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Reimagining German identity through the politics of memory: Changing interpretations of German past migrations during the "Refugee Crisis", 2015/2016

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Reimagining German Identity Through the Politics of Memory: Changing Interpretations of German Past Migrations during the "Refugee Crisis", 2015/2016
Or
Redrawing German identity boundaries : Changing Interpretations of German Past Migrations during the "Refugee Crisis", 2015/2016

This paper brings memory and migration studies together. It focuses on the way the past was used in the context of the "refugee crisis" in Germany in 2015/2016. The analysis concentrates on how politicians and journalists used the memory of Germans' own migrations to legitimise rhetorically the political decision to open the borders and let more than a million people into the country, as well as to call for a welcoming attitude (*Willkommenskultur*) towards the refugees. It shows how, by doing so, they have contributed to the reframing of one of the founding identity narratives of the FRG, namely the one about "flight and expulsion", and thus helped to redraw Germany's identity boundaries in a more inclusive way.

Key words: Germany, memory, migration, flight and expulsion, politics of history

Word Count: 8 999

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"Flight and Expulsion" (*Flucht und Vertreibung*) and the "Refugee Crisis"

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In the interplay between migrants and their hosting societies, the focus of research is often on how migrants can identify with a society that has markedly different histories and memories from their own, or on "how they have succeeded in appropriating it [the dominant culture] for themselves often by modifying it to the point at which the latter is enriched through contact with foreign contributions" (Noiriel 2007, 15).[1] Or it is about the break-up of homogenic national identity constructions through the pluralisation of identity discourses and their underlying memory (Baussant et al. 2017). However, as Irial Glynn and Olaf Kleist have pointed out, "scholars have rarely combined Migration Studies and Memory Studies to consider how perceptions of the past affect the incorporation of immigrants in their host societies" (2012, 4). This is the focus I intend to adopt in this paper.

The collective process of remembering is essential to the self-definition of societies (Renan, 1882, Castoriadis, 1975, Anderson 1983). It provides the nation with a sense of continuity and a shared image of the group. But memory as "*vis*"/ force also plays a significant role in political change (Assmann, 2009, pp. 27-32, Assmann & Shortt 2012). Memory is an active social process carried out by different actors that originates in present needs and is tightly bound to forgetting. Remembering or, in other words, shaping past events into a narrative entails silences, renewals, distortions, shifts and reevaluations (Assmann, 2009, p. 29). This power to revise the past, to question ongoing representations, values and attitudes inherent to memory opens new frames of action. Starting from these assumptions, my aim is to analyse the uses of the past in Germany during what has been called the "refugee crisis" of the early twenty-first century.

First, it is necessary to address the matter of which past was mobilised, since there have been several waves of migration to and from Germany historically. Significantly, it was neither the experience of the most recent massive arrival of asylum seekers, at the beginning of the 1990s,[2] nor the arrival of the *Gastarbeiter* in the 1950s and 1960s that were most often referred to during the 2015/2016 "crisis",[3] but rather an older experience dating back to the Second World War, namely the "flight and expulsion" of Germans from Eastern and Central Europe at the end of and immediately following the war.

[1] All translations are mine.
[2] A time not only when East Germans left the GDR/New *Bundesländer*, but also when hundreds of thousands of late re-settlers (*Spätaussiedler)* arrived from the USSR and Romania, along with hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers from Yugoslavia.
[3] This is especially noteworthy since this last "refugee crisis" is much more recent and since the solidarity movement that developed around 2015 is rooted in the mobilisation for refugees that emerged in the 1990s. (Ulrike Hamann, Serhat Karakavali 2016, 74).

After reviewing how this still controversial chapter of German history was used by politicians and journalists to legitimise rhetorically the present political decision to open the borders and to call for a welcoming attitude, I show the simultaneous resistance to this comparison of fate (*Schicksalsvergleich*)[4] revealing the power struggles over the interpretation and uses of history. I explain why referring to the Germans own experience of migration is anything but obvious in this context. Resistance can be explained by how the memory of "flight and expulsion" has been built (Bazin, Perron 2018). Analysing a few of the narratives on which this memory is based helps elucidate why the comparison has been contested, and why, despite massive waves of immigration, the country long continued to define itself as not a country of immigration.

I then demonstrate that the current political and media uses of this past change the frame in which "flight and expulsion" is remembered. I consider how, by deconstructing some myths attached to "flight and expulsion" the opinion leaders reframed one of the founding identity narratives of the FRG, so as to transform the representation of who a German is and who a German can be, and how this, by softening the rigidity of the borders between newcomers and natives (Bertossi, Duyvendak, Foner in this volume) – aimed at enforcing a more political vision of citizenship and deconstructing culturalist conceptions that used to be predominant until recently in German politics as well as in German law.[5]

The analysis is based on a systematic study of the political and media discourse during the so-called refugee crisis: of Chancellor Angela Merkel, President Joachim Gauck, the federal minister of the interior, and the minister-presidents (*Ministerpräsidenten*) of the sixteen states (*Bundesländer*), as found in government declarations and speeches delivered in national and regional parliaments, as well as interviews in the media[6] and federal and regional parliamentary debates. It is also based on observations gathered in Germany between mid-2013 and the end of 2017.

The "Refugee Crisis" of 2015/2016

Over night on September 4, 2015, Chancellor Merkel unilaterally decided to open the border between Germany and Austria, suspending de facto the Dublin Agreement. Tens of thousands

[4] I borrow this term from Stephan Scholz (2016, 41).

[5] Here the differences with the Greek case, a country that had also received millions of Greek refugees in the aftermath of a population exchange in the early twenty century, as described in this issue by Georgios Kritikos, are noteworthy.

