

History Wars in Germany and Australia: National Museums and the Relegitimisation of Nationhood

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Abbreviations

DHM Deutsches Historisches Museum
HGBD Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland
NMA National Museum of Australia

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the political controversies that surrounded the creation of national museums in Germany and Australia at the end of the twentieth century.¹ It argues that national museums in these two countries were a form of state-sponsored history that sought to relegitimise their respective nations: nations in which critical understandings of the past undermined the legitimacy of contemporary nationhood and nationalism. These arguments about the content and *raison d'être* of national museums played out within wider debates about the transcendence of nationalism and the future of the nation-state more broadly. Both museums became part of political projects that

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sought to ‘normalise’ or ‘mainstream’ nationhood, simultaneously ‘depoliticising’ nationalism and thereby ‘relegitimising’ the nation.

When viewed as part of a national and nationalist project, national museums become the arena for contestation about the past and in particular an attempt to re-establish a single national narrative. Situating this analysis of state-sponsored history since 1945 within the literature on nationalism, this chapter first examines the relationship between museums, state-sponsored history and the relegitimisation of nations, nationhood and nationalism. It then examines the political controversies surrounding the establishment and opening of the Deutsches Historisches Museum (DHM), the Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (HGBD) and the National Museum of Australia (NMA), opened in 1990, 2006 and 2001, respectively. The political projects associated with their establishment represented a form of state-sponsored history that sought to relegitimise nation, nationhood and nationalism in Germany and Australia.

MUSEUMS, STATE-SPONSORED HISTORY AND THE RELEGITIMISATION OF NATIONS

Nationalists create narratives from the past to endow nations with legitimacy and thereby justify and prolong the existence of the nation. John Breuilly, a historian of both nationalism and Germany argued in *Nationalism and the State* (1983) that nationalism should be seen as an ideology that legitimises political projects that seek both to attain *and maintain* the nation-state. Furthermore, this need for the maintenance of the nation-state and nationalism is generated in response to potentially dislocating change rather than being an expression of timeless continuity (Wellings 2014, p. 45). Therefore the state—or more precisely governments that control it—needs to reproduce the nation daily to support the legitimacy of the nation-state itself.

More recent research suggested the way that ideas of nationhood have insinuated themselves in everyday lives and practices, often in ‘banal’ ways (Billig 1995; Edensor 2002; Sumartojo 2013). National symbols have been produced to generate loyalty and conviction across classes, genders, ethnicities and generations, functions that link nineteenth-century nationalism to its present day manifestations. But what is legitimised could also delegitimise. Although nations have required the construction of national narratives to exist, and those narratives endow nations with legitimacy, some historical narratives could also undermine the legitimacy of nations. With the past being such an essential element in national narratives, negative or catastrophic versions of history have had the potential to undermine the political project of the maintenance of nationhood.

In both Germany and Australia the history controversies in the late twentieth century were closely linked to controversies over the establishment of national history museums. The establishment of national history museums in both cases led to a clash of interpretations of the past. Partisan groups

comprising historians, politicians and intellectuals in both nations engaged in 'trauma' management (Alexander 2012) to (re)define their historical cultures. This clash of what Jörn Rüsen (1994) called *Geschichtskultur*, society's practically articulated historical consciousness, was argued out between political parties and politicised individuals. It was a controversy over the physical manifestations of state-sponsored museums of national history.

More broadly these debates took place during the constructivist turn in history, during which the work of historians and curators became increasingly politicised (MacIntyre and Clark 2004). Delegitimising critiques emanating from the historical profession made the relegitimation of the nation through state-run museums all the more urgent. Museums of national history play a crucial role in the official representation of nations to domestic and international audiences. With the growth of history-tourism and the popularisation of certain forms of history that occurred towards the end of the twentieth century, such as family history, museums enjoy more than a merely physical prominence in the metropolis. They also perform an educational or even didactic role, seeking to maintain a balance among informing, educating and entertaining. This balance is not easy when dealing with such disturbing subjