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Debates about National Museums. About a Completed Project in Switzerland, a not yet Realized Project in Austria and a Failed Attempt in France

Andrea Brait

«National» History in Museums

In the late 19th century, museums often functioned as places of the presentation for national «master narratives», i.e. of histories conveying a clear message and generally directed to the nation state.¹ In some former Habsburg countries during the 19th century, museums were founded by the emerging nations, legitimizing their own national identity – as a demarcation to the multi-ethnic state and central power in Vienna.² This first wave of new national museums in Europe was initiated by a return to their own history.³ The national museum not only served as a place of collection and preservation, but also of the creation of national culture and history.⁴

National history museums are still a major trend at the beginning of the 21st century. The end of the Cold War resulted in «the strongest wave of museum building since the nineteenth century»⁵, but these new museums were not only constructed with the goal of national identity building. The European Union had also discovered museums as a possible way to promote identities, culminating in the opening of the *House of European History* in 2016.⁶ Oliver Rathkolb, an Austrian historian, explains that the boom in museum building is due to the uncertainty that people feel regarding the current socio-economic development. This results in a

1 Konrad H. Jarausch, Martin Sabrow, «Meistererzählung» – Zur Karriere eines Begriffs, in: Ibd.. (Ed.), *Die historische Meistererzählung. Deutungslinien der deutschen Nationalgeschichte nach 1945*, Göttingen 2002, p. 9–32, here p. 16. Cf. to the development of the term: Krijn Tjijss, *Vom «master narrative» zur «Meistererzählung»? Überlegungen zu einem Konzept der «narrativen Hierarchie»*, in: Alfrun Kliems, Martina Winkler, *Sinnstiftung durch Narration in Ost-Mittel-Europa. Geschichte – Literatur – Film*, Berlin 2005, p. 21–53, here p. 48.

2 Cf. Marlies Raffler, *Museum – Spiegel der Nation? Zugänge zur Historischen Museologie am Beispiel der Genese von Landes- und Nationalmuseen in der Habsburgermonarchie*, Wien/Köln/Weimar 2007.

3 Cf. Theo Öhlinger, *Die Museen und das Recht. Von der Öffnung der kaiserlichen Gemäldesammlung bis zum Bundesmuseengesetz*, Wien 2008, p. 12.

4 Cf. Aikaterini Dori, *Museen und nationale Identität. Überlegungen zur Geschichte und Gegenwart von Nationalmuseen*, in: Kurt Dröge, Detlef Hoffmann (Ed.), *Museum revisited. Transdisziplinäre Perspektiven auf eine Institution im Wandel*, Bielefeld 2010, p. 209–222, here p. 215.

5 Robin Ostow, *Introduction: Museums and National Identities in Europe in the Twenty-First Century*, in: Ibd. (Ed.), *(Re)Visualising National History. Museums and National Identities in Europe in the New Millennium*, Toronto/Buffalo/London 2008, p. 3–12, here p. 3.

6 <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/visiting/en/brussels/house-of-european-history> (online 20.8.2016).

desire for historical images tending to reinforce national identity⁷ – one is reminded of the compensation theory of Lübke.⁸ At the same time a critical analysis of the narratives of classical history is expected, as well as a debate about plural identities in increasingly more diverse societies. This is also a result of critical museology, which has evolved in recent decades.⁹

The present study analyzes three cases of debates about new national museums. The (interim) results could not be more varied: In Switzerland, several existing institutions have been grouped under a new umbrella organization, called «National Museum». However, it was founded only in organizational terms. In addition, a new exhibition was realized in one of the museum buildings, which at least shows a basic idea of the nation's history. In France, the project of a national museum was a political desire and announced by the president.¹⁰ The subsequent preliminary works came to a standstill though after the head of state changed (for the time being). In Austria there has been a discussion since the late 1990s about the creation of a new museum, the shaping of which has been in fact perceived very differently. Further review and analysis must show whether the project will be realized, after a concept was finalized and a legal basis was provided in 2016. The present study, which is meant as a contribution to historical museology¹¹, focuses on the public debate about these projects. It seeks to identify the actors involved and the patterns of argumentation; but it is also a contribution to current Austrian debates.

A Museum as a Monument for the President – The Case of France

France is among those countries where one of the first «National Museums» was established: after the *British Museum* in London (1753) came the *Hermitage* in St. Petersburg (1764) and the *Louvre* in Paris (1793). As Christoph Stölzl emphasized, in the 18th century no one had yet come up with the idea to use these institutions as instruments to display collections consisting solely of national art and culture.¹²

7 Cf. Oliver Rathkolb, «Wir sind Museum!», in: *Der Standard*, 23.3.2007, p. 35.

8 Cf. Hermann Lübke, *Zeit-Verhältnisse. Über die veränderte Gegenwart von Zukunft und Vergangenheit*, in: Wolfgang Zacharias (Ed.), *Zeitphänomen Musealisierung. Das Verschwinden der Gegenwart und die Konstruktion der Erinnerung*, Essen 1990, p. 40–49.