[6] I analysed the Plenary minutes of the *Bundestag*, the 16 *Landtage* (*Bürgerschaft/Senat*), between 2014 and 2016, as well as the personal, party, or official websites and/or Facebook accounts of the *Ministerpräsidenten* (or *Regierender/Erster Bürgermeister* in the case of the city-states Berlin, Hamburg, and Bremen), and of Chancellor Merkel, President Gauck, and the federal minister of the interior, De Maizière.

of refugees who had come through the "Balkan route" via Turkey crossed this border in the next days.[7] By the end of the year about 1.1 million refugees had entered Germany (of which about two thirds had arrived between September and December), causing the so-called refugee crisis (see Oltmer 2016).

However impressive this influx was in the autumn of 2015, it did not come completely unexpectedly. Since 2010 Germany had had to cope with a steadily growing number of refugees. Before 2015, most were from the Balkans, but that summer the situation changed and the number of migrants from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, all of them asylum seekers, dramatically rose (Migrationsbericht 2014, 37).

The federal government and the governments of the *Bundesländer* acted during the next months following the maxim: "Those who need and are seeking for protection, shall obtain protection" in Germany,[8] a position that was widely backed. Throughout the political spectrum only a few voices openly criticised the decision to open the borders. In the media, the tone was overwhelmingly positive in favour of welcoming the refugees. Even *Bild Zeitung*, Germany's leading tabloid, usually known for its right-wing populist positions against foreigners, called loudly for a welcoming attitude.[9]

The purportedly cold-hearted Germans who had just been blamed for their lack of solidarity with the Greeks during the Euro crisis demonstrated an impressive generosity and readiness to help. Migrants stepping out of trains coming from Hungary were acclaimed at Munich Central Station (and elsewhere) in a way that was puzzlingly reminiscent of the arrival of trains full of East-German refugees coming from Prague in the summer and autumn of 1989. An immense mobilisation took hold of the country. Thousands of volunteers spent days and nights helping to relieve the basic needs of the refugees, making a humanitarian arrival in the unprepared FRG possible and compelling admiration of the German "welcoming culture". All this seemed to acknowledge Angela Merkel's mantra "*Wir schaffen das*" (we will manage it).

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[7] On Saturday, September 5, one day after this announcement, 6,780 refugees arrived at Munich Central Station; on Sunday, this number increased to about 11,000 (*Die Zeit*, 35, August 18, 2016, http://wwww.zeit.de/serie/mein-fuenfter-september). Following the statistics of the Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, the number of registered arrivals (by the EASY-System) rose from 54,000 in June to 83,000 in July, 104,000 in August, 164,000 in September, 181,000 in October, with a peak being reached in November with more than 206,000 persons arriving, and a decrease in December to about 127,000. See: *Migrationsbericht 2015*, p. 13.

[8] As Angela Merkel said in her government declaration of February 17, 2016.

[9] About the position of the media see Dietrich Thränhardt (2018).

However, the influx of refugees in 2015 represented a huge challenge for German politics and society at all levels, and the general welcoming attitude and empathy towards the refugees' fate could not mask the strengthening of a new national-populism, which manifested itself on German streets and in public places in more and more violent forms of rejection of foreigners (like in the activities of the Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the Occident [PEGIDA]),[10] and through the electoral successes of the Alternative for Germany AfD (Party). Radical anti-immigration discourse and attitudes moved from the margins of German society to its core. The "uncontrolled" migration flow gave the demonstrations of right-wing groups a fresh impetus and a perfect theme around which to crystallise the anger of the so-called *Wutbürger* coming from the middle classes.

"Flight and Expulsion" (*Flucht und Vertreibung*) and the "Refugee Crisis"

In this context, references to German experiences of "flight and expulsion" were pervasive. In its popular understanding "flight and expulsion" refers to the fact that "after WWII the German population of German territories and of East central European countries [usually a number of 12-14 million people is mentioned] were expelled by their enemies" (Hahn and Hahn 2010, 9) and settled in what remained of the German Reich (the four occupation zones and later the FRG and GDR). It became one of the founding narratives of the FRG's national self-understanding, the memory of it being officially supported through commemorations and by financial means allocated for preserving the culture of the territories of expulsion (*Vertreibungsgebiete*) in the consciousness of the German people, following section 96 of the 1953 Federal Law on Refugees and Exiles (*Bundesvertriebenengesetz*) (Perron 2016).

This past was repeatedly referred to in 2015/2016 in connection with the fate of the refugees at all levels (local, regional, and national) by actors comparing "then *and* now" (Foner 2006).

The *Ministerpräsidenten* of the western[11] *Bundesländer*, whatever their political colour, used this comparison in speeches given in reaction to the opening of the border and the arrival of tens of thousands of people every week. For example, on September 10, 2015,

[10] PEGIDA was created in autumn 2014 and organised weekly demonstrations – mainly in Dresden – against immigration and asylum policies in Germany and in Europe. See the *Chronik Flüchtlingsfeindlicher Vorfälle* of the Antonio-Amadeo Stiftung and the maps done in common with the Stiftung PRO-ASYL. https://www.mut-gegen-rechte-gewalt.de/chronik-karte and https://www.mut-gegen-rechte-gewalt.de/service/chronik-vorfaelle (accessed October 4, 2017).

[11] In the New *Bundesländer* this reference was strikingly absent. Two explanations can be found to this. First, the memory of "flight and expulsion" has been silenced in the GDR, and therefore it is much less present there. Second, 2015 was the 25th anniversary of the unification and of the (re)creation of the New *Bundesländer*.

Stephan Weil (SPD), *Ministerpräsident* from Lower Saxony concluded his government declaration with the words:

> From the very beginning Lower Saxony was the Land of the flight. After the Second World War, more than a quarter of our population were expellees (*Vertriebene*). There is numerous evidence for the fact that these people were not welcomed with open arms in Lower Saxony at the end of their flight in 1945, but on the contrary often with distance and rejection. (…) Many expellees felt their new homeland as a cold homeland. At the same time, we know that it was in particular expellees who made an essential contribution to reconstruction.
>
> Today we are again confronted with humans that came to us out of deepest distress, that seek protection. Today we can show in Lower Saxony, that we can do better. (…)
>
> I am certain: We will manage it (*Wir schaffen das*).

