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Colourful but Confusing: The Permanent Exhibition in the German Historical Museum

In its information leaflet for visitors, the German Historical Museum in Berlin proudly proclaims that it has managed to present a “lebendiges und anschauliches Bild der Vergangenheit” (a vivid picture of the past) in its new exhibition on German history – an exhibition, as the leaflet also points out, that contains 8,000 exhibits distributed over 8,000 square metres of floor space. I found myself wondering what I was being asked to admire: was I to believe that 8,000 square metres was a generous allowance for a subject such as this – so generous as to allow the careful placement of an exactly corresponding number of exhibits – or that it was actually not very much at all, such that the display of 8,000 exhibits within it was a feat of compression? What counts, in the end, for me, is my personal impression: namely that this exhibition is simply too big for its own good, too big in terms of floor space *and* the number of exhibits.

Far from being animated by a “living” image of the past, by the time I had reached the 15th century I was suffering from extreme thirst. When I arrived in a state of near exhaustion at the First World War, I took a wrong turn – easily done in this exhibition – and found myself back at 1848, which I thought we had surely long left behind. But it was the presentation of the Second World War which had me heading for the exit with my last reserves of strength. Here, between 1941 and 1945, I was overcome by complete confusion. Illuminated text boards referred to section 7.9 and 7.10 and 7.11. Hardly had I started doing the rounds of section 7.9, than it seemed to break off and I found myself in section 7.10, only for 7.9 to be resumed at a later point. Numbered subsections (7.10.1, 7.10.2 etc.) may be a necessary evil in academic publications (I stress the word ‘may’), but in an exhibition they are simply tiresome. The intricate network of display boards set out without a clear structure compounded my sense of disorientation – a problem throughout the exhibition. The German word “verschachtelt” comes to mind.

There is, despite my slightly cynical opening paragraphs, much to be admired here in the exhibition. It contains superb exhibits: photographs, posters, documents, newspaper articles, and artefacts are the means by which the exhibition’s makers hope to bring history alive. My criticism is not of these themselves, but of their overuse. The accompanying texts are, as far as I could tell, accurate, and

informative. Occasionally one might question certain formulations, such as the description of the bombing of Dresden as “militarily meaningless”. This is simply wrong. The bombing of Dresden was excessive and, to my mind, criminal. But it was not without military significance. But by and large I would not want to take issue with the factual information provided on the text boards. The problem, by contrast, is what the boards do *not* tell us. Thus the final years of the Weimar Republic, so important for understanding Hitler’s accession to power, are not adequately explored. The section on the early concentration camps, remarkably, fails to mention that communists were incarcerated there in considerable numbers. But then the exhibition as a whole is rather dismissive of communism. The section on resistance during the Third Reich has little to say about communist resistance; the NKFD is shunted off to a section on the Soviet Union, rather than included in the resistance overview. Questionable, too, is the depiction of the KPD during the Weimar years, which is blamed entirely for the schism with the SPD, and depicted as equally threatening to the welfare of the Republic as Nazism.

What sort of image of history is the German Historical Museum trying to convey? For the purposes of this critique – as the above paragraph implies – I will restrict myself to the portrayal of the 20th century, particularly post-1914. The exhibition is at pains to interpret World War One within the context of the imperial interests and the jockeying for position on the world stage of the protagonists Germany, Austro-Hungary, Russia and Turkey. The Versailles Treaty, especially the guilt clause, is thereby exposed in the exhibition as unjust. 1918 is understood as the point of collapse of empires and emperors, of revolutionary and social unrest, and the self-assertion of nations and ethnic groups. When we reach 1933, we are informed that “authoritarian regimes pushed democracy aside in many countries in the 1920s and 1930s”. The clear wish here is to set Germany’s history in relation to that of other European countries, to counteract any notion of a special German historical narrative, a “Sonderweg”. But then where did National Socialism come from? Why was it different, as the exhibition admits, to other forms of authoritarianism? We receive no answer. Instead, we are told that the NSDAP “grew into a catch-all for opponents of a presidential cabinet not legitimised by the people”. This really says little about what attracted so many people to the Nazis. It almost makes it sound as if people drifted towards it out of protest against the corrosion of democracy under Hindenburg and Brüning. In the exhibition, the Nazis come to power rather mysteriously.

The section on National Socialism itself seems to cover the main ground: state terror, cultural politics (why does the exhibition put most sections on culture up a sets of stairs, I wonder?), racial persecution of Jews and Sinti and Roma, the dismantling of democracy, *Gleichschaltung*, propaganda and mass

mobilisation. But the history presented here is largely political history, with touches of economic history (such as the costs of rearmament, or the effects of the rearmament drive on consumption). There is very little social history, and next to no grass-roots history looking at how people lived under Nazism, how they accommodated themselves to it – although resistance is discussed. A symptom of this lack is the absence of biographies. Many exhibitions these days feature biographies of individuals; a focus on individual lives can illustrate not just the impact of social, political and economic change, but also the scope for reaction and the variety of response. Such biographies could have brought the exhibition “alive”. But National Socialism in the exhibition “happens” to the German people as it happens to the Jews. It arrives and steamrollers society. Even the institutional history of the absorption of the Germans into Nazi organisations – German Labour Front, Hitler Youth, and so on – is far too briefly analysed.

