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The German Refugee Crisis: Narratives of Empathy and the Politics of Memory

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ABSTRACT

The refugee crisis reached its peak in Germany and Europe in 2016. More than one million refugees, mostly from Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq were registered in Germany alone. Worldwide, millions of people were fleeing, with Europe recording the highest growth rates of refugees. In September 2015, Germany and Austria decided to open their borders to refugees who had been prevented from continuing their journey by the government in Hungary and allowed them to register in Germany or Austria. Most refugees moved on to stay in Germany.

The refugee crisis in Europe has not only changed the political landscape in most European countries but has also had a major impact on the culture of remembrance. The example of Germany will show how the reception of more than one million civil war refugees from Syria influenced and changed the German culture of remembrance and how history was used to promote the reception and integration of refugees. The German example reveals how historical analogies are being used for political reasons and how this decontextualization translates into new patterns of commemoration and politics of memory.

Keywords: Refugee crisis, Germany, European Union, Migration, Memory.

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1. Introduction

The refugee crisis reached its peak in Germany and Europe in 2016. More than one million refugees, mostly from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and North Africa, were registered in Germany alone. The politically unstable situation in Iraq, Afghanistan and the economic problems in North Africa have caused millions of people to leave their homes.

In September 2015, Germany and Austria opened their borders to refugees who had been prevented from continuing their journey by the government in Hungary and allowed them to register in Germany or Austria.

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In autumn 2015 the refugee crisis reached Germany and with it started the debate how the integration of Syrian refugees in German society is possible and feasible. These discussions happened on different levels and were joined by journalists, politicians and academics. What all these debates about the integration of war refugees had in common was the approximation of forced migration from Syria with *Flucht und Vertreibung* (flight and expulsion) of Germans after World War II (Feindt, 2017, p. 553). This historical comparison is remarkable for several reasons. Firstly, it shows how fundamental the memory of World War II in Germany changed and secondly it shows the decontextualization of flight and expulsion from the Second World War. Finally, it reveals how historical analogies are being used for political reasons and how this decontextualization translates into new patterns of commemoration and politics of memory. As the refugee crisis emerged, politicians, scholars and NGO-representatives used historical examples for both, supporting and opposing the integration of refugees into Europe (Feindt, 2017, p. 553). Historical analogies were used in a political discourse and in political decision making to either evoke a positive climate for refugees from the Middle East and Northern Africa or to condemn the integration of refugees.

Most politicians tried the historical comparison between flight and expulsion and the current refugee crisis to promote solidarity and empathy. This was particularly necessary in the European context, as the refugee crisis once again revealed how divided the European Union is on this issue (Greenhill, 2016, p. 317). Even before the refugee crisis intensified in 2015, a fierce dispute broke out over the reception and distribution of civil-war refugees from Syria, in which it became apparent that most European countries were placing national interests above EU solidarity.

It is against this background that the statements made by Jean-Claude Juncker in his State of the Union in September 2015 should be understood. He compared the situation of the civil war refugees from Syria with the forced migration of thousands of Europeans before, during and after the Second World War. In his speech he referred to the mass expulsion and the resettlement of different nationalities in Europe as one of the main characteristics that shaped today's European Union:

Have we really forgotten that after the devastation of the Second World War, 60 million people were refugees in Europe? That as a result of this terrible European experience, a global protection regime – the 1951 Geneva Convention on the status of refugees – was established to grant refuge to those who jumped the walls in Europe to escape from war and totalitarian oppression? We Europeans should know and should never forget why giving refuge and complying with the fundamental right to asylum is so important. I have said in the past that we are too seldom proud of our European heritage and our European project. Yet, in spite of our fragility, our self-perceived weaknesses, today it is Europe that is sought as a place of refuge and exile (Juncker, 2017).

Juncker's speech is just one example of many where politicians and political decision makers referred to forced migration from the past to analyse the European refugee crisis and to find solutions for a political very difficult situation for the European Union.