His colleague from Hessen, Volker Bouffier (CDU), on September 19, 2015, at the occasion of the 70 Years of Proclamation of Hessen, similarly finished his speech by saying:

> I would like to use the opportunity to once point [out] the fact that this land, Hessen, had received until 1950 one million refugees. One million. In a completely devastated country, in which people were indeed fighting for survival. This one million was an immense challenge. The people that came to us, the refugees, the expellees, they had not only lost their homeland (*Heimat*) but also many relatives. They came into a situation in which they were not at all welcomed with open arms. What we witness today as a refugee welcoming culture (*Flüchtlingswillkommenskultur*), this did not exist at the time. Nobody was standing at the train station shouting "welcome to Germany". They were very different times. […] In some ways it can be compared with today in some ways of course not. The people that came at the time were Germans. They were ethnic Germans (*Volksdeutsche*), they all spoke German. The people coming today don't speak German. They too have lost their homeland (*Heimat*), they look for a new future. […] This a challenge […]. But, Ladies and Gentlemen, we can manage it. […] What we can do from looking back is taking the power and confidence and say: If we do it intelligently, then we have the chance to overcome such challenges.[12]

[12] See : https://www.hessen.de/sites/default/files/media/staatskanzlei/09-19-15_70_jahre_proklamation_hessen.pdf (accessed September 20, 2018)

For his part, Winfried Kretschmann (B90/Grüne), Baden-Württemberg's *Ministerpräsident*, concluded his government declaration about the politics of the state in the refugee crisis on October 1, 2015 in this way:

> My parents were refugees themselves. My older brother died as an infant during the flight.(…) Baden-Wuerttemberg has become my home (*Heimat*), throughout.
>
> It is also because of this personal experience that I know about the difficulties that we will have to face, but I also know about the opportunities.
>
> We want to integrate the people that will stay permanently here. This will be demanding for us, but it also will be very demanding for the refugees. […] Baden Wuerttemberg has always been a land of immigration and has proved that it can successfully integrate people: expellees, *Gastarbeiter*, refugees from the Balkans. We are able to manage this (*Wir können es schaffen*) if we go about it with courage, with pragmatism, and with realism.

A little later, even in the eastern state of Thüringen, *Ministerpräsident* Bodo Ramelow (Die Linke) said in a government declaration on November 26, 2015 dedicated to "Thuringia in the 25th year of German unity":

> Thuringia counted on the basis of the official forecast of the federal government for the whole year 2015 with about 8,000 refugees. Almost as many came in October alone. In total, we expect around 30,000 refugees to arrive in Thuringia this year. There is little to suggest that the influx will quickly subside. […] It is precisely the broad look back at the 25 years since Reunification that opens up a valuable perspective for us.
>
> Valuable firstly, because it imposes on us a little more prudence with regard to our current tasks, in view of what we have achieved under initially difficult conditions. Here I like to quote the former Ministerpräsident of Thuringia, who said […] "A people that has managed reunification will also manage that".
>
> Valuable, secondly, because placing the refugee crisis in its historical context provides an important change of perspective: from uncertainty, even fear, to courage – from burden to opportunity. The integration of hundreds of thousands of people will, if it succeeds as it did more than half a century ago with the integration of 12 million expellees, become a building block for the completion of inner unity.
>
> We will change together and move together anew. In Europe, in Germany, in Thuringia.

The heads of other western *Bundesländer* also used this parallelism: Olaf Scholz (SPD), Regierender Bürgermeister of Hamburg, in a speech on September 12, 2015, Thorsten Albig (SPD) of Schleswig-Holstein in his governmental declaration of September 18, 2015, and Malu Dreyer (SPD), from Rhineland-Palatinate, also in a governmental declaration on September 23, 2015.[13]

However, although it was especially prevalent in the months after the opening of the border, the parallelism was used earlier, including by Thorsten Albig[14], Malu Dreyer[15], Stefan Weil[16], Bodo Ramlow[17], Rainer Haseloff [18], Winfried Kretschmann[19], Katrin Göring-Eckhard,[20] and even Horst Seehofer[21]. The most prominent politician, and maybe the first to use this "comparison of fate", was President Gauck at the federal level, who did so repeatedly from 2013 on.[22] The first National Remembrance Day for the victims of flight and expulsion on June 20, 2015, offered him the occasion (the more so because this day is coupled with World Refugee Day) to develop the parallelism at length. Among other things he made the following plea:

> Today we want to talk about those who have been uprooted. About refugees and expellees, who have been forced into emigration. About those who were driven out of their homes in the past and those who will be forced to leave their homes today and tomorrow. [...]
>
> For they belong together in a quite essential manner – the fate of people back then and the fate of people today, the grief and the expectations back then and the fears and hopes for the future of today. [...]