What can be said in defence of the presentation of post-war Germany (which I looked at after recovering in the Museum Café) is that it is more clearly structured than the sections on the Third Reich – generally speaking, the history of the GDR is positioned (appropriately) on the left, and that of the Federal Republic on the right. The two sections are separated in part by physical barriers suggesting the Berlin Wall and other fortifications at the German-German border. Nothing seems to encapsulate the divided history of Germany better than the inclusion of a Volkswagen and a Trabant among the exhibits. In terms of content, the presentation of post-war Germany covers all the main areas one might expect to be covered in any good school text-book: the influence of the Soviets here and the Americans there; denazification in the respective states; political restructuring and differing concepts of democracy; differences in economic systems and living standards; life-style in East and West (something missing from the portrayal of the Third Reich); cultural life in the two Germanies (again, banished upstairs); the “Wende” and reunification. Unfortunately, the post-1980 period leading up to revolution and reunification is very cursorily treated; the exhibition resorts to a few video installations showing newsreels. Was it fatigue or disinterest that overcame the exhibition’s makers as 1990 approached? The 1989 revolution and the fall of the Wall – arguably two of the most positive developments in German history – deserved more focused and detailed attention than this. And quite why the final section claims to cover the period up to 1994 is a mystery to me, because – beyond a few references to post-1990 developments – it provides little information on the 1990–1994 period.

The main weakness of the presentation of post-1945 German history, however, derives from what might appear to be its strength: the division into “halves”, here the GDR, there the FRG. For while the

visitor can certainly orientate himself or herself more easily as a result of this physical separation, it effectively obstructs a truly integrated understanding of post-war German history. The exhibition conveys little sense of the interconnections between the two states, be these cultural, political, economic or social. The issue of the theme of reunification, so important in the 1950s, is inadequately treated. There is too little information on the flight of East Germans to the West and the Berlin crisis, without which one can not really understand the building of the Berlin Wall fully. Shifts in cultural, social and foreign policy triggered by changes in the temperature of the Cold War, or themselves designed to change the character of German-German relations are portrayed without a proper sense of historical context.

Furthermore – as might, perhaps, have been expected – the exhibition clearly sets out to portray the GDR as a much worse state than the FRG. This hardly seems a controversial intention. One only needs to compare the numbers of those citizens who moved from West to East with those who moved (or would have done, had they been able to) from East to West to know which of the states was the more popular and democratic. There was no *Stasi* in the Federal Republic (whatever the brown colour and questionable activities of the *Bundesnachrichtendienst*), and no freedom of speech in the GDR. But the exhibition achieves its intention partly by means of distortion and omission – neither of which would have been necessary to prove the point.

This is particularly the case when presenting the way the two states handled the Nazi past. Thus we read that “the genocide of the Jews was hardly treated at all” in East German memorial sites. This statement is more than misleading. In fact, by way of example, the early exhibitions at Buchenwald memorial site in the 1950s did include sections on the suffering and systematic killing of Jews.¹ Of course, at East German memorial sites, Jewish suffering was not focused on to the same extent as Communist heroism, and it was viewed through the narrow lens of East German fascist theory – but this is not the same thing as “hardly treating it at all”. More differentiation would have been required. One wonders, too, at the lack of any detailed and judicious coverage either of the 1968 generation in West Germany, or of its impact on West German democracy: more specifically, its *positive* impact. For there are references to the danger posed by radical left-wing groups such as the RAF. In fact, social and generational conflict – and change – in the Federal Republic is all too briefly adumbrated. Yet one can only understand the weaknesses – and the strengths – of West German democracy by taking into

¹ See Deutsches Historisches Museum, Archiv, Bestand MfdG (Museum für deutsche Geschichte): Drehbuch-Entwurf für die Gestaltung des Buchenwald-Museums und einzelner Gedenkräume, 1958.

account the advent and impact of the 1968 generation. Especially in the post-1970 sections of the exhibition, the focus is too much on government and on political parties and figures.

When all is said and done, a visit to the German Historical Museum is a strenuous affair. What, for the visitor, begins as a gentle stroll past a fascinating array of exhibits, soon becomes a weary-legged footmarch (or, for schoolchildren, a frogmarch) past one antique-shop after another. How much are we bid for Helmut Kohl's briefcase? Or the uniform worn by Kaiser Wilhelm I on the occasion of an assassination attempt? Or indeed that massive howitzer? It is more than obvious that the exhibition's organisers were reluctant to structure the exhibition around a strong central narrative – and this for understandable reasons. In this post-modern and arguably post-national age, grand narratives are regarded as a the symptom of a bygone era. Visitors are to be encouraged, as it were, to find their own way and develop their own interpretations. But precisely because grand narratives are symptoms of a bygone era, an exhibition focusing on the past needs to take them into account as historical phenomena. How have the Germans viewed their history through the centuries? How have they sought to make sense of it? How were politics, foreign policy and culture at any given point in German history influenced by grand visions, visions themselves inspired and reinforced by stories about Germany's past greatness? It is disappointing that the exhibition makes no attempt to show us how Germans in the past understood their past, present and future. Such an attempt would have given the exhibition a coherence, without recourse to any single grand narrative. A chance has been missed.

While the exhibition may not have a clear narrative purpose, it does, however, have an "atmosphere". Like the exhibitions in English country houses, a phenomenon, as a British citizen, that I know well, it is steeped in a sense of the wonder of heritage. It is nothing if not colourful, and the exhibitors no doubt hoped visitors would make their way from exhibit to exhibit with a mounting sense of awe. But the German Historical Museum is not Chatsworth House (arguably England's best-known country house). And visitors come to a historical exhibition not to marvel at exhibits, but to be informed. Exhibits in the German Historical Museum do inform and illustrate in many cases, but in others they are there merely to impress. The result is that German history, at times in the exhibition at least, is in danger of being reduced to its most impressive, or most emblematic physical remains; the wish to create an aura has been as much a guiding principle behind this exhibition as the wish to enlighten. Such a combination cannot work. In my view, by creating an aura in a historical museum you are in danger of removing the history being presented from the sphere of rational apprehension. That, surely, cannot be in the interests of the German Historical Museum.

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