9 Carmen Mörsch, *Am Kreuzungspunkt von vier Diskursen. Die documenta 12. Vermittlung zwischen Affirmation, Reproduktion, Dekonstruktion und Transformation*, <http://www.igkultur-vbg.at/attach/docs/doc/5c1abb4bdb7e7f3001d737b4cf0b5484/DokuTagung%202-09.pdf> (online 11.8.2015).

10 The procedure was so similar to the one in the 1980s in the Federal Republic of Germany. Cf. Andrea Brait, *Gedächtnisort Historisches Nationalmuseum. Eine Analyse unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Debatten um Museumsneugründungen in Deutschland und Österreich*, Wien 2011 (Dissertation).

11 Cf. Friedrich Waidacher, *Handbuch der Allgemeinen Museologie*, Wien/Köln/Weimar³ 1999, p. 65; Raffler, *Museum*, p. 77 f.

12 Cf. Christoph Stölzl, *Statt eines Vorwortes: Museumsgedanken*, in: Marie-Louise von Plessen (Ed.), *Die Nation und ihre Museen*, Frankfurt am Main/New York 1992, p. 12–18, here p. 14.

Nevertheless nationalist motives played a major role, and objects were collected and exhibited in order to honor the nation. Today's *Musée national du Louvre* was opened under the name *Musée Français* and appeared as a type of universal museum.¹³ The central role among museums in France has remained unchanged until today.

Due to France's pioneering role with regard to the development of national museums, it seems unusual at first glance that a national history museum has never been opened there. The representation of its own history is realized today only by many smaller institutions such as the *Musée Carnavalet – Musée de l'Histoire de Paris*, where there are also exhibits covering the French Revolution.

Newly elected President Nicolas Sarkozy, who often mentioned history and national identity during his election campaign,¹⁴ wanted to change this situation, and announced in January 2009 that a *Maison de l'histoire de France* should be created. Such a place should serve to strengthen the identity of the country and should be located in an emblematic place.¹⁵ He decided to follow the footsteps of his predecessors, who set themselves monuments by founding a new museum, just as Georges Pompidou with the *Centre Pompidou*, François Mitterrand with the Louvre Pyramid and Jacques Chirac with the *Musée du quai Branly*.

Hervé Lemoine, who actually proposed the museum project to Sarkozy during the campaign,¹⁶ composed a first report (in two versions) and named the *Hôtel des Invalides* as a possible location, which accommodates already the *Musée de l'Armée* and the *Historial Charles de Gaulle* (opened in 2008). In a second report by Jean-Pierre Rioux other possible buildings were mentioned, including the castles of Fontainebleau and Vincennes.¹⁷ During the discussions about the site, there was a political push to make the project seem to be a natural process. However, from the beginning there was massive criticism regarding the project's thematic orientation. The formulated intention that the museum dealing with civilian and military history should illuminate the «soul of France» caused quite a stir. The historian Arlette Farge characterized this as an «extrem rückschrittliche[n] Diskurs im Vergleich zu dem, was wir in den Geschichts- und Sozialwissenschaften machen. Es ist nicht an

13 Cf. Dori, *Museen und nationale Identität*, p. 209f.

14 Cf. Nicolas Offenstadt, *Die «Geschichtspolitik» während der fünfjährigen Amtszeit Nicolas Sarkozys. Streitfragen und Debatten (2007–2012)*, in: Yves Bizeul (Ed.), *Rekonstruktion des Nationalmythos?: Frankreich, Deutschland und die Ukraine im Vergleich*, Göttingen 2013, p. 65–82, here p. 66.

15 Cf. Kulturoffensive von Staatspräsident Sarkozy, DPA-Meldung, 14.1.2009.

16 Cf. Nicolas Offenstadt, *Brauchen wir ein «Haus der Geschichte Frankreichs»? Oder die Rückkehr der nationalen Meistererzählung*, in: Deutsch-Französisches Institut (Ed.), *Frankreich Jahrbuch 2010. Frankreichs Geschichte: Vom (politischen) Nutzen der Vergangenheit*, Wiesbaden 2011, p. 55–74, here p. 63.

17 Cf. Nadine Pippel, *Ein präsidiales Großprojekt. Eine Maison de l'Histoire de France für die nationale Identität*, in: *Dokumente/Documents* 1/2012, p. 29–32, here p. 30.

uns, den Franzosen zu erklären, was die französische Seele ist.»¹⁸ Jean-François Hébert, who was entrusted with another preliminary study by the new Minister of Culture, Frédéric Mitterrand, pointed out in his report, that there will be no display of a national «master narrative». ¹⁹ But the critics could not be calmed so easily, which is probably in particular owed to the fact that neither the scientific community nor the public were involved in the planning of the museum.

