

August 2023

KEY ISSUES PAPER

THE »GERMAN-POLISH HOUSE. COMMEMORATE – ENCOUNTER – UNDERSTAND«

deutschpolnisheshaus.de



Stiftung
Denkmal für die
ermordeten Juden
Europas

DEUTSCHES
POLEN
INSTITUT

The »German-Polish House. Commemorate – Encounter – Understand« is the most significant project to address German-Polish relations within the framework of German commemorative policy. The main objective of the German-Polish House is to commemorate the victims of the German occupation of Poland during World War Two. In addition, it will illustrate the various ways in which the history of the two countries has been intertwined before 1939 and after 1945, for example through the partitions of Poland, which resulted in a substantial proportion of the Polish population coming under Prussian rule; Polish migration to German lands; Polish-German rapprochement after 1945; and integration into the EU and NATO.

The German-Polish House will be innovative and the first of its kind in the world. Never before has one nation worked alongside another to realise such a project as an expression of the historical responsibility for its crimes and victims. The House will recount the entangled history of two societies. It is intended to further existing efforts towards reconciliation by transmitting knowledge, providing a space for commemoration and creating many different opportunities for dialogue and exchange.

This key issues paper provides the basis for an implementation plan that is scheduled for completion by spring 2024. In March 2023 a »task force« was set up to elaborate the plan, based at the Foundation Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe (Memorial Foundation) and funded by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and Media. Close cooperation with the German Poland Institute (Deutsches Polen Institut, DPI) is integral to the project.

1. Background

At the end of 2019 the Memorial Foundation proposed the creation of a documentation centre in a prominent Berlin location to address the German occupation regime in Europe between 1939 and 1945. Since 2017 the DPI has been advocating the establishment of a commemorative site in Berlin dedicated to Poland's victims of World War Two, and it lent its support to a corresponding citizens' initiative. This proposed site was to be linked with an exhibition on German-Polish history and a broad range of activities in the field of education and exchange. Since 2020 the two institutions have worked together effectively to formulate joint ideas on the project.

On 9 October 2020 the German Bundestag voted to establish a centre for documentation, education and remembrance dedicated to the history of World War Two and the National Socialist occupation in Europe. The centre is to be developed under the auspices of the German Historical Museum. On 30 October 2020 the Bundestag passed the resolution: »A Forum for Remembrance and Exchange to Reflect the Attributes of German-Polish History and Contribute to Deepening the Special Bilateral Relationship«. After an extensive consultation process and a series of meetings with experts, in September 2021 the Federal Foreign Office presented its initial concept for a »Forum for Remembrance and Exchange with Poland« (Poland Forum for short).¹

After the Federal election in autumn 2021, responsibility for the Poland Forum was transferred from the Federal Foreign Office to the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media. On 12 May 2022 the Commissioner gave the Memorial Foundation the task of further developing existing ideas in conjunction with the DPI. The Memorial Foundation operates in accordance with its legal mandate »to protect the memory of all victims of National Socialism and to honour it appropriately« (Law of 17 March 2000). The two institutions subsequently began to develop the concept for what was later renamed the German-Polish House.

¹ Ort des Erinnerns und der Begegnung mit Polen. Konzept. Auswärtiges Amt [Berlin 2021], abrufbar unter: <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/blob/2482192/b066a68fd345413e8406c39cf21d6816/210915-konzept-data.pdf>

2. Concept

The concept for the German-Polish House is centred on three pillars: a memorial to the victims of the German war against Poland, an area with historical information focusing on the period 1939 to 1945 and including exhibitions dealing with German-Polish history over the centuries, and a section dedicated to educational work with Poland.

The Memorial

The Memorial to the Victims of World War Two in German-Occupied Poland should be a striking artistic component that is either connected with the building or integrated into the landscaped surroundings. It will be conducive to both individual reflection and official commemoration, for example the laying of wreaths. Artists will be invited to take part in a competition which will consist of several rounds. A jury of prominent individuals will decide on the design of the building and the memorial as an expression of Germany's continuing responsibility.

