they worked the trip east. Nevertheless, they needed to read the tea leaves, rather than believe the rosy war propaganda. They knew how to cook and preserve

food for the road, select the strongest horses and prepare for sleeping anywhere. What made this harder was the extreme cold and snow of the winter of 1944/45. In contrast, there are also stories of women who rescued only their favorite pet and left with nothing to support themselves.

This overview shows that survival became much more likely when there had also been personal provision and planning for a worst case. For example, a farmer kept his best team of horses well-fed and his best wagon in excellent repair, or people had stashed a thoughtfully packed suitcase ready in spite of miracle weapons propaganda. Some community leaders also disregarded orders and sent “get ready” warnings before official notification, even when that put their lives in jeopardy.

In spite of organization, often tragedy, crime, and trickery struck and whoever lived through this period has personal horror stories. Because of continuing war action, the transportation systems could get completely backed up. Ships were sunk, killing thousands, railroad and wagon trains were attacked from the air or stopped and robbed, families got separated when confusion arose and illness led to certain death, so that many of the very young and very old were vulnerable. A total of 2 million did not reach safety. Another 2 million who stayed behind suffered worse.



Ankommende Flüchtlinge in Berlin, 1945

Arrival in “the West” meant more difficulties because the refugees were strangers forced into the homes and communities of the established population and initially completely dependent. They also suffered discrimination and ridicule because of unfamiliar accents, worn clothing, and their general

appearance of misery. Soon, though, schools, employment offices, ration cards and welfare were organized and private enterprise became possible, even if initially mostly on the “black market.” Later, everyone received payment (Lastenausgleich, starting in 1952) equivalent to a percentage of their proven loss which gave them a basis for a fresh start; however, those who ended up in Austria or what later became “East Germany” had a different experience.

Pulling the cart out of the mud

While it is true that not every German refugee succeeded quickly and particularly older people found their way out of the cramped housing in camps very late, the majority attacked the tasks at hand and joined the economic miracle with vigor. Were they condensing their emotional needs into participation in successive waves of economic achievement (waves of eating, building, traveling) as a way of not mourning their losses? Individual approaches probably range from forgetting completely to, recently, moving back.

Families who passed their history and traditions in the eastern areas on to their children and grandchildren seem to be the exception, rather than the rule. Recently, some have tried to avoid the harshness of forgetting the old home by buying a piece of property in the lost territories and spending their retirement years under the “home” sky. Likewise, the German nation as a whole is still very much in the process of finding a unified response to the losses over 60 years ago.

So, the lessons are largely individual and hard to generalize, really calling out to be defined. There are internalized lessons that the survivors would probably call toughness, but no strategies for coping—nor are there defined worst case scenarios for which to prepare. We all need to keep looking as we are being told that more disasters, both natural and man-made, may befall us.

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