The goal of this article is, on the one hand, to examine how the 2015 refugee crisis has influenced and changed the German politics of memory, and, on the other hand, to discuss how narratives of the politics of memory were used by various parties to generate empathy for the cause of accepting approximately one million refugees in Germany. This reciprocal, highly complex process will be discussed and illustrated using examples from the media, academia and politics. The first chapter examines the methodology and theoretical framework of the study. Subsequently, the refugee crisis will be examined in more detail, followed by a discussion of the migration history of the Federal Republic of Germany and the historical background of flight and expulsion after 1945. The historical analogies between the current refugee crisis and the situation after 1945 will then be presented.

2. Methodology and theoretical framework

“History is not the past, it is the present. We carry our history with us, we are our history” (Baldwin & Peck, 2017). This research is using textual analysis to study how the refugee crisis influenced the politics of memory in Germany. For this study, newspapers, magazines, books and websites that dealt with the topic at the height of the refugee crisis in autumn 2015 were evaluated.

History accompanies everyone, whether in the form of their personal history, the history of the family into which they were born, or that of their home country. History serves as our frame of

reference and is a regular cause of political crises, controversies, and debates, and therefore a component of our social discourse.

Over the last few years, numerous studies in the discipline of history have focused on the questions of how and why we remember. Here, remembering is described as the process of retrieving events of the past and visualising them in the present (Rüsen, 1994, p. 216). Remembering correlates, the past with the present, as a result of which the two influence each other. Due to this reciprocal relationship, memories of the past become changeable and subject to reinterpretation on the part of the individuals, groups, or cultures who remember. Remembering the past constitutes a highly complex process to which a number of researchers have dedicated themselves (Clark, 2014; Rüsen, 2012; Assmann, 2011).

The central project of these studies is to determine how collective memories emerge, and how these politics of memory, shaped by media representation and dissemination, influence society and politics. The terminology used to examine these processes is at times vague and not always clearly differentiated. The keywords of “the politics of memory” (Aguilar, Brito, & González, 2001; Becker, 2013) particularly describe the political instrumentalization of the “culture of memory,” although the two terms are occasionally used synonymously (Becker 2013, p. 187).

Germany demonstrates an exceptionally great interest in the politics of memory; at least since the 1980s, the post-war period and the responsibility of society as a whole for the crimes of the Nazi regime have represented major topics of debate. The Holocaust and the war crimes of World War II characterised the historical-political debates in Germany for a long time and have shaped the external perception and self-conception of the young Federal Republic (Hockerts, 2001, p. 22). The reappraisal of the country’s own past and the cultivation of an exceptionally active politics of memory through memorial days, monuments, museums, educational curricula, and the media are viewed as exemplary from a foreign perspective. Countries such as Japan and Italy, who took Nazi Germany’s side in World War II, consider the German politics of memory to be commendable (Assmann, 2013, p. 59). However, in recent times, the German politics of memory, which almost solely focuses on its Nazi past, have also been subject to criticism. Aleida Assmann, a leading researcher in the area of the politics of memory and remembrance, has ascribed this criticism to the fact that society and the media have changed drastically since the 1990s, when the politics of memory entered the broad public discourse:

The memories of World War II and the Holocaust will soon exist exclusively in the form of media. The fact that the media landscape is experiencing considerable changes due to the now generally available access to digital media, and especially to social media, plays an important role in this. What significance do national alliances even bear in a digital world where everyone is at an equal distance to everyone else and can access the same repertoire of images, texts, and sounds? In a similar vein, the composition of society has fundamentally changed in times of immigration (Assmann, 2013, p. 14).

Like Almeida Assmann, the German Historian Stefan Troebst pointed out that the changed composition of society must bring a change in the culture of memory.

The wave of war refugees from Syria, which is currently reaching the EU and Germany in particular, will inevitably shift the coordinates of how the commemorative cultural is handling forced migration in this country. In the immigration society, the distinction between German and non-German makes less and less sense (Troebst, 2015).