Historical Information

Knowledge of what, whom, and why we remember is essential to create active, empathetic forms of commemoration and at the same time to look forward with future generations in mind. The planned German-Polish House aims to remember the suffering endured in Poland between 1939 and 1945 and the violent death of more than five million Polish citizens, among them some three million Jewish children, women and men. World War Two, and specifically Germany's invasion of Poland and the ensuing six years of terror under the occupation, are at the core of the German-Polish House's remit, both from an emotional perspective and in terms of the activities pursued. The permanent exhibition will not only chronicle the war but also cover everyday life under the German occupation, the reactions of the civilian population, and civilian and armed resistance. Prominent examples include the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in 1943 and the Warsaw Uprising in 1944. Many Poles also had defining experiences of forced labour, captivity as prisoners of war, deportation and flight. The Holocaust of the Polish Jews will be documented both as a part of Polish history under the German reign of terror and in relation to its long-term impact. The Soviet occupation of Poland between 1939 and 1941 and Poland's reconfiguration as a satellite state of Moscow from 1944 with the loss of its eastern territories are essential elements for an understanding of Polish history.

The German-Polish House will also give Germans the opportunity to consolidate their often very abstract knowledge concerning the experience of their own families in World War Two. It was not anonymous localities in »the East« which were occupied, but rather towns and regions which had a long-established social and cultural existence and were condemned to destruction.

The permanent exhibition will deepen and widen perspectives on the centuries of joint and divided history up to the present. It will be structured around themes including the perception of self and others, the experience of migration, and the phases of »hostility«, rapprochement and reconciliation, all marked by an often extreme imbalance of power. The exhibition will not be organised chronologically but by theme and it will provide insights into events or myths from the Middle Ages and the early modern and modern periods which are particularly significant for German-Polish history and the commemorative culture of both countries. The thematic rooms forming the centrepiece of the exhibition will deal exclusively with the history of the German occupation of Poland in World War Two. The history of selected towns will be a recurring thread throughout the permanent exhibition and demonstrate the coexistence of people of different ethnicities over centuries. People of Polish, German, Jewish, Ukrainian or Armenian ancestry or with other origins lived alongside one another here; they engaged in trade and established towns which had close links with their rural surroundings. The examples of towns and their populations will equally serve to shed light on the multiple instances of migration as well as the vast scale of the destruction that occurred during World War Two. The focus on specific locations will enable visitors to picture key historical developments.

Regions which are representative of a German, Polish, and common history, such as Silesia, East Prussia (above all Warmia and Masuria) or Galicia (with its Austrian, Polish, Jewish and Ukrainian influences) will be presented by way of example and highlight the complexity and richness of a multi-layered history. This can be illustrated with reference to family histories or biographies.

The permanent exhibition should have a modular and dynamic design that allows the content to be extended or supplemented with new themes or approaches. Temporary exhibitions will present additional aspects and details and raise new questions regarding historical and current topics. Touring exhibitions will provide a means to present themes from the German-Polish House elsewhere in Germany and Poland.

The permanent exhibition is intended to reflect the interests of Germans and Poles and to consider the needs of younger generations in particular. It is important to take account of the fundamental differences between these groups in terms of what they know about the topic. Another factor to consider is that Berlin is a city that attracts international visitors like almost no other; the exhibition should also be comprehensible and appealing to this group. Moreover, the aim should be for the German-Polish House to be known beyond the borders of Germany and Poland as a place where European history is recounted in an engaging way that brings it to life.

It is important to recognise that the relationship between German and Polish society is far from equal. People in Poland are far more interested in Germany than vice versa and tend to know more about Germany than Germans do about Poland, and there are more Poles who speak German than Germans who speak Polish. The permanent exhibition also needs to take this into account. It must present unexpected themes and perspectives and present people from Poland and Germany with unusual questions, so that visitors to the German-Polish House are keen to find out more about each other's society and the diverse features of each country. The purpose of the German-Polish House will not be to provide conclusive answers but rather to ask questions: What is our responsibility for the past? What makes something German or Polish now, and what was the case in the past? To what extent is Poland part of Germany and Germany part of Poland? What is the significance of these questions in the 21st century in (post)migration, highly diverse societies? Why do Germans and Poles consider each other as strangers rather than neighbours; what is the source of the often fundamental misunderstanding or lack of understanding between the two societies? The goal should ultimately be for Germans and Poles to gain new and diverse insights into each other's country and the people who live there, but also for both Poles and Germans to learn more about their own country and its population.