---

[13] See, *Ministerpräsident* Thorsten Albig: "Regierungserklärung: Flüchtlinge in Schleswig-Holstein - zusammenstehen, helfen, gemeinsam Heimat schaffen" http://www.landtag.ltsh.de/export/sites/ltsh/infothek/wahl18/plenum/plenprot/2015/18-098%5F09-15.pdf (accessed September 20, 2018);
Regierungserklärung von *Ministerpräsidentin* Malu Dreyer, "Solidarität und Perspektiven – Flüchtlingsaufnahme in Rheinland-Pfalz" https://www.rlp.de/fileadmin/rlp-stk/pdf-Dateien/Ministerpraesidentin/23092015_Regierungserklaerung_Fluechtlinge.pdf (accessed September 20, 2018);
Olaf Scholz, *Erster Bürgermeister*, Rede zur Kundgebung "Hamburg bekennt Farbe" für Demokratie, Toleranz und Vielfalt, https://www.hamburg.de/buergermeisterreden-2015/4599672/2015-09-12-hamburg-bekennt-farbe/ (accessed September 20, 2018).
[14] November 12, 2014 – Government declaration; February 8, 2015 – Government declaration.
[15] January 13, 2015 – Speech on New Year's Eve.
[16] January 20, 2015 – Government declaration.
[17] February 26, 2015 – Government declaration.
[18] April 7, 2015 – Interview *Magdeburger Zeitung* (MZ).
[19] August 15, 2015 – Interview *Stuttgarter Zeitung.*
[20] February 5, 2015 – plenary debate, Bundestag.
[21] Speech to the cornerstone ceremony of the Museum der Bayrischen Geschichte, May 22, 2015, and speech at the 66. Day of the Sudetengerman, May 24, 2015.
[22] April 12, 2013, Gespräch auf dem Sachverständigenrat der Stiftungen für Integration und Migration ; June 30, 2014 – Berliner Symposium zum Flüchtlingsschutz; June 20, 2015 – Gedenktag für die Opfer von Flucht und Vertreibung; August 29, 2015 – Interview *Generalanzeiger Bonn.*

> I wish the memory of those who fled or were expelled back then could enhance our understanding for those who have fled or been displaced today. And vice versa: our encounters with those who are uprooted today could enhance our empathy with those who were uprooted back then. […] 70 years ago, a poor and ruined Germany managed to integrate millions of refugees. Let us not think ourselves capable of too little today. Let us trust in the energies this country has.

A few months later, during a visit to a Jewish community in Oranienburg, on the anniversary of the *Reichskristallnacht*, November 9, 2015, he was questioned by journalists about recent political developments and repeated "that flight and expulsion have marked the fate of the German nation during decades". He continued calling the Germans to "remember how it was in many families, when we were homeless (*Heimatlos*) and we needed protection". And he finished saying "This means that this country will stay open and that it will talk with dignity and decently about the burden it can withstand and about its welcoming capacity. That we are ready to welcome is a fact, it's a part of our culture". These declarations, like the speech of June 20, were relayed by numerous media and were to be seen in the evening journal of the ARD the same day.

The abundant use of this parallelism, which may be explained as resulting from a "commemoration effect",[23] was not limited to politicians. There are also innumerable examples in the media in which the historical episode of "flight and expulsion" was contrasted to the contemporary challenges posed by the massive arrival of refugees.[24] The parallelism has been established as a kind of *topos*. Municipalities like Leipzig, for instance, linked both experiences, hanging banners with similar pictures of refugees fleeing then and now (Scholz 2016, 40). Exhibitions contrasted then and now, for example, in the Westpreussisches Landesmuseum in Warendorf,[25] a museum dedicated to a "lost" territory in the East from which Germans had been expelled. Organizations such as the Catholic Church

[23] In relation with the first National Remembrance Day for the Victims of Flight and Expulsion. I thank Jan Willem Duyvendak for suggesting this idea to me during our discussion at NIAS in Amsterdam in July 2018.

[24] A few examples amongst many others: in the *Zeit Online*, the much read historian Andreas Kossert, wrote an article entitled „Böhmen, Pommern, Syrien", on February 12, 2015, *Der Tagesspiegel*, "Frau Kieswetters Liste", 24.04.2015, *Zeit Online* April 25, 2015, „Meine Großeltern waren auch Flüchtlinge",; June 16, 2015, *Süddeustche Zeitung* „Vertriebene 1945, Flüchtlinge 2015, Stolz und Vorurteil", *Die Zeit*, n°27/2015, (July 2, 2015) „Bundesstiftung Flucht, Vertreibung Versöhnung : zu deutsch gedacht. Noch nie gab es so viele Flüchtlinge – die Vertriebenenlobby aber kreist um sich selbst". *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, on October 7, 2015: "Wie sich die Geschichte wiederholt. On radio: *Deutschlandfunk* « Das Leid ist das Gleiche », 18.11.2015

[25] Here on September 19, 2015, the Westpreussisches Landesmuseum in Warendorf organised from July 25 to September 27, 2015, a special exhibition called "Integration der Vertriebenen" and organised an encounter between expellees and refugees: "Ankommen. Flüchtlinge und Vertriebe: Damals - und heute. Begegnungen über Ländergrenzen und Generationen hinweg".

in Erfurt coordinated encounters between refugees of yesterday and today,[26] while others such as the Protestant Church in the Rhineland ran campaigns and numerous cultural projects such as readings (in literature this topos is widely used[27]) theatre plays, and discussions were planned throughout Germany..

The functions of using the past and the resistance to these uses

Recalling the past experience of "flight and expulsion" served different functions in the political debates about the refugee crisis.

First, drawing a parallel between the current situation of the refugees and the experience of "flight and expulsion" legitimises the government's decision to open the borders. Recalling how it felt years before to be offered shelter after having had to flee acknowledges the soundness of the principle of receiving and welcoming refugees. It also recognises the rightness of the huge spontaneous mobilisation of the Germans to help the refugees.

Referring to this past experience also serves to reiterate trust. It supports Chancellor Merkel's claim, "we will manage it", recalling that "we have already managed it" in a situation which was much more difficult. Then, about 11.5 million people had to be welcomed into a devastated country that lacked the administrative, financial, material, and human resources to do so. And this has created no major political, economic, or social instability.

A third function relates to the historicisation of the crisis: by referring to past challenges, politicians and journalists take the long-term view, which helps to minimise the exceptionality of the phenomenon as perceived by contemporaries. It contextualises it and makes the situation less alarming, not only in practical terms (registration, health care, sheltering, costs, etc.), but also in terms of potential dangers linked to the number of people who have arrived. It normalises the situation, showing that the encounter with people from elsewhere is more ordinary than is usually admitted in Germany (see Beer 2014, 11). A look back to the groups of people that have settled in Germany or left the country over time challenges the widespread "metaphor of being rooted" as the proper way of living (Bausinger 2014, 40). It is therefore also a way to make a plea for accepting the foreigners in their foreignness and for acknowledging that integration takes time.