What and how we remember is subject to constant change. The pedagogical instruments of the politics of memory, the mediatisation of memory, its political instrumentalization, and not least the predominant narrative in political and social discourses are renegotiated again and again and reevaluated by every generation. Political upheaval and social transformations are reflected in the politics of memory and impact the way history is interpreted in a national context. In Germany, the so-called refugee crisis that began in 2015 led to major social and political changes. Taking in over a million people, the majority of whom come from a different cultural and religious background, has sparked social discourses on the country’s own past and future. The conflict in Syria between the government and numerous other national and international forces caused the displacement of millions of people from Syria and the across the Middle East. The refugee crisis, a term coined in early 2015, describes the increased migration from Syria and its neighbouring countries to Europe from across the

Mediterranean Sea by boat or through the so called Balkan route on land (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016, p. 13).

3. Refugee crisis

While countries such as Israel and most of the Gulf states have uniformly turned away refugees, and others such as Hungary have answered with direct violence, Germany has responded with an ambivalent hospitality that is uniquely nuanced and conditioned by memories (and some present-day realities) of xenophobia and fascism (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016, p. 14).

From the start, the 2015 refugee crisis was discussed in Germany against the background of moral obligation and responsibility towards war refugees. Some German politicians spoke of Germany's moral obligation, and a sense of pride, enthusiasm and even moral superiority resonated in the media coverage when they reported on the unconditional acceptance of refugees in Germany (Ulrich, 2015).

During the summer of 2015, Germany witnessed a wave of support and even euphoria for Syrian refugees from broad strata of society. In this specific situation, the implicit equalization of all forms of migration became a leitmotif of the German discussion, referring both to the humanitarian imperative of supporting refugees and successful earlier experiences. (Feindt, 2017, p. 565).

The refugee crisis in Germany and Europe peaked in 2016. More than one million refugees, largely from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and North Africa were registered in Germany alone. As of autumn, 2015, some communities and municipalities registered more than 10,000 asylum seekers a day. Around the world, millions of people were fleeing, but Europe registered the highest rate of increase of incoming refugees (Blume, 2016). In September 2015, Germany and Austria opened their borders to refugees. According to the German government, this border opening – which resulted in hundreds of thousands of refugees flooding into Germany – was intended as a temporary measure, triggered by the crisis situation for refugees in Hungary and Austria (Blume, 2016). Over the following months, more and more people flocked across the so-called Balkan route from Turkey over to Austria and finally to Germany, where they were registered as refugees. Germany's border opening had thereby achieved the opposite effect: Motivated by essentially unrestricted entry to Germany, thousands of refugees headed to Europe from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan over the following months, most of them aiming for Germany or Sweden as their final destination (Ostrand, 2015).

The 'refugee crisis' a term that had established itself in Germany by 2015 (Alcalde, 2016, p. 2; Krzyżanowski, Triandafyllidou, & Wodak, 2018, p. 3) led to far-reaching political changes in Germany. As a result of the mass influx of refugees into the EU in general, and Germany in particular, the situation started to be perceived as a crisis in 2015 and has been portrayed as such by the media ever since (Lehmann, 2015, p. 7). Media coverage itself also contributed to this 'crisis' perception, by nearly every day publishing pictures of refugees who had drowned in the Mediterranean Sea or focusing on the catastrophic humanitarian conditions in refugee camps in Turkey and Greece. From a political perspective, accepting, distributing, and providing supplies for refugees is a highly contentious matter among European states and also led to cross-party discussions in Germany (Gehrsitz & Ungerer, 2017). Angela Merkel's own party (the Christian Democratic Union, or CDU) sharply criticized the chancellor's decision to open the border and accept war refugees. This decision ultimately led to a considerable decline in her approval ratings, and her decision not to seek another nomination as her party's chancellor candidate in 2018. Another immediate consequence of the refugee crisis has been the rise of right-wing conservative parties such as the "Alternative für Deutschland" ("Alternative for Germany", AfD), who succeeded in gaining seats in the regional parliaments as well as in the German parliament as the third-strongest party in 2017 (Decker, 2016). A result that was confirmed in the European elections and the council elections in Germany in 2019, where right-wing and nationalist parties won many votes.