Education and Exchange

As a hub for education and exchange, the proposed German-Polish House must be developed by independent experts without individual agendas to be a European, forward-looking institution that incorporates state-of-the-art design features. In this the project is guided by the standards established for extracurricular educational activities at memorial sites, for example research-led learning and the focus on developing an empathetic approach to the victims, and these standards will be developed further within a German-Polish framework. This framework is predefined by differing levels of knowledge, the existence (or lack) of a historical canon and a variety of approaches and methods. Historical themes will be presented through the perspective of people's lives at the time, for example with reference to diverse experiences of migration and to the family histories of those participating in the educational programmes, and in this way they will bear relevance to contemporary society. The educational programmes will be targeted to the needs of participants, with themes ranging from the Polish experience of violence in World War Two to other stages in the history of German-Polish relations. Both intercultural and intergenerational exchange are important.

Before the German-Polish House comes into existence, a »mobile learning centre« will travel around Germany and Poland to provide information about German-Polish relations. A variety of resources for face-to-face or online learning and teaching (e.g. seminars, workshops, exhibitions, podcasts, hands-on initiatives and competitions) will be developed with the involvement of the target groups and in cooperation with education providers in all of the German federal states and in Poland.

One of the aims of the project is to emphasise the importance of good neighbourly relations and cooperative partnerships. The »Education and exchange« section will not replace existing resources but instead create new ones and it will link up existing projects and help them to develop further. The DPI-run »Young People's Ideas Labs«, a project in which young people develop their own ideas for future educational resources, will continue as a feature of the German-Polish House.

Events such as readings, discussions, concerts, workshops and lectures will provide the opportunity for exchange and dialogue. Our aim is to create a venue within a European framework to facilitate intellectual confrontation with German-Polish themes that reflect mutual interests and may also be contested. Fellowships for scholars, artists and educators working on projects that correspond to the German-Polish House's objectives will reinforce its external impact and establish exchange and networks, thereby gaining people to disseminate the work of the House.

3. Location

The preferred location for the German-Polish House is the site of the former Kroll Opera House.² In Germany, this is the symbol of the invasion of Poland and the ensuing outbreak of World War Two. It was the seat of the German Bundestag after the Reichstag burnt down in 1933. And it was here that the Bundestag convened to listen to Hitler's speech on 1 September 1939 announcing the attack on Poland. Realising the project here would be a highly symbolic gesture in both Germany and Poland. Discussions are currently under way regarding the availability of this plot and its potential for construction, and possible alternatives.

² For the location, see: <https://goo.gl/maps/UaXcdQd7tLr6FvEJ7>

4. Time Planning and Working Methods

The »task force« based at the Memorial Foundation will be responsible for conceiving and developing the German-Polish House in close cooperation with the DPI and its partner projects. By spring 2024 the task force will draw up an implementation plan for the project. This plan will be submitted to the Federal Cabinet and the German Bundestag. Taking account of deliberations on the project thus far, the plan will include a detailed concept for the three pillars of the German-Polish House: the memorial, the displays of historical information, and the section dedicated to education and exchange. In addition, it will provide details of the future premises and an estimate of staffing and budget requirements. The institutional affiliation or the body responsible for the project will be ascertained during the conceptual and consultation phase. The aim is for the German Bundestag to have examined the implementation plan by summer 2024.

Experts, representatives of civil society, young people and politicians will all be involved in different ways in the work to draw up the implementation plan. People from Germany and Poland should be invited to participate in the planning of each of the three pillars in order to share their individual perspectives. The German-Polish House should be a place where Germans and Poles can jointly discuss and exchange ideas on their mutual relationship in past, present and future.