[26] See the report about the encounters in the Saint Martin's Church in Erfurt entitled "Flüchtlinge Gestern und Heute, Das Leid ist das gleiche", *Deutschlandfunk*, September 19, 2016

[27] See the novel *Das Schicksal der Sterne*, by Daniel Höra and published in 2017 by Bloomoon, Munich.

Perhaps most significantly, it offers a change of perspective that calls for a paradigmatic shift in the way immigration is conceived. For instance, recalling the fact that Winfried Kretschmann – first Green *Ministerpräsident*, and a very popular politician – is himself a refugee's child, shows that migration and migrants are not a problem *per se*. On the contrary, it highlights the opportunities migration bears, especially the fact that refugees can importantly contribute to the development of the country in the future, the same way the expellees made an essential contribution to the *Wirtschaftswunder* in the 1950s and 1960s.

And last but not least, the "comparison of fate" works as a call for an empathetic attitude towards people arriving, to have an eye for their needs, to give them protection and help. President Gauck's discourse on the first Day of Remembrance for Refugees and Expellees illustrates this use. The former pastor used this occasion dedicated to a specific instance of German suffering (for which the associations of expellees had fought for years) to transform it into an exemplary memory in Tzvetan Todorov's sense: "without denying the singularity of the event", he used it "as a model to understand new situations with different agents", making it an *exemplum* so that "the past thus becomes a principle of action for the present" (Todorov 2004, 30–31). In doing so, he deconstructed its monological orientation turned only towards the German victims and their suffering. He opened perspectives that go beyond the event itself and created space for the recognition of the suffering of others (and not the measuring up of one's own suffering against that of the others).

However, the use of the "flight and expulsion" narrative for legitimising the welcoming of hundreds of thousands of refugees and calling for empathy towards them was highly contested. Resistance emerged first from the Bavarian *Ministerpräsident* Horst Seehofer from the CSU, a political party close to the associations of expellees. Seehofer reacted to Gauck's speech, in an interview with the *Münchner Merkur* about the tense situation with migration: "I know from many conversations with expellees that they don't like to hear such comparisons. The causes are now different, now it is also a matter of mass abuse of asylum. I don't think this discussion is appropriate (Merkur 2015, n.p.)[28]

Even though the president of the Federation of Expellees (*Bund der Vertriebenen* - BdV) and CDU member of the *Bundestag*, Bernd Fabritius, supported Gauck's view at first, in December 2015 he expressed his disapproval:

> I am also concerned about the confusion which is again evident […] between the themes of "flight" and "expulsion" and questions of simple, plain migration.

[28] See *Münchner Merkur*, June 25, 2015, "Seehofer zu Asyl: Merkel hat den Ernst der Lage nicht erkannt", https://www.merkur.de/politik/horst-seehofer-asyl-merkel-ernste-lage-erkannt-5165954.html (accessed September 20, 2018).

> It should be precisely the task of responsible politicians to differentiate and clearly separate these issues.[29]

Many expellees were much more radical:

> The moral extortion of the German expellees (*Heimatvertriebene*) as chief witnesses of the necessity of an uncritical "welcoming culture" (*Willkommenskultur*) is one of the most perfidious brainwashing arguments, with which the political and medial class try to suppress any skeptical thought about abuse of Asylum and illegal immigration.[30]

This reaction of a far-right publicist close to the Federation of Expellees, entitled "Comparison Refugees/Expellees (*Heimatvertriebene*) Does Not Work", exemplifies the points of view circulating among expellees' circles, to be found for instance in many discussion fora around the articles about Gauck's speeches in the German media on the web.[31]

Such points of view insist on the ethnic boundary between yesterday's expellees and today's migrants (those are not Germans, not Christians, and do not speak German, unlike the expellees). They reject the idea that acculturation processes were necessary for German expellees coming from the East and, by doing so, invalidate the fact that "we will manage" the integration of the refugees into the FRG the way "we" managed the integration of the expellees. They consider that the integration of the expellees was not an issue.

They further question the soundness of the categories of comparison, calling into doubt the legitimacy of the motives for departure of today's migrants. In their eyes these people are economic migrants and not people fleeing war or being persecuted in their home countries. This is a clear distinction that Erika Steinbach, at the time president of the Federation of Expellees (and speaker for human rights of the CDU-parliamentary Group!) had

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[29] See Debate "Fluchtursachen Bekämpfen", Deutscher Bundestag, Plenary session, 146 session, 18th legislative period, December 17, 2015.

[30] See "Vergleich ‚Flüchtlinge'/ Heimatvertriebene hinkt", Michael Paulwitz, *Junge Freiheit*, a reaction to the „actual speach of the federal liar (Bundesgauckler) at the first national „Gedenktag für die Opfer von Flucht und Vertreibung", https://jungefreiheit.de/kolumne/2014/fluechtlinge-fluechtlinge-und-heimatvertriebene/ published in the online edition of *Junge Freiheit*, a weekly magazine of the new right.

[31] See for instance the 23 comments of the reports on the website of the *Siebenbürgische Zeitung* https://www.siebenbuerger.de/zeitung/artikel/verband/kommentare/15658-gedenktag-fuer-opfer-von-flucht-und.html; the 801 comments of the report of *Zeit.online* https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2015-06/joachim-gauck-bundespraesident-fluechtlinge; the 129 comments of the report made by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung online* http://www.faz.net/aktuell/politik/inland/rede-des-bundespraesidenten-gauck-fordert-mehr-grossherzigkeit-gegenueber-fluechtlingen-13657911.html#void; the 284 comments to the report of *Spiegel online*, http://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/fluechtlinge-gauck-fordert-von-deutschen-mehr-offenheit-a-1039870.html; or the 172 comments to the report of the magazin *Focus,* https://www.focus.de/politik/deutschland/geschichte-erster-nationaler-gedenktag-fuer-vertriebene_id_4764186.html#commentFormbegin.
Numerous reactions to President Gauck's TV interview on November 9, 2015, on the website of the ARD - First public service television program (where reactions to Gauck's statements were so numerous that the website had to be closed down for a while) clearly show that the comparison of fate was not taken for granted.
(all webpages were accessed on September 20, 2018).

always stressed,[32] saying expulsion is a "heavy violation of human rights", whereas migration is "something very voluntary" (quoted in Ohlinger 2005, 432). She reiterated this position in the course of the refugee crisis in her tweets[33], and left the CDU in January 2017 in protest against its refugee politics.