Since the start of the refugee crisis in the summer of 2015 and the cultivation of the so-called "Willkommenskultur" (welcome culture, here in the sense of welcoming refugees), the treatment of refugees, their integration, and the associated social, economic, and cultural problems have shaped the public debate (Münkler, 2016, p. 8). But there has been a clear shift in the public discourse. The arrival and acceptance of refugees was initially positively received across party lines, and garnered support from leading conservative media as well as the tabloids. But this attitude saw a turning point on New Year's Eve in 2016, when a large group of immigrants sexually assaulted hundreds of women (Schiffer-

Nasserie, 2015). Although highly lauded abroad, welcome culture considerably weakened ever since the attacks on New Year's Eve, even though many Germans still actively support refugee aid (Zunes, 2017).

4. Expulsion, migration, and memory culture

Germany's experience with migration and flight can largely be traced back to the expulsion of approximately 13 million ethnic Germans from their homelands in Central, Eastern and Southwestern Europe after 1945 (Schulze, 2006). Germans who were living beyond the newly drawn border between Poland and Germany, the so-called Oder-Neiße line (named after the rivers Oder and Neiße) at the time were forced to leave their homes in haste, fled in fear of the vengeance by the Red Army or were expelled, as these areas no longer belonged to Germany's post-war territory following the peace agreement in 1945. According to this agreement the territory east of the Oder-Neiße river became Polish, including the German provinces of Pomerania, East Prussia, Lower and Upper Silesia and the city of Danzig (Lowe, 2012, p. 19). The Potsdam Agreement after the war, signed by the Allies, provided the countries who were having ethnic Germans in their territories with the legal and official endorsement for their expulsion (Lowe, 2012, p. 20). This mass exodus of Germans from East and Southeast Europe, resulted in about 1.5 to 2 million fatalities and was accompanied by ethnic cleansing, mass suicides and mass rape by the victorious Red Army (Douglas, 2012).

The victims of this forced migration were not welcomed with open arms in post-war Germany. Many people had to stay in crowded refugee camps or had to share rooms with other families. At a time where resources like food, housing, clean water, firewood and jobs were sparse, the refugees were seen as a heavy burden by the impoverished post-war population. It took more than 20 years to overcome these obstacles and to fully integrate the expelled Germans into the society and economy of the young West-German Republic (Faulenbach, 2009, p. 108).

The expulsion of millions of Germans after the Second World War and their although difficult but successful integration into post war Germany has formed a central element of the German politics of memory ever since the foundation of the Federal Republic (Hockerts, 2001; Schwarz 2001; Beer 2011, Kittel, 2011). With more than twelve million Germans who experienced forced migration; the remembrance of the Second World War and the Holocaust shifted from victims of Germany to the German victims of flight and expulsion after 1945. In the late 70s the collective memory of the lost homeland in the east was marginalized by the emerging memory of the Holocaust (Feindt, 2017, p. 552). Now, the Jewish victims of the war and countless other people of ethnic or religious minorities who were killed in Concentration Camps were in the focus of the memory culture. Therefore, the victims of flight and expulsion turned towards individual victimhood and claimed a universal commemoration of the forced migration and the condemnation of any future mass expulsion based on ethical or racial questions. With the decontextualization of flight and expulsion the door was open for humanitarian and political claims based on the forced mass migration of Germans after the Second World War (Feindt, 2017 p. 552).