We are establishing cooperation with the Institute for History at the Polish Academy of Sciences as well as with a respected partner from the educational sector to emphasise that the House is an expression of a joint commitment to provide historical information and to remember the past.

1. **Forums of experts:** Historians and representatives with expertise in museums/exhibitions and education will discuss aspects of the implementation plan for the German-Polish House.
2. **Transparency forum:** the task force will invite representatives from civil society, policy-makers, initiative founders and supporters to attend regular Zoom meetings to exchange information on progress.
3. **Youth forum:** with its focus on German-Polish themes and its efforts towards reconciliation with regard to past and present, the German-Polish House is intended to appeal to young people and to future generations. With this in mind, an appropriate forum will be created for young people to get involved. This will be based on experience and knowledge gained to date, above all from the »Young People's Ideas Labs«. The Youth forum will feature generation-specific themes that will enhance the future German-Polish House and encourage critical dialogue.

A standard advisory board for the German-Polish House will be established at a later date, composed of individual representatives of these three forums.

The architectural and artistic competitions to design the building and the memorial can only be announced after the German Bundestag has issued its resolution on the implementation plan and the location.

Activities prior to the Establishment of the German-Polish House

As there are major expectations in both Germany and Poland in view of the creation of a prominent symbol of remembrance in the near future, the German-Polish House should have a public presence even before the building has been constructed. Information boards will be put up at the former site of the Kroll Opera House – which faces the Reichstag building – so as to remember and critically address the invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939 and the German war of extermination and its victims at the very place where Hitler delivered his speech in the Reichstag. The inauguration of this marked area is envisaged for 1 September 2024. As in previous years, a memorial ceremony will be held at this site in 2023. In addition, a proposal will be submitted for an annual commemoration to be held on 1 September in the German Bundestag or in the form of a public ceremony led by German politicians to ensure that this momentous date is marked appropriately.

On 1 September 2024, the 85th anniversary of the German invasion of Poland, we plan to open a touring exhibition. Plans for 2024 also include the addition of audiovisual resources to the website and the visible marking of »Polish locations«, firstly in and around Berlin and later in the rest of Germany. Digital resources are a key element of the German-Polish House and an extension of analogue facilities. Digital tools will be an integral part of the exhibitions, educational activities and opportunities for exchange. There will be sustained efforts to develop and maintain digital resources prior to the inauguration of the House.

Required Infrastructure for the Building

- Rooms for the permanent exhibition and special exhibitions as well as »display windows« to present German and Polish initiatives and organisations in the field of commemorative culture
- Multifunctional teaching and meeting rooms as well as a space for events (a multifunctional room that can be divided into sections of different sizes, with facilities for simultaneous interpreting and to screen films)
- Office space for staff and the project team
- Library and multi-media resources with areas for reading and for interaction (talks, group work etc.)
- Storage areas
- Café and restaurant with outside seating: a regularly changing menu offering food and drink from both countries
- Terrace that provides an external space featuring a large number of examples of German-Polish links in past and present (Berlin's Central Station with the Berlin-Warsaw Express, the Reichstag and so on); intended as a lively space that appeals to people of all ages
- Bookshop and museum shop

Project Contacts

Foundation Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe

www.stiftung-denkmal.de/en

Georgenstraße 23

10117 Berlin

Task Force

German-Polish House

Dr Agnieszka Wiercholska agnieszka.wiercholska@stiftung-denkmal.de

Robert Parzer robert.parzer@stiftung-denkmal.de

Adam Kerpel-Fronius adam.kerpel-fronius@stiftung-denkmal.de

Uwe Neumärker uwe.neumaerker@stiftung-denkmal.de

Deutsches Polen-Institut (German Poland Institute)

www.deutsches-polen-institut.de

Residenzschloss 1

64283 Darmstadt

Emilie Mansfeld mansfeld@dpi-da.de

Anna Jankowska jankowska@dpi-da.de

Prof. Dr. Peter Oliver Loew loew@dpi-da.de