In their own way the late re-settlers (*Spätaussiedler*), mostly from Russia or the ex-Soviet Union, who are considered by law as "expellees", also resisted the comparison of expellees and today's migrants. They expressed their defiance against migrants, Islam, and Germany's welcoming policy through demonstrations against "the violence of foreigners" throughout Germany (especially in the south-west) and criticised Chancellor Merkel's policy of asylum.[34] Fearing that "the wrong ones are coming",[35] they drew a clear boundary between themselves and the incoming refugees.[36]

Reimagining "Flight and Expulsion": Revising Germany's National Myths

Resistance to comparisons between contemporary migrants and historical German expellees can be explained by how "flight and expulsion" has been regarded and used in Germany's memory landscape until recently. Not only did the codification of what an expellee (*Vertriebener*) and a refugee (*Flüchtling*) is, by the 1953 Federal law[37] rest on ethnicity (Stoke 2019), but a critical appraisal of the construction of the memory of "flight and expulsion", its shape, content, and function in setting German identity boundaries, clarifies why using it as an argument for integration or for legitimising the government's liberal welcoming policy can be considered as a rupture.

In fact, it is less its use that is noteworthy – the memory of "flight and expulsion" had already been mobilized to protest against ethnic cleansing (especially during the Balkan wars)

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[32] She said this in 2003 during a discussion about the eventuality of making out of the *Zentrum gegen Vertreibung* planned by the Association of expellees, a migration museum.

[33] Such as mid-November 2015, when she tweeted "we can not absorb more foreigners, this will lead to murder and killing", a quotation from the former President Helmut Schmidt, who had died a few days earlier and that was extracted from its context. This was followed a few months later (on Februarry 27, 2016) by another tweet with the image of a blonde girl child surrounded by dark-skinned people, with the title "Germany 2030", and the text: "Where are you coming from?".

[34] Those demonstrations were a reaction to the news of the kidnapping and raping of Lisa, a thirteen-year-old girl from a Russian German family in Berlin, which rapidly proved to be a fake news story relayed to the public by Russian state TV.

[35] "Die Wut der Russlanddeutschen", *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, February 11, 2016.

[36] See "Russlanddeutsche im Zwiespalt", *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, March 12, 2016. See also the organisation of vigilante groups against alleged threats from refugees in several neighbourhoods (in Stuttgart/ Pforzheim etc.), or the support to the AfD: cf. results in Haidach/Pforzheim where out of 8,000 inhabitants 5,500 are late re-settlers (*Spätaussiedler)* (and where the AfD had its best result in European, local, regional, and federal elections).

[37] This law was the legal framework for the economic and social integration of the expellees that had arrived in the aftermath of Words War II in the Western Occupation Zones, but it also laid the provisions for further migrations of ethnic Germans. May 1953 Federal Law on Expellees and Refugees (Bundesvertriebenengesetz) (Stoke 2019)

– than the intention with which it was used – for advocating tolerance and the welcoming of migrants into Germany – and the very wide range of politicians that used it, well beyond the usual CDU/CSU representatives linked to the associations of expellees. Until recently, the frame in which "flight and expulsion" was referred to, namely "ethnic cleansing", enabled it to be used to legitimise German claims of being a victim of the Second World War. But it was built in such a way that it wasn't useful for advocating tolerance and the welcoming of migrants into Germany. On the contrary.

As the historians Eva Hahn and Hans Henning Hahn have shown, the narrative linked to "flight and expulsion" "was less the result of the free 'play' of memories, than of a very concrete politics of memory" (2001, 339). Its core, which until recently had proven extremely stable since the 1950s, was built under the first Adenauer government by the leaders of the expellee organizations for revisionist reasons: documenting the injustice and the sufferings experienced by the Germans in order to legitimize the claims for compensations and the recovering the lost territories in the East (Lotz 2007; Ahonen 2003). It was framed by the wish to draw a thick line under the past through silencing the National-Socialist era and downplayed German guilt by considering Germans as (the main – at least by numbers) victims of the war.

"Flight and expulsion" was a simplifying narrative whose function was largely to unify ex-post a very heterogeneous group of people,[38] whose migration experiences strongly differed in timing and context.[39] This was important for recognising the huge injustice the expellees considered had been enacted upon them. It gave more weight to their claims of a right to return,[40] and of material and moral compensations.

This memory narrative worked well because it was rooted in the ethno-nationalist/racist (*völkisch*) discourse of the pre-war period and based on tenacious political myths.[41] I will pick up three important ones – the myth of origins combined with the myth of

[38] Some were German citizens before the end of the Second World War, like the Silezian or the Eastern Prussian, others had never had German citizenship and were minorities like the Swabians from the Banat, the Germans from Bohemia, the Transylvanian Saxons or Germans from Bessarabia – not all even used German as their primary language.

[39] People who were repatriated to the Reich by the Nazi regime, people who fled in front of the Red Army in the course of the war, people who were expelled violently at the end of the war during the so-called period of "wild" expulsion, people who were expelled by the governments of Central European countries following the Potsdam agreements, *Aussiedler*/re-settlers that left their home countries during Communism or late re-settler /S*pätaussiedler* who took the advantage of the collapse of the communist regimes to leave their home countries.