The time preceding German reunification in 1990 also saw a major refugee movement, as thousands of East Germans fled to West Germany through the Hungarian and Czech borders in 1989, shortly before the GDR (German Democratic Republic) fell. Germany is not a classic immigration country like the United States, Canada or Australia for example, and had never been willing to accept a large number of refugees until 2015. However, migration movements have occurred again and again. In the 1950s, for example, Germany recruited workers from Italy, Turkey, and Greece on a significant scale. In the 1990s, the country took in approximately 400,000 war refugees from the former Yugoslavia, as well as granting numerous so-called late repatriates – immigrants with a German background – the right to return to Germany after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Haman & Krakayali, 2016, p. 72).

In the past, the political elites in Germany have always permitted migration if it served to balance out a lack of workers, particularly recruiting specialists from specific industries. Not until 1998 did Germany officially describe itself as a country of immigration, although the number of accepted refugees quickly receded following the intake of war refugees from former Yugoslavia, as Germany tightened its entry requirements (Münkler, 2016, p. 7).

5. 'Welcome Culture' and historical associations

The long summer of migration in 2015, which can be traced back to the border opening initiated by Angela Merkel, led to a large-scale, in part unregulated influx of refugees into Germany (Lehmann, 2015, p. 8). This marked the first time in Germany's history since the end of World War II that thousands of individuals sought refuge in Germany within a short period of time. Neither the government nor the country's communities and social organisations were prepared for the flood of refugees. The initial reception and provision of care for the more than a million refugees who entered Germany up until 2016 only succeeded due to the help of countless volunteers who assisted the refugees and even took some into their own homes (Hamann & Karakayali, 2016, p. 74). On an international scale, this 'welcome culture' was received with astonishment and admiration (Cohen, 2015). The unparalleled commitment of millions of voluntary helpers who received refugees at train stations and processing points with applause and donations were viewed as an expression of a "new" Germany that sees itself as open-minded and liberal after World War II and the reunification in 1990.

"Sometimes German words end up having an international career. Kindergarten is one of them, Blitzkrieg another. Willkommenskultur could be next. With its uniquely German ring of bureaucratise and poetics, Willkommenskultur means "welcome culture" and is a word not born of custom but created to establish one" (Akrap, 2016).

Approximately 11% of Germans have actively supported refugees since 2015, and this number remained stable in the following months (Hamann & Karakayali, 2016, p. 75). Other sources speak of more than eight million Germans who donated their time to refugee aid in 2015 (Vollmer & Karakayali, 2016, p. 123).

According to a representative study, the reason why many citizens – spanning all social classes and age groups – are willing to volunteer to help refugees lies in their own family history.

A total of 49% of the German population, meaning nearly every other citizen, have a personal connection to displaced individuals: either they themselves or a family member were displaced, or they have friend or acquaintance who have themselves or whose family has been expelled from their home (Stiftung Flucht, Vertreibung und Versöhnung 2015).

A majority of those surveyed also indicated that they were very concerned about the current refugee crisis, and a third of all participants stated that they were interested and moved by the topic of refugees and expulsion after 1945 (ibid). Aside from the personal connection with the topic, the subject of flight and displacement serves as one of the central narratives of German politics of memory and is proudly viewed as one of post-war society's most important achievements, due to the successful integration of the displaced Germans from the east in the young Federal Republic.

The displacement of more than 10 million Germans from former German areas in 1945 and the integration of these refugees into post-war society form part of the Federal Republic's founding myths (Kittel, 2011, p. 8) and are pulled up as a comparative yardstick by politicians, citizens, and the media within the framework of the refugee crisis. On the occasion of the first national Memorial Day for the victims of flight and displacement in 2015, the Federal President at the time, Joachim Gauck, drew clear parallels between the current refugee crisis and the German population's expulsion from the eastern areas in 1945:

I wish the memory of those who fled or were expelled back then (1945, C.W.) could enhance our understanding for those who have fled or been displaced today. ... 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. We always need a vision of ourselves which carries us onward. And, in the long term, we will only be able to accept ourselves if we do everything possible just now (Gauck, 2015).