The decision to house the new museum in *Hôtel Soubise*, where the *Centre historique des Archives* is found, brought about a new round of protests. The staff of the National Archives believed that the development and renovation project of the archives, which had already been decided, was at risk. Over 200 (!) people participated in a debate on the grounds of the *Hôtel Soubise* in October 2010.²⁰ A few French historians subsequently decided to publish an article in the newspaper «Le Monde», in which they described the museum as dangerous and accused the project of teaching a very narrow-minded concept of France – «une telle maison serait en quelque sorte la vitrine historique de la supposée ‘identité nationale’». ²¹ The internationally well-known historian Pierre Nora appealed in an open letter to the Minister of Culture Mitterrand to consider:

«Dans ce pays aux héritages et aux traditions si divers et contradictoires, et où l’opinion depuis la Révolution reste divisée entre au moins deux versions de l’histoire de France, la sagesse est précisément d’en rester à une pluralité de musées, lesquels témoignent, chacun à sa façon, de leur vision et de leur époque.»²²

Only in mid-January 2011, a Scientific Advisory Board under the direction of Rioux was appointed by Mitterrand.²³ The organization of such an assembly was not easy,

18 Historikerstreit in Frankreich, <http://oe1.orf.at/artikel/266732> (online 25.11.2015).

19 Cf. Offenstadt, Brauchen wir ein «Haus der Geschichte Frankreichs»? , p. 69.

20 Ibid.

21 La Maison de l’histoire de France est un projet dangereux, http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2010/10/21/la-maison-de-l-histoire-de-france-est-un-projet-dangereux_1429317_3232.html#b6mw7cz4ZLiA8Swx.99 (25.11.2015) – the text was signed by Isabelle Backouche (EHESS), Christophe Charle (université de Paris-I), Roger Chartier (Collège de France), Arlette Farge (EHESS), Jacques Le Goff (EHESS), Gérard Noiriel (EHESS), Nicolas Offenstadt (université de Paris-I), Michèle Riot-Sarcey (université de Paris-VIII), Daniel Roche (Collège de France), Pierre Toubert (Collège de France) und Denis Woronoff (université Paris-I).

22 Pierre Nora, Lettre ouverte à Frédéric Mitterrand sur la Maison de l’histoire de France. En savoir plus sur http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2010/11/10/lettre-ouverte-a-frederic-mitterrand-sur-la-maison-de-l-histoire-de-france_1438123_3232.html#QDwAXDgy5SR0ewzL.99 (online 15.11.2015). Nina Gorgus listed around 1,200 museums in 2010 that are certified by the National Museum Association, of which about one-fifth are cultural historical museums. Cf. Nina Gorgus, Gesellschaft und Museum – Gesellschaft im Museum. Neuere Tendenzen kulturgeschichtlicher Museen in Frankreich, in: Heidrun Alzheimer, Sabine Doering-Manteuffel, Daniel Drascek, Angela Treiber (Ed.), Jahrbuch für Europäische Ethnologie. Frankreich 6 (2011), p. 19–34, here p. 20f.

23 Cf. Annette Schuhmann, Zentral, national und emotional. Das Haus der Geschichte in Paris. Ein Projekt des französischen Präsidenten Sarkozy, <http://www.zeitgeschichte-online.de/kommentar/zentral-national-und-emotional> (online 19.11.2015).

due to the wide rejection of the project²⁴ – this fundamental approach meant that the critics didn't take the opportunity to change the project by their participation. However, the ultimate failure of the project had little to do with the fierce protest of the historians or their ultimate rejection of it. The decision not to realize the project, was rather due to the outcome of the 2012 presidential election. The new political majority under President François Hollande, who was extremely skeptical about the museum, decided against the project.

The «Neue Zürcher Zeitung» wondered that so many historians opposed the project so strongly.²⁵ The debates can only be understood by analyzing the larger context of how French history is generally dealt with, and the role of the historians in particular. Since the 19th century, French historiography has been characterized by a national «master narrative», the «roman national», as emphasized by Stephan Geifes and Stefan Seidendorf.²⁶ Starting in the 1960s, this narrative gradually lost much of its legitimacy due to the impact of increasing migration. Nora, who established a new research paradigm with his series «Les lieux de mémoire», did not decide to name his third volume «Les France» without reason. This title made it clear that there is not only one point of view or monopoly of interpretation with regard to France. Since the appointment of Sarkozy in particular, many people finally realized that the political system acted to strengthen national identity and at the same time suppressed any contradictory discourse.²⁷ The fact that the project of a new national history museum, requested by the state and for which no broad public debate was ever initiated, was ultimately rejected, was a logical consequence.

A National Museum in the Form of a Museum Association – The Case of Switzerland

In Switzerland, the conditions were completely different. Starting from a conflict over the *Landesmuseum* in Zurich, which had been established in the 19th century, and had consistently demanded more autonomy, consideration developed in regards to a new organization of cultural science museums in Switzerland. In June 2009, a federal law was enacted, which created a new public institution, the *Schweizeri-*

24 Cf. Offenstadt, N.: Brauchen wir ein «Haus der Geschichte Frankreichs»? p. 71.

25 Marc Zitzmann, Ein Geschichtsmuseum mit Vorgeschichte, <http://www.nzz.ch/ein-geschichtsmuseum-mit-vorgeschichte-1.8458244> (online 19.11.2015).

26 Stephan Geifes, Stefan Seidendorf, Einleitung, in: Deutsch-Französisches Institut (Ed.), Frankreich Jahrbuch 2010. Frankreichs Geschichte: Vom (politischen) Nutzen der Vergangenheit, Wiesbaden 2011, p. 11–21, here p. 12.

27 Cf. Lindner, Kolja: Policing minorities and postcolonial condition. Sarkozy'sche Geschichtspolitik zwischen ideologischer Anrufung und gesellschaftlicher Modernisierung, in: Deutsch-Französisches Institut (Ed.), Frankreich Jahrbuch 2010. Frankreichs Geschichte: Vom (politischen) Nutzen der Vergangenheit, Wiesbaden 2011, p. 105–121.

sches Nationalmuseum. This museum existed alongside the *Landesmuseum* in *Schloss Prangins*, the *Forum der Schweizer Geschichte* in Schwyz and the *Sammlungszentrum Affoltern am Albis*, and should strive to pursue a coordinated museum and collection policy.²⁸ The specific designation of tasks of this new establishment outlined by its director Andreas Spillmann could have hardly been more appropriate for a National History Museum, namely that it should seek to present the history of Switzerland over the past 2000 years.²⁹ The decision corresponded with a report by the responsible Department of the Interior, which criticized the *Musée Suisse Gruppe* consisting of eight individual bodies at that time. The main complaints were that its existence as a National History Museum was not evident enough, and moreover that it was rooted too deeply in the German speaking region of Switzerland.³⁰

The new organization was criticized because it was deemed insufficient with regard to the diverse museum landscape in Switzerland.³¹ The term «National Museum» also proved to be controversial: member of the National Assembly Christoph Mörgeli said that the term «national» was not entirely suitable for the small country of Switzerland.³² Hansruedi Stadler pointed out in a political debate that the term is also used by the PNOS, the extreme right wing Swiss Nationalist Party. This was countered by the argument that Switzerland sees itself as a nation not unlike other nations, which are defined by linguistic or cultural definitions. The law was finally passed without any opposing votes, failing to initiate a broader public and expert discussion.

Even before the enactment of the law, a new permanent exhibition entitled «Geschichte Schweiz» opened in spring 2009 at the *Landesmuseum Zürich*.³³ The organization of the exhibition, designed by Tristan Kobler, had a thematic approach,³⁴ in contrast to many other history museums. The section «Durch Konflikt zur Konkordanz», which critically examines the problems of many Swiss national myths, permits however to chronologically trace the development of Switzerland. In addition, there is a section of the exhibition dealing with the topic of migration and is entitled «Niemand war schon immer da»; another one is called «Glaube,

28 Cf. Ein Nationalmuseum mit mehr Selbständigkeit, in: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 14.3.2008, p. 17.

29 G. Mack: Das neue Gesicht der Schweiz, in: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 19.7.2009, p. 37.

30 Das Gesetz ist älter als das Museum selbst, in: *Tagesanzeiger*, 4.4.2006, p. 3.

31 B. Lezzi, Welche Museen soll der Bund unterstützen?, in: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 7.8.2008, p. 17.

32 Nuspliger, N.: Festival der Zustimmung» zur Museumspolitik, in: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 20.3.2009, p. 15.

33 Cf. Erika Hebeisen, Pascale Meyer, Einleitung, in: *Geschichte Schweiz*, [Zürich] 2009, p. 11f. In dem Museum finden sich darüber hinaus die Dauerausstellungen «Galerie Sammlungen», «Möbel & Räume Schweiz», «Fernsehen und Studio» sowie der «Waffenturm».

34 Cf. Arnet, von Helen, *Schweizer Geschichte mit Panoramablick* inszeniert, in: *Tagesanzeiger*, 23.3.2009, p. 17.

Fleiss und Ordnung» where issues of faith and virtues are exhibited, most of which the Swiss are happy to be associated with, and finally the section «Die Schweiz wird im Ausland reich», where the economic development is displayed.

The Swiss exhibition clearly distances itself from traditional «master narratives». Even though there were many discussions regarding whether or not to exhibit exclusively one history of Switzerland,³⁵ the concept of the exhibition was ultimately rated positively.³⁶

20 Years of Discussion until the Opening? – The Case of Austria

Due to the structure of the Habsburg Monarchy no National Museum was established in Austria before 1918.³⁷ After World War II, a *Museum der Ersten und Zweiten Republik* was founded on the initiative of President Karl Renner, it was however never officially opened to the public.³⁸ Although a *Museum Österreichischer Kultur* existed for several years, it was regarded as a failure due to low numbers of visitors in both of its locations.³⁹

The current discussion about such an institution dates back – with many interruptions – to the end of the 1990s. The discussion emerged from a request formulated by Leon Zelman, who was the head of the Jewish Welcome Service in Austria. He proposed to create an institution in a palace on the Wiener Ringstrasse, with the objective not only to exhibit National Socialism, but the entire history of racism and intolerance in the 20th century.⁴⁰ Various possibilities regarding the presentation of history in a museum were subsequently discussed. Over the years and under different governments many concept papers emerged, but a final decision for a museum had never been taken. A 2009 concept paper was not even published,⁴¹ and for this reason any further debate about the foundation of a museum was stopped.⁴²

