

**Dr. Monika Röther,
Establishing the House of History
of the Federal Republic of Germany
in the midst of Controversy**

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“Museum in the Midst of Controversy:
What is ‚Contemporary‘?”
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The spoken text is binding.

First of all, many thanks to the director and the organizers of this conference for giving me the opportunity to participate. It is great to be back in Seoul and in the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History and I feel honored to be here and talk to you about the establishment of national museums for contemporary history in Germany.

This year, on November 9th 2019, Germany remembers the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Next year, we will celebrate 30 years of unification. As you can imagine, our national government and many institutions such as museums will commemorate these anniversaries with manifold ceremonial acts, festivities and cultural activities.

Germany has two national history museums which will both participate in the festivities and will both host several events: In our capital city Berlin we have the **“Deutsches Historisches Museum”/“German Historical Museum”**, which shows German history from the Middle Ages to the Fall of the Berlin Wall.

I work for the **“Stiftung Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland”** – in English that is **“Foundation House of History of the Federal Republic of Germany”**. The Foundation is based in Bonn and its mission is to convey German contemporary history since 1945 to the general public and to conduct extensive collecting activities covering this period. So, in contrast to the German Historical Museum in Berlin which presents a huge period of about 1,500 years,

the foundation House of History is responsible for contemporary history. That means, we focus on German history (in international context) after the end of the Second World War, we focus on the last 75 years.

It is worth noting that although today in Germany we have two large national history museums, Germany did not have any national history museum until the 1980s – a fact which may astound you.

Nowadays, both museums are generally accepted as national institutions with innovative concepts of presenting and discussing German history in an international context. However, they were both founded in times of lively debate: The founding years, the 1980s, were indeed times of controversial discussions on German history. As the House of History and the German Historical Museum were both established under the same circumstances and as the public discussions were very similar, I am going to focus on the House of History in my presentation, as that is the museum I work for.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, a few basic facts: The domicile of the foundation is the **House of History** in Bonn. It was established during the 1980s, its first permanent exhibition opened in 1994. It was revised and renewed several times, but from 1994 to the present day the overall topic has always been the same: The permanent exhibition of the House of History in Bonn presents German history from the end of the Second World War to the present. It shows the history of the Federal Republic of Germany (that is West Germany) as well as of

the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) and from 1990 we are happy to deal with our common history.

Three more museums belong to the foundation: The „Zeitgeschichtliches Forum“ in Leipzig in the East of our country (Forum of Contemporary History), the Tränenpalast (the Palace of Tears) on the former border crossing point and the Museum in der Kulturbrauerei in Berlin. These three museums were built up later: The Forum of Contemporary History in Leipzig was opened in 1999, the two museums in Berlin were opened in 2011 and 2013. At that time, the foundation House of History was already well-known and popular with the public. That is why today I will focus on the first and largest museum of the foundation, the House of History in Bonn.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

as I already mentioned, Germany did – quite surprisingly – not have any national history museum until the **1980s**. In 1982, **Dr. Helmut Kohl** became federal chancellor. He was one of the first high-ranking politicians in Germany to campaign for the establishment of a national history museum. He himself was a historian, actually, and in his first government declaration on **October 13th 1982** he called for a collection on recent German history after WW II to be created in the Federal capital Bonn.

At the same time, also at the beginning of the 80s, the idea for a national museum in Berlin was born, and soon, **the federal chancellor was campaigning for both museums.**

That means, in the beginning of the 80s, German society was suddenly discussing plans for two large history museums – one in Bonn and one in Berlin. But what was the reason for this new trend? How come that two national museums were founded in the 1980s, after 40 years without any national history museum?

In the following, I would like to give a short report of the role museums played in Germany at that time, give you some brief information about the place and significance of **history, museums and exhibitions in Germany in the 1970s and 80s**. On that basis, we will be able to get closer insight into the process of the establishment of the House of History “in the midst of controversy” in Germany.

Until the 1970s, German national history was not dealt with in museums. German national history was dominated by the Holocaust – a history at the time thought not to be suitable to be presented in a museum. The buildings of some former concentration camps were preserved as memorial sites in the 1950s and 1960s, and beyond that, national history was only brought up in speeches of politicians, for example to commemorate the anniversaries of the end of World War II. Politicians warned the German people not to forget about the crimes of the National Socialists. They remembered the victims of the war and the Holocaust and emphasized the importance of peace and human rights in Europe.

So, in the 1970s, German politicians started thinking about founding a national museum. The federal president **Gustav Heinemann** (1969-1974) for example had received the impression that Germans did not know enough about their history – about positive traditions as well as negative developments – and did remember and analyse their past the way he thought it was necessary for a positive development of German society and democracy. That is why he founded the **“Erinnerungsstätte für die Freiheitsbewegungen in der deutschen Geschichte”** / the **“Memorial Site for freedom movements in German History”** in 1974 and created a **“history contest”** for school kids. As the memorial site was established in Rastatt, a historical site of the German Revolutions 1848-49, but at the same time kind of remote/out-of-the-way, and as it only focused on freedom movements and democratic traditions in the 19th century, it never became a real national museum of German history. But still, Heinemann's initiative was pathbreaking and an important step to increase public interest in history: The memorial site in Rastatt became an early predecessor of the national history museums.

In the late 1970s, the interest of the German population in their history was rising. There are several reasons for and signs of that: For example, the American TV series **“Holocaust”**, which tells the story of the Holocaust from the perspectives of a fictional family of German Jews and that of a member of the SS/National Socialists, was shown on German television in January 1979. It turned out to be extremely popular and lead to increasing public interest in the crimes committed during the Nazi era. The series was watched by roughly

50% of the West German population and it first brought the matter of genocide during World War II to widespread public attention in a way that it had never been before.

The above development led up to the creation of some large **exhibitions on German history** were presented in various parts of Germany; they were prepared and paid for by the federal states (not German government, but regional governments).

For example, the exhibitions on the Hohenstaufen dynasty (“Die Zeit der Staufer”) which was shown in Stuttgart in 1977 and on the House of Wittelsbach (“Wittelsbach und Bayern”) in Munich in 1980 were highly praised and attracted many visitors. These exhibitions dealt with medieval history, with events that happened several hundred years ago – so they were of little controversy.

The first large exhibition that showcased recent German history was a presentation on Prussia in Berlin in 1981 (“Preußen – Versuch einer Bilanz”). It focused on the era preceding National Socialism – not an easy topic. But: It was very successful, nearly 500,000 visitors came to see it.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As you may have already realized: We have arrived in the 1980s and history exhibitions and museums had become popular. At the time, West Germany experienced a museum boom: Various museums were founded throughout the country, either as town museums or museums of the federal states.

In **October 1982, Helmut Kohl** was elected Federal Chancellor and presented his plan to establish a national history museum:

„We want to work towards establishing a collection of German history since 1945 in the federal capital Bonn as soon as possible.“

In his second government declaration on 4th of May 1983, Kohl made his intentions more explicit:

„We, the Germans, have to come to terms with our history – with its greatness as well as its misery – leaving nothing out, adding nothing. [...] German history in European contexts and conditions needs to be the younger generation's spiritual home again.“

The Federal chancellor campaigned for both museums – the House of History in Bonn and the German Historical museum in Berlin – since 1983. In the political situation of the early 1980s, it was hardly surprising that chancellor Kohl's announcement to establish two national history museums was followed by intensive and controversial discussions in the media, in cultural and academic institutions, in politics and among civil society groups.

Critics argued that the conservative federal government would impose their view of German history on the visitors and they worried that any critical discussion would be suppressed. Some even suspected that the narrative in the new museum might relativize, that means attempt to reduce or qualify the significance of the Holocaust.

But the Chancellor did not waste any time **setting up the House of History**: In the same year, in 1983, a commission of experts was set up, consisting of four historians, political scientists and museum experts. They were asked to develop the conception of the museum and its permanent exhibition. What is important: This commission of experts was able to work independently of any political influence. A first draft of the commission's conception was presented to the public in November 1983 ("Überlegungen und Vorschläge zur Errichtung eines Hauses der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in Bonn" / "Considerations and propositions for the establishment of a House of History of the Federal Republic of Germany in Bonn"). It was deliberately left kind of unfinished and open to discussion. It was sent to numerous civil society groups, to political parties, universities and personalities from politics, science, society and economy. The conception was discussed at several big public hearings and comments, criticism and suggestions were considered. These open debates were very important and supportive for the acceptance of the new museum in German politics and society. Finally, in July 1985, the federal government approved of the basic conception of the content of the new House of History, and at the beginning of 1986, a dependent foundation was established, which was converted to an independent foundation four years later in 1990. In any case, once the foundation House of History had been established, the staff was hired and they started working. As we have seen, this new team was indeed preparing their first permanent exhibition in times of lively debate in the historical sci-

ences and the public – they were right **“in the midst of controversy”** – to pick up the title of our conference. The founding years of the House of History and the German Historical Museum, the 1980s, were times of controversial discussions on German history. So, the debate on the establishment of the House of History cannot be seen without considering the more general discussions on the politics of memory in Germany at that time. These discussions reached their climax in the so-called **“Historikerstreit”** in 1986/87 – in English that's a dispute among historians. The historians' dispute was an intellectual and political controversy about how best to remember and deal with Nazi Germany and the Holocaust and on the question if the crimes of Nazi Germany were unprecedented in their cruelty in the history of mankind or if other crimes, such as those of Stalin in the Soviet Union, were comparably evil. Actually, the name “historians' dispute” is misleading, as it wasn't only a scholarly debate within the scientific community. The debate attracted a lot of media and public attention, with its participants frequently giving television interviews and writing articles in newspapers. The debates about the founding of the House of History and the German Historical Museum became kind of a sideshow / a sideline discussion of the historians' dispute because many left-wing German historians of the time disliked what they saw as the nationalistic tone of the Kohl government. They suspected that chancellor Kohl wanted the museum to emphasize the post-war success story and to neglect National Socialism and Nazi crimes.

You see, the team building up the House of History and preparing the permanent exhibition did not have an easy job. The construction and

planning of a new national museum was a great challenge for all involved. There was no model, as a national museum that dealt exclusively with contemporary history existed nowhere in the world. The House of History initially had no collections of their own, the employees had to painstakingly hunt for and gather all the objects. They were able to secure some outstanding exhibits for the museum; including the furniture of the first Bundestag (that's the parliament), the official car of the first federal chancellor Konrad Adenauer, a huge black Mercedes, and even the railroad car which the chancellors from Konrad Adenauer to Willy Brandt used for business travel. It was placed into the basement of the museum building during its construction.

Finally, nearly 12 years after his first initiative, Federal chancellor Helmut Kohl opened the House of History and its 4,000 sqm permanent exhibition on **June 14th 1994**. I am happy to say that the House of History was – and today still is – a museum for everyone, for visitors of all ages and all walks of life.

In his opening speech, he said:

“This museum presents contemporary history in a clear and comprehensible way.... This museum shows the diversity of historical perspectives. ... This House of History of the Federal Republic of Germany recalls a past which must enter into our future.”

After the opening of the exhibition, the critics fell silent quickly. The

lively and diverse, multifaceted and visitor-friendly design of the exhibition also convinced the skeptics and has since inspired numerous Houses of History in Germany and across Europe.

Today, our permanent exhibition in Bonn, titled **„Our History. Germany since 1945“** also starts with the post-war years and the division of Germany. The visitors find out how the two parts of Germany developed and what links existed between the Federal Republic and Communist East Germany. The way to reunification is presented as well as the challenges that Germany has been facing from 1990 to the present day.

Political events and developments form the central track running through the exhibition. Moreover, our visitors see a broad variety of objects relating to everyday life, culture, business life and world events. Each item in the exhibition has its own story to tell. We present the small private and the large public narratives that have changed society. A mass of different stories merge to form „Our History“.

From the opening in June 1994 to today (in the last 25 years) about 13 million visitors have seen the permanent exhibition. In addition to that, we have counted roundabout 7 million visits in our temporary exhibitions in Bonn, so that in total, by the time we celebrate our 25th anniversary in June this year – about 20 million people have come to see our exhibitions in the House of history in Bonn. (plus we have many evening events forming special thematic highlights for those interested in further information, discussion.)

Ladies and Gentlemen,

let me give you a short **conclusion**: Looking back to the founding years of the House of History has made one thing very clear: In the midst of controversy, two structural characteristics of the foundation House of History were essential for its success and survival: its **institutional as well as its academic independence**.

The foundation is politically independent and has four organs: the Board of Trustees, the Academic Advisory Council, a group of representatives of Civil Society Groups, and the President.

The **Board of Trustees** is the Foundation's supervisory body. It decides on the budget, the fundamentals of the program, and on all key appointments. It is composed in equal parts of members of the Bundestag (parliament), the federal government and the Bundesrat (representatives of federal states). Furthermore, we have the **Academic Advisory Council** which is made up of historians, political scientists and museum experts, and a group of representatives of **Civil Society Groups** who represent the interests of different visitor groups. **They both** advise the Board of Trustees and the **President**. Together they help ensure that the Foundation can fulfil its mission.

And – what's positive about controversy and debate: When there are open discussions, there is democracy. Heated debates are part of democratic and pluralistic processes of formation of opinion and decision-making.

Generally speaking, museums are contact zones, they give room for discussions. Visitors do not only get into contact with historical facts and figures, but also with each other and with conflicting views of history, with diverging experiences and memories. In contrast to a movie, for example, a museum does not tell one single consistent story, but shows different perspectives and encourages visitors to interact, to debate and discuss and to form their own opinion.

So, to be “in the midst of controversy” is the best thing to happen in a contemporary history museum.

Thank you for your attention.