Given the fact that people turn to the past as a standard of comparison and for self-reassurance, the comparison to flight and expulsion in 1945 seems apt. As the numbers of refugees increased, and especially after the incidents in Cologne on New Year's Eve, many citizens started to worry about whether and how millions of refugees could successfully be integrated. Beer (2016) points out that the present is interpreted by looking to the past in order to defuse the growing insecurity within society. Scientists, journalists, and not least politicians swear to what has become a narrative of the seamless integration of millions of displaced persons after the end of the war. At the CDU's federal

party conference – at the preliminary peak in December 2015 of the refugee crisis – chancellor Angela Merkel also emphasised these historical parallels by putting the refugee crisis on a level with the expulsion of the Germans in 1945:

We face the biggest refugee crisis since the Second World War. The fight for a unified Europe is worthwhile – of that I am deeply convinced. ... We are going to manage this – if there are obstacles to overcome, then we will have to work to overcome them. We are ready to show what we are made of (Paterson, 2015).

Bernd Fabritius, the president of the conservative BdV (Bund der Vertriebenen = Federation of Expellees) used the same pattern of comparison and historical analogies. The Federation of Expellees is a non-profit organization, founded in 1957 in West-Germany to represent the German nationals who fled or were forced to leave their homes in the aftermath of the Second World War.

In his speech at the Tag der Heimat (homeland day) in August 2015 Fabritius wished for the society to welcome the Syrian war refugees with open arms and compared their situation with what the expelled Germans after the war experienced when they arrived in West-Germany. Interestingly Fabritius stated in his speech that the situation between the war refugees today is completely different from the situation of the expelled Germans after the war but regardless of these differences he called for a broad solidarity with victims of forced migration.

Nevertheless, the situation of the German expellees is not comparable to the situation of the current refugee situation and the challenges facing today. After the war, ladies and gentlemen, compatriots came, people from the same cultural group came, they spoke the same language, prayed to the same god despite different denominations, they lived the same values.

For many refugees and displaced people today, it is much harder because they come from other cultures and are literally foreign. It is therefore more difficult for the receiving society. Nevertheless, and for that very reason, I ask you to meet the suffering people of today with even more empathy than we and our mothers and fathers were first to face 70 years ago. (Fabritius, 2015).

His argumentation is exemplary for the equalization of all forms of forced migration while referring to the “humanitarian imperative” of supporting war refugees and the successful integration of the expellees after the war (Feindt 2017, p. 565). In his speech, Fabritius used a central element that can be found again and again in the comparisons between the current refugee crisis and the expulsion after the end of the Second World War. He has linked the flight from the Syrian civil war with the issue of forced migration in general, thus placing the issue of flight and expulsion after 1945 in a broader context. Flight and expulsion are thus not a national, purely German topic of remembrance, but appear as a topic in an international context. By placing the flight and expulsion of Germans after the war in a broader, international context, the speaker gives it new relevance. He thus takes up what Almeida Assmann and Stefan Troest have already mentioned in their remarks on the politics of remembrance. German society has undergone major changes since the end of the Second World War and is much more characterized by integration and immigration than ever before. Be it that more and more families themselves have a migration background or that flight and expulsion are no longer seen as a purely German fate but as an international problem.

Not only have top politicians drawn historical parallels, but church organizations such as the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland have done the same. Under the banner of “Fremdling.eu”, the church ran a large-scale poster campaign and operated a web presence with which it promoted neighbourly love for refugees. Large posters displayed iconic images of women and children fleeing from the occupied eastern regions in 1945. The pictures included quotes from the Old Testament: “You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the soul of a stranger, for you were strangers in Egypt” (Fremdling.eu, n.d.). (“Fremdling” translates to “stranger,” in the sense of Leviticus 19:33)