[40] To understand the stability of the memory and the claims it nourishes, one can mention the fact that the *Sudetendeutsche Landsmannschaft* (association of Sudeten Germans) has only renounced its territorial claims in February 2016! *Die Zeit*, "Sudetendeutsche verzichten auf 'Wiedergewinnung der Heimat", February 28, 2016.

[41] I use here the definition of Heidi Hein-Kirchner of the political myth, as "an emotionally charged narrative that reads certain historical facts 'mythically', that is, interprets reality not according to the facts, but in a selective and stereotyped manner, thus giving it a semblance of historicity" (2006, 408).

successful integration and the myth of victimhood – to show how this combination at the core of German identity construction made it difficult to use the memory of "flight and expulsion" as an example of the capacity for integration of migrants within German society, preventing it from becoming an "exemplary memory" in Todorov's (2004, 29–33) sense, a memory that uses the lessons from endured past injustice to raise empathy for the similar fate of others and to combat today's injustices.

Myth of the Origins and Civilising Mission of the Germans in the East

In most of the founding narratives about the origins of the expellees, the German presence in the East is presented in missionary terms. It is referred to as a civilising mission (Bausinger 1971; Wild 2005; Seewan 2014). The pioneering spirit of the Germans that left to populate the "East" is highlighted, whereas the sheer poverty and distress that pushed many people to emigrate is left unspoken (Bausinger 2014, 27). Their cultural achievements and their contributions to the manufacturing, technical, and agricultural development of allegedly depopulated and abandoned wastelands are elements that can be found in historical narratives about the emigration of the Donauswabians, Transylvanian Saxons, Eastern Prussians, and Germans from Bohemia or the Volga until today. Not only were the Germans often depicted as the schoolmasters (*Lehrmeisters*) of other ethnic groups, but they were also described as acting as a bulwark, having had to defend themselves against other ethnic groups (the non-Christian or Orthodox East), or to protect German language, customs, and traditions. Thus, not only was Germanness associated with the virtue of being hardworking, but also the demarcation with other ethnic groups was often overemphasised whereas cultural transfers were mostly silenced (Bausinger 2014, 25–47).

The Myth of the Victim

In the narratives about "flight and expulsion" the end of the so-called "German East" has usually been depicted as a radical historical break that brought German presence in the East to an end. It is described as something that came over Germans and German-speaking minorities brutally, without a warning, like a natural catastrophe (Hahn and Hahn 2001, 379–396) or the doom of Atlantis.[42] In these narratives, "flight and expulsion" are imputed to the will of the Central-Eastern European people, dating back to the nineteenth century, to build "ethnically pure" nation states. Thus, it is understood as an example – certainly the worst by virtue of numbers – of "ethnic cleansing". Neither the attitude of German minorities in the East in the

[42] A metaphor used among others by Karl Schlögel (2002, 239-245).

interwar period, including their attempts at destabilizing the new nation states they were living in (even when those were democracies like Czechoslovakia), and their often very active support for the Nazis, nor the disastrous experience of the Second World War in this part of Europe are mentioned. By virtue of the sheer number of expellees and casualties (which are usually exaggerated) the Germans in the East appear in these narratives as the main victims of the war. This victimhood, conveyed by the narratives about "flight and expulsion", gives expellees a special status[43] in German society, a status, like all victim status', which needs to be defended against possible competitors (see Lefranc, Mathieu, and Siméant 2008).

The Myth of Successful Integration into (West) German Society

An essential function of memory is the selection it operates on past facts. Here, interestingly, an episode that found no place in the original narratives about "flight and expulsion" was the one about the expellees' arrival in the West. If the sufferings of the flight and the ones caused by the loss of home are extremely present, the hardships of the arrival and of the first years in the "West" are silenced in the "official" accounts (see Fendl 1995). Material misery is the only element that is mentioned in these narratives of "flight and expulsion", overshadowing other sufferings like moral deprivation, the lack of compassion of the locals, the cold welcome from their so-called fellow-citizens, humiliations of all kinds but notably the one of being treated like a foreigner (because of differences in religious beliefs or practices, customs, clothing, dialects, cooking, religious practices, etc.), and the lingering racial prejudices of the Third Reich against people from Eastern Europe and Slavs, homesickness and a feeling of not being welcome. Last but not least, the fact that the expellees not only were instrumentalised politically, but also served as scapegoats for German guilt is silenced. To face this, the expellees highlighted their achievements (*Leistung)* and insisted on their economic performance as well as their adaptability (*Angepasstheit*). However, as Klaus Bade, historian of migration, states, if in the mid-1950s economic and social integration can be considered resolved for German expellees, "this was not the case from the point of view of the problems of identity and mentality. In this regard integration represented for many the traits of a regular immigration prospect inside the nation itself" (Bade 1992, 7–8).

Altogether these three myths of the original narrative of "flight and expulsion" not only silence the numerous conflicts that existed between locals and refugees from the East in the

[43] In fact, a legally recognized status, included in the law of 1953 on expellees (BVFG), and a presence guaranteed by law in numerous instances such as for instance in public broadcasting boards.

first decades after their arrival, but also suggest that integration was not an issue for the expellees. Because of the way it is framed, this memory could hardly be used "to keep alive or to raise the consciousness in the public sphere, that this century it [Germany] has already managed to master successfully the situation of a partly peaceful, partly conflictual cultural contact in the context of a mass migration in the interest of both groups", as the cultural anthropologist Albrecht Lehmann (1995, 30) concluded it should in his plea for a historical comparison between "the conditions then and now of migration and acculturation" more than twenty years ago (28).