After such a long time with virtually no public involvement in the subject, the former Federal Minister of Arts and Culture, Constitution and Media, Josef Ostermayer (SPÖ) surprised the public at the end of 2014, when he spoke about the re-

35 Cf. Interview by Andrea Brait with Prisca Senn, Zürich 9.2.2013.

36 Cf. Hannes Nussbaumer, Das Land, das Demokratie, Tell und Tamiflu vereint, in: Tagesanzeiger, 30.7.2009, p. 33.

37 Cf. the text by Laurent Dedryvère in this volume.

38 Cf. Andrea Brait, Gedächtnisort Historisches Nationalmuseum. Eine Analyse unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Debatten um Museumsneugründungen in Deutschland und Österreich, Wien 2011 (Dissertation), p. 528–533.

39 Cf. Dirk Rupnow, Nation ohne Museum? Diskussionen, Konzepte und Projekte, in: Ders., Heidemarie Uhl (Ed.), Zeitgeschichte ausstellen in Österreich. Museen, Gedenkstätten, Ausstellungen, Wien/Köln/Weimar 2011, p. 417–463, here p. 424–434.

40 Leon Zelman wünscht sich zum 70. Geburtstag Haus der Toleranz, APA-Meldung, 12.6.1996.

41 Cf. E-Mail from the Institute for Contemporary History at the University of Vienna, 11.9.2009.

42 Cf. Brait, Gedächtnisort Historisches Nationalmuseum, p. 525–699.

alization of a *Haus der Geschichte der Republik Österreich*, which had actually been mentioned in various coalition papers in the last 15 (!) years.⁴³ The announcement can be seen as a response to the March 2014 announcement of Lower Austria's Governor Erwin Pröll (ÖVP) that a *Haus der Geschichte* should be implemented at the *Landesmuseum Niederösterreich*.⁴⁴ Ostermayer wanted to accommodate the *Haus der Geschichte der Republik Österreich* in several rooms of the Vienna Hofburg originally assigned to locate a newly redesigned *Weltmuseum*. Unlike in other cities,⁴⁵ the plans for a major new permanent exhibition and the redesign of the ethnological museum in Vienna will only be partially implemented.⁴⁶

Within a few weeks of the publication of the announcement Oliver Rathkolb, a professor of contemporary history at the University of Vienna, was appointed head of a scientific advisory board,⁴⁷ who managed to win support from 30 Austrian and international members within a short period of time. The work done by the advisory board resulted in an implementation strategy for the *Haus der Geschichte der Republik Österreich (HGÖ)*, which was presented to the public on September 9th, 2015.⁴⁸ It stipulated that a museum had to be created by November 2018 and should be integrated in the *Österreichische Nationalbibliothek (ÖNB)*. According to the paper it should establish its own collection and cover a surface of 1.700 m² for a permanent exhibition, and 550 m² for special exhibitions.⁴⁹ The museum's main objective is to display Austrian history since the mid-19th century, with a special emphasis on the period from 1918 until today within a European and international context, with longer lines of development also being integrated into the exhibitions.⁵⁰

But it is not entirely clear what kind of museum concept is to be established. Despite the fact that the implementation strategy uses the term «museum», and an entire chapter deals with the composition of the collection, it became ever clearer during the discussions that the new institution will not be a museum as defined by ICOM. Rathkolb asserted that the objects themselves are less important than the topics,⁵¹ and that special objects have to be searched in order to create a basis for

43 Cf. Kulturminister stoppt Umbau des Weltmuseums, in: Salzburger Nachrichten, 27.11.2014, p. 8.

44 LH Pröll: 38 Millionen für «Museum NÖ» und «Galerie NÖ», http://www.noel.at/Presse/Pressedienst/Pressearchiv/111162_Kultur-NOE.html (20.8.2016).

45 Cf. the texts by Bjarne Rogan and Anja Früh in this volume.

46 Cf. Ina Weber, Platz für Geschichte, in: Wiener Zeitung, 20.1.2015, p. 17.

47 Cf. Welt und Geschichte bekommen einen gemeinsamen Eingang, in: Kurier, 25.1.2015, p. 34.

48 Umsetzungsstrategie für das Haus der Geschichte Österreich, <https://www.bka.gv.at/site/6698/default.aspx> (online 19.9.2015).

49 Cf. Unterlage zum Mediengespräch am 9. September 2015, <https://www.bka.gv.at/site/6698/default.aspx> (online 19.9.2015).

50 Umsetzungsstrategie, p. 6.

51 Thomas Götz, Wie Erwin Pröll Wien ausbremste, in: Neue Vorarlberger Tageszeitung, 11.4.2015, p. 2f.

the didactic message. An exhibition, which is based on objects and research on them, obviously has not been planned yet.

The pace of development indicates that the circle of those involved was kept to a small number. The members of the scientific committee were found through personal contacts, just as Rathkolb was directly commissioned by the Minister. The majority of the committee's members consist of historians with a university background (24), only five members currently work or formerly worked as curators or museum directors, and only eight members are female.