The images used in the campaign by the Evangelical Church made additional appearances in similar campaigns, for example at the town hall in Leipzig in October 2015. At the height of welcome culture, two pictures were mounted on the town hall façade side by side, each depicting a woman with her child in the middle of a landscape of ruins. The images were displayed without any captions, as the city administration assumed that both pictures were known to the public. One image showed a woman in the bombed Syrian town of Kobani, the other photo stemmed from war-ravaged Gdansk in 1945 (Scholz, 2016). In an interview, Mayor Jung explained the background of the poster campaign. He stated that he wanted to point to the historic parallel between the flight and expulsion in 1945 and the

war refugees of today. The central idea behind this campaign lay in utilizing the model function of the successful integration achieved by the German post-war society: “Back then, we mastered this situation in times that were much worse” (Leipziger Volkszeitung, 2015). Furthermore, he referred to the refugee crisis as something the Germans must overcome and should see as a challenge. The campaign at Leipzig’s town hall was unusual not just in its presentation, but also in terms of its statement. The use of two iconic images, one of them well-known from today’s news, the other from German school textbooks, conjured up the picture of a “common fate” of refugees and displaced Germans (Scholz, 2016). This comparison of fortunes, which Gauck and Merkel already hinted at in their speeches, represents a new phenomenon in the German politics of memory, in which the flight and displacement of 1945 forms a fixed component. Equating the flight and displacement of Germans after World War II to war refugees from Syria is – from a strictly historical perspective - incorrect in light of the completely different migration stories. While in 1945 it was the Germans who were forced to flee or were displaced from former eastern areas such as Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, today’s refugees have a different migration background, and different legal instruments and definitions apply to them (Beer, 2016). In addition, the displaced came from a similar cultural and linguistic cultural background and belonged to the newly founded Federal Republic as Germans. Therefore, their integration took place under distinctive conditions from the start. Furthermore, in 1945, the Western forces had obligated the Federal Republic to manage the integration of the Germans from the former eastern regions, but the allies did not address the matter of how to achieve this.

Nonetheless, a number of historians and academics emphasize this correlation and use it as a standard of comparison. They make associations and analogies to draw conclusions and “morals” from history (Kossert, 2015). “The German migration experience constitutes an important cultural asset that should be exploited and harnessed in the process of historical reassurance for dealing with the refugees of today and integrating them into society” (Scholz, 2016). It is not surprising that especially communities and churches use these historical comparisons to generate empathy for the thousands of refugees who flocked into Germany every day in 2015. As the border opened without any preparation in the summer of 2015, they were the main actors responsible for caring for and accommodating the displaced (Scholz, 2016). Without the help of thousands of voluntary helpers and the unbureaucratic aid offered by many communities, a welcome culture and support for refugees would have been impossible (Hamann & Karakayali, 2016, p. 74). There are some differences here in comparison to the situation after the end of the war in 1945, when the integration of the displaced only succeeded with the enforced cooperation of the communities who took in refugees even against the wishes of their own citizens (Faulenbach, 2009, p. 107)

An oral history project launched by the broadcasting company Westdeutscher Rundfunk in the spring of 2019 illustrates the extent to which the media coverage of the politics of memory has changed since the refugee crisis. Now, not the only German victims of flight and expulsion were depicted as victims of the Second World War but rather a claim for a universal, more international commemoration of past war crimes and victims of forced migration.

In addition to an app which portrays contemporary witnesses of World War II as a hologram, another more large-scale contemporary witness project is in the making. Titled “A Childhood in War”, Syrian war refugees living in Germany, among others, report on their experiences (Hoff, 2019). These experiences are juxtaposed with reports from World War II, thereby illustrating once more that the wars in Syria, and other regions such as Afghanistan, are viewed as part of a bigger context in terms of the politics of memory. The experiences of Flight and Expulsion (Flucht und Vertreibung) of Germans after World War II, which for a long time were seen exclusively from the German national perspective, are now depicted within an overarching context of war and its consequences for the civilian population.