Conclusion: Expanding German Identity Boundaries

A closer analysis of the references to "flight and expulsion" made during the "refugee crisis" reveals a significant evolution of its public narrative. Beyond the fact that reference to the topic of "flight and expulsion" had moved beyond the usual narrow circles to be mentioned by a very broad range of politicians, the striking thing is that in most speeches a new kind of narrative was associated with it. German politicians of all parties tended to historicise the topic of "flight and expulsion" as a history of migration, and in doing so, to deconstruct the above-mentioned myths. Watering down the distinction between "flight and expulsion" and migration in public discourse allowed them a reappraisal of integration prospects for today's migrants and to loosen German identity boundaries.

The new official discourse challenges the myth of the unproblematic integration of the expellees. The journalists and politicians who use the comparison of fate acknowledge the "crucial contribution to the reconstruction" of the country of the expellees after the war as well as their contribution to the economic miracle (*Wirtschaftswunder*), but at the same time, they precisely highlight the previously obliterated episode of the harshness of the arrival in the new homeland, if not the outright rejection by local populations and the difficulties of integration. "These people were not welcomed with open arms" as Volker Bouffier (CDU) and Stephan Weil (SPD) stressed.[44] "Wasn't it so, that at the time our Western Germany was almost overburdened with so many refugees? […] Our country has learned then openness. Sometimes laboriously; sometimes it took long" Malu Dreyer (SPD) recalled.[45] Winfried Kretschmann (B90/Grüne) confirmed this when he mentioned the fact that his older brother

[44] Discourse of *Ministerpräsident* Volker Bouffier, *70 Jahre Proklamation Hessen*, Festakt, September 19, 2015, Stefan Weil, *Government declaration*, Niedersächsischer Landtag, September 10, 2015.
[45] Governmental declaration of *Ministerpräsidentin* Malu Dreyer, September 23, 2015, "Solidarität und Perspektiven - Flüchtlingsaufnahme in Rheinland Pfalz".

could not become an altar boy, because he spoke no Swabian (the local dialect).[46] Or President Gauck in his speech on the first Day of Remembrance of "flight and expulsion": "The refugees and expellees after the end of the war were often discriminated against and abused as Polacks, gypsies, backpack Germans or have-nots, were branded as backward and had allegedly offered themselves to the Nazi Reich in a special way. In this way, the lack of solidarity found a cynical justification."

But even more ground-breaking is the fact that these discourses openly break with the previously general understanding that "flight and expulsion" and migration are two distinctive subjects. President Gauck, spoke of people then and now "who have the same painful experiences [of emigration] etched in their souls". More explicitly, Olaf Scholz (SPD) declared that "Migration and immigration are part of Hamburg's history. For example, after the war, in times of hunger, unemployment and total exhaustion Hamburg has welcomed 275,000 expellees (*Heimatvertriebene*) and refugees".[47] Winfried Kretschmann claimed that "Baden Württemberg has always been a Land of immigration", mentioning different groups of "immigrants": namely, "Expellees, *Gastarbeiter*, refugees from the Balkans".

These assertions are noteworthy in that they bring together the history of "flight and expulsion" and the integration of expellees into German society with migration history, a parallelism that has been vigorously combatted by the representatives of the expellees for years, that was anything but obvious until recently in public discourse, and that was contradicted by the law and the Constitution until the end of 1990.[48] They publicly challenge the belief that used to be the official position in Germany until the turn of the millennium – "Germany is not a country of immigration" (*Deutschland ist kein Einwanderungsland*) – endorsing a shift that law and social sciences had taken only recently (see Meier-Braun 2014).[49]

In this case, in a country that used to be considered an anti-model in Europe because of its ethnocultural definition of the nation, in which migrants were long denied access to citizenship, a country that thus thought of itself as having no experience of migrants

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[46] "Der Fremde ist dein Nächster", Interview with *Ministerpräsident* Winfried Kretschmann, *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, August 15, 2015.

[47] Discourse of the *Erster Bürgermeister* Olaf Scholz on the demonstration "Hamburg bekennt Farbe" für Demokratie, Toleranz und Vielfalt, September 12, 2015

[48] Even though history writing had already engaged in this (paradigmatic) shift in the 1990s, and the law had been already fulfilled it in 2005 through the Immigration law (*Einwanderungsgesezt*) which gave the late-re-settlers the same status as the other immigrants whereas until then those fell under the law over expellees (*Bundesvertriebenengesetz*) of 1953 that considered them German by virtue of their descent (blood).

[49] For a detailed analysis of the research field linked to migrations in Germany see the report by Olaf Kleist "Flucht und Flüchtlingsforschung in Deutschland, Akteure, Themen und Strukturen", *State of research paper 01*, IMIS, BICC, February 2018; https://flucht-forschung-transfer.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/State-of-Research-01-J-Olaf-Kleist-web.pdf (accessed September 20, 2018).

integration (Sebaux, 2016, Wilhelm 2017), past experiences could neither function in a legitimizing way by situating the present state of society in a shared continuity (perpetual grace) nor could it be used in a deligitimizing way (rebirth now or never) (see Bertossi, Duyvendak, Foner in this volume), pointing the deficiencies of the present state of things through contrasting it with better times that have past. In the German case, rememoration was used to shed a new light on past events so as to reframe the Flight and expulsion narrative and by doing so, to soften the borders that had been constructed (also with the help of the numerous political myths attached to this past) between native Germans and all newcomers, deconstructing nativist perceptions about immigration.

To conclude, if one can agree that from a heuristic point of view it is questionable whether it is possible to draw lessons and knowledge from the historical comparison between refugees and migration *now* and "flight and expulsion" *then*, yet, what I have shown in this paper is that the way the past experience of the Germans' own forced migrations has been referred to by politicians and the media during the "refugee crisis" reframed one of the founding German identity narratives. Through defining "flight and expulsion" as a migration it reminds the German that migration has been an integral part of German society for decades and reinforces the new self-perception of Germany as a country of immigration. It reasserts the legitimacy of the recent changes in the citizenship law, disclosing new prospects of integration of the migrants (and in an understated way, deflates the still problematic question of their naturalisation).

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