This approach is surprising, especially if one bears in mind that things can be different in Austria. The redesign of the Austrian exhibition in the Auschwitz concentration camp was advertised throughout Europe in 2013 by the National Fund of the Republic of Austria for the Victims of National Socialism. They demanded a conceptual design for the exhibition including the newest teaching methods and research results.⁵² Efforts were made to find both a curator and a scientific director. Similar to an architectural competition a commission decided which team would be awarded the contract. The initial ideas and preliminary work were presented to the public and discussed.⁵³

Now the question arises why there was never an international invitation to tender for the thematic design of the *Haus der Geschichte*, considering that so many working groups consisting of respected historians had gathered over the past 15 years. Policy makers are thus faced with the accusation that they influenced the institution through its conceptual orientation in order to realize a «master narrative».

Public criticism was soon inevitable. Many content-related questions were not sufficiently discussed (in particular those regarding the period of time to be exhibited). There was an overlapping with the museum project in Lower Austria, and many plans were presented to the public without previous consultation of those chiefly concerned (especially regarding the institutions already housed in the Hofburg). All this raised a wave of critical commentary in the daily newspapers. One such critique came from the historian Thomas Winkelbauer in April 2015 when he raised some fundamental questions,⁵⁴ in particular concerning the different periods of Austrian history to be displayed in the *Haus der Geschichte*. His article became

52 Cf. <http://www.kupf.at/service/informationen/neugestaltung-der-sterreich-ausstellung-auschwitz> (online 22.10.2015).

53 Cf. <https://nationalfonds.org/meldung/von-der-opferthese-zur-europaeischen-erinnerungskultur.html> (online 22.10.2015)

54 Thomas Winkelbauer, Welches Haus? Welche Geschichte? Welches Österreich?, in: Der Standard, 14.4.2015, p. 23.

the starting point for several discussions. But who actually gets a chance to speak there?

At the podium discussion arranged at short notice and entitled «Häuser der Geschichte»⁵⁵ which took place as part of the 2015 *Austrian Historians' Day*, the two project managers did not speak, but Winkelbauer Philipp Lesiak (for the *Haus der Geschichte Niederösterreich*) and Florian Wenninger. Wenninger has a position at the Institute for Contemporary History, which was advertised with the task of «Mitwirkung in Forschungsprojekten insbesondere in der Umsetzung des Projekts Haus der Geschichte Österreichs seit 1848»⁵⁶. He was listed as a speaker for the *HGÖ*, but described his role as that of an «independent observer». Although the constellation was somewhat confusing, it did not stop the audience (mostly those speaking at *Historians' Day*) from discussing key issues such as the planned exhibition space and the time period, which should be exhibited. Answers were given only in relation to the Lower Austrian project, based on the current status of the project.

At the largest exchange of opinions to date «Braucht Österreich ein neues historisches Museum (*Haus der Geschichte*) und, wenn ja, was für eines? Eine Enquête»⁵⁷ which took place in October 2015 in the Austrian Academy of Sciences, there were many highly regarded international speakers, but also a few Austrian historians at the end of their careers, some of them actually members of the scientific advisory board. Among the 17 presenters there were only three women and the average age of all speakers was 62! Like in the scientific advisory board, museologists and museum specialists represented only a small minority; representatives of the active younger generation of historians did not have a chance to be heard. In addition to the clear specifications by Ostermayer and the non-transparent selection of the board members, this can be seen as a form of «politics of history». There is little interest in (critical) voices from the outside. There also seems to be little willingness to introduce a general discussion of museum projects in Vienna and Lower Austria, and at the Austrian History Day, only the *Haus der Geschichte Niederösterreich* was discussed.

At the first major discussion event on *HGÖ*, which was organized by ICOM Austria in the *Weltmuseum* in June 2015, another form of «politics of history» became clear. Rathkolb defended the plans to locate the *Haus der Geschichte* in the Hofburg. But he had apparently not negotiated previously with the representatives

55 Cf. <http://www.jku.at/konferenzen/content/e268159/e274010> (online 30.11.2015).

56 Cf. https://univis.univie.ac.at/ausschreibungstellensuche/flow/bew_ausschreibung-flow.jsessionid=670357D3A57974FFC0566D72EE5E2F02?flowExecutionKey=c1F905C0F-653E-65E9-57B2-8BEB5ABA0942_k9B1FE26D-7A88-A776-92E7-C751718725CC (online 24.3.2015).

57 Cf. <http://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-6237> (online 22.11.2015); Thomas Winkelbauer, *Haus? Geschichte? Österreich? Ergebnisse einer Enquete über das neue historische Museum in Wien*, Wien 2016.

of the institutions already located there, and thus he referred several times to the stipulation of Minister Ostermayer. The result was a heated debate in which many of the audience as well as the director of the *Sammlung Alter Musikinstrumente*, Matthias Pfaffenbichler, demanded the continuation of the exhibition of his museum.⁵⁸ The resistance should at least be partially successful: according to plans presented in autumn, 1.620 m² of the exhibition space will be allotted to the *Sammlung Alter Musikinstrumente*, 2.840 m² to the *Hofjagd- und Rüstkammer*, 1.050 m² to the *Ephesos-Museum*, 3.560 m² to the *Weltmuseum*, and 2.920 m² (including the entrance area and the stairwells) to the *Haus der Geschichte*.⁵⁹ This means, if the current plans are realized, the historical reappraisal of Austrian history will be granted only around 1000 m² more space than the display surface for the musical instruments. And if the entrance areas and stairwells are included, it amounts to roughly the same surface for general public use. Gudula Walterskirchen rightly pointed out, that one should more aptly speak of «Räumen der Geschichte».⁶⁰

Although repeatedly emphasized that it is pointless to insist on the location for the *Haus der Geschichte*, determined by the minister, debates do not end. Rathkolb emphasized in various discussions that the Heldenplatz is particularly well suited for a critical look at the Austrian history and this will be «das erste Ausstellungsobjekt».⁶¹

Furthermore, the title *Haus der Geschichte Österreich* is continually under discussion. The historian Gerhard Botz asserted that this is a «Lebenslüge» because first and foremost contemporary history should be displayed.⁶² Winkelbauer repeatedly expressed concern that Austrian history before 1918 would be turned into a mere «Vorgeschichte».⁶³

The accusations as expressed by Gottfried Fliedl that there are not enough discussions about contents,⁶⁴ cannot be confirmed for 2015/16. On the contrary, the

58 Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEIXO8KTeAY> (20.11.2015).

59 Vgl. Raumkonzept Neue Burg inkl. Corps de Logis, <https://www.bka.gv.at/DocView.axd?CobId=60420> (online 20.10.2015).

60 Gudula Walterskirchen, *Haus der Geschichte: Wer hat die Deutungshoheit über die Historie?*, in: *Die Presse*, 21.9.2015, p. 31.

61 Lecture «Das Haus der Geschichte Österreich als Katalysator für ein zweites Museumsquartier» im Rahmen der Enquête «Braucht Österreich ein neues historisches Museum ('Haus der Geschichte') und, wenn ja, was für eines?».

62 Lecture «Zeitmaschine Geschichtsmuseum: Zwischen Identitätspolitik, Geschichtswissenschaft und der Macht der Bilder» im Rahmen der Enquête «Braucht Österreich ein neues historisches Museum ('Haus der Geschichte') und, wenn ja, was für eines?».

63 Winkelbauer, Thomas: *Welches Haus? Welche Geschichte? Welches Österreich?*, in: *Der Standard*, 14.4.2015, p. 23. His arguments were in a similar vein to those at the discussions at the Austrian Historian's Day in 2015. Many critiques dealt with the fact that the institution was to be named *Haus der Geschichte Österreich* instead of *Haus der Geschichte Österreichs*.

64 Cf. <http://museologien.blogspot.co.at/2015/09/haus-der-geschichte-niederosterreich.html#links> (online 20.10.2015).

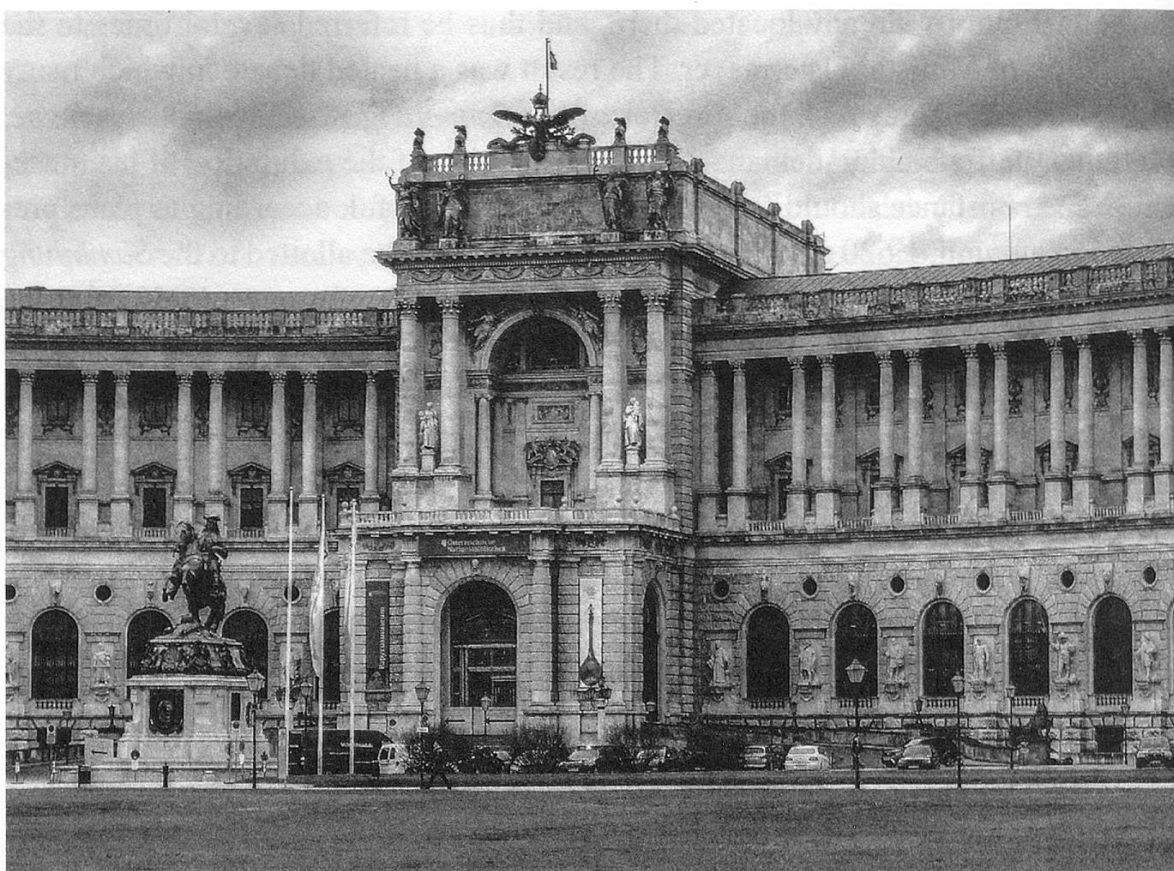


Figure 1: The Neue Burg – a new Museumsquartier? Claudia Berger, Vienna.

content of the new museum has never been discussed so intensively and especially in such publicly accessible forms. However, consideration of the recent comments in the implementation strategy, like the revisions of the concepts of the *Deutsches Historisches Museum* and the *Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* after public debates, is decidedly missing. Such a revisionary step is not currently provided for, and its implementation will be left to the future directorate.

Whether there will be such an implementation, will become clear in the coming months. Although a new amendment was passed in early 2016, which provides the creation of a *Haus der Geschichte Österreich*, the project lost much of its momentum soon after. There are two main reasons for it: firstly, it became increasingly clear how high the cost of such a facility would be. To date (fall 2016), no budget has been adopted for this purpose – corresponding negotiations are planned for the end of 2016.⁶⁵ Second of all, the government reshuffle in spring 2016 had a nega-

⁶⁵ Vgl. Kulturminister Drozda: Haus der Geschichte – Keine Eröffnung 2018, http://www.ots.at/presseaussendung/OTS_20160630_OTS0193/kulturministerdrozda-bekannt-sich-zu-foerderaufgaben-des-bundes (online 20.8.2016).

tive impact on the project, especially the loss of Ostermayer as Minister of Culture, and with him also the loss of its greatest political supporter. It is clear that due to the preliminary study, which was presented in May 2016, that an opening coinciding with the 100th anniversary of the Republic of Austria (2018) will not take place. Without the pressure of a set date, there is maybe the possibility for a further analysis of the varied suggestions resulting from the public debates of the last few months, and with it also the involvement of a wider circle of experts. Even without such further developments, there is also the danger that after a possible change of government,⁶⁶ similar to the situation in France, the project will be abandoned altogether.

Conclusion

Comparing the discussions in Austria, France, and Switzerland, it is apparent that the establishment of «master narratives» was feared and deemed as a clear step backwards in all three countries. To avoid this, independence from politics and a broader public discourse were demanded everywhere.

In France, many within the historical profession categorically rejected the project, because they considered it to be instrumented for further political interests. Apart from these sweeping accusations of political affiliation, very little about the content of the planned institutions was discussed. The current discourse in Austria differs significantly in this regard: having argued for many years mainly about locations and a possible director for the *Haus der Geschichte*, the largest concern now is the content of the institution, even if the site continues to be a major issue.

The Swiss Museum was able to provide an answer to the question of how national history can be exhibited – and this fulfilled the demands in many areas which were formulated by the protagonists in critical museology. In many parts of the permanent exhibition, it offers approaches to the deconstruction of national myths and discusses social challenges of the present. Despite these approaches, it would be wrong to declare the exhibition «Geschichte Schweiz» as a new ideal type of a historic National Museum, as the *Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* is seen.⁶⁷ But it clearly indicates that such institutions can serve as discussion forums for possible variants of historical narratives, as well as current socio-political issues.

⁶⁶ The next national elections should take place in the fall of 2016 at the latest.

⁶⁷ The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe praised the *Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* as a model for other national historical museums, Pkt. 16 Abs. iii Recommendation 1283 (1996) on history and the learning of history in Europe.

The debates presented here have clearly shown that national history museums, which are purely intended to serve the foundation of a national identity, and do not promote critical discourses on national history or show a «master narrative», will be rejected, even before their concrete, substantive concept has been presented. The lack of involvement of academic disciplines and the defining of crucial conditions (such as the location) through politics are responsible for this attitude. With respect to the discourse in regards to the founding of new museums it should be noted, of course, that not all interested parties in society can equally participate in these projects. Nevertheless it is necessary to foster a broad public debate during the early stages of the creation of a museum and permanent exhibition, with an active involvement of the historical sciences (and especially the younger generation of researchers) along with the didactics of history, political education and museum sciences.