Another example shows how the 2015 refugee crisis is decontextualized in very different settings and outside the world of academics or politicians. Dieter Zetsche, the chairperson of Mercedes-Benz, stated in an interview about refugees in 2015: (The refugees are) “... young, well-educated and highly motivated. Those are exactly the people we’re searching for. ... The refugees can become the motor of another economic miracle in Germany, like migrants did before in the 1950s and 60s.” (Zetsche, 2015). He is hereby alluding to the mass recruitment of foreign workers in the 1950s and 1960s

who worked in the industrial and mining sectors and balanced out the labour shortage in Germany during the economic upswing after World War II. Zetsche was harshly criticized for his statements in this interview, since at this point in 2015, many migration researchers had already pointed out the problems that would cause difficulty in integrating refugees into the job market (Gehrsitz & Ungerer, 2017). In contrast to the foreign workers who were recruited specifically to work in the industrial and mining sector in the 1950s and 1960s, many refugees have no education, or merely a poor school education to speak of, and therefore cannot immediately be employed in the positions in the automobile industry mentioned by Zetsche (Gehrsitz & Ungerer, 2017). Zetsche's statement shows the universalizing conceptualizations of the refugee crisis and how it drew on different historical associations which were established within the German politics of memory (Feindt, 2017, p. 565). Historical associations may be helpful in a situation like the refugee crisis in 2015 because they offer guidance and a sense of stability, but they cannot answer the question of how and if the integration of over one million refugees can be successful.

The question of how to successfully integrate today's refugees – the essential and decisive component of the refugee question – remains uncertain. There are speculations on what the long-term consequences of the current intake of refugees will be – demographically, economically, politically, culturally. It is unclear whether refugees will help balance Germany's demographic problem of population decline, at least in the long term. It must still be seen whether they deliver the workers, and particularly specialists, that the economy is desperately seeking. And although it is assumed, it is also far from clear whether it will be possible to balance the resources of the German social welfare system with the number of incoming refugees. The only thing that is certain is that we are facing a long process with uncertain, by no means predictable consequences – for refugees and for German society (Beer, 2016).

6. Conclusion

There is a fundamental difference between today's refugee crisis and the one that followed World War II. Despite this, the media, politicians, and the public compare the two. We can and undoubtedly will draw conclusions about the current crisis based on the refugee issue from 1945, but it is not suitable as a standard of comparison. Integrating more than ten million Germans who fled the eastern regions or were displaced constituted a painful process that lasted decades and demanded great sacrifices from everyone involved. The current refugee crisis presents a completely new situation given its dimensions and the associated challenges. As a result, it is hardly possible to predict when and how the crisis can be overcome. The state can rely on asylum law and the empathy of its citizens, the majority of whom welcome refugees, when it comes to integrating the new citizens. The politics of memory – in which flight and displacement form a well-known narrative – have changed as a result of the refugee crisis. Refugees from civil war-torn Syria are seen as part of a community of fate that exists beyond nationality or ethnicity. The universalizing idea of a shared victimhood between Syrian War refugees and Germans who experiences flight and expulsion was a dominant narrative during the long summer of migration in 2015. As of 2019, the analogy between the German victims and Syrian refugees is not something the media, academics or politicians are drawing on anymore. With the ever-growing number of refugees entering Germany and a failed European response towards the ongoing refugee crisis, the debate about the integration of more than one million refugees got more and more critical. Whereas the analogy of German expellees and Syrian war refugees was used to generate empathy it also established an overarching narrative of a shared fate. With now almost 1.8 million refugees in Germany this narrative is not suitable anymore because it fails to help with the actual integration of the refugees into a society that is vastly different in regards to culture, political system and religion. The integration of the German expellees into the post-war society was a long and difficult process of more than two decades. The integration of the refugees today is still just at the beginning and it remains unclear if and how the German society will be able to cope with all the social and political implications aligned with this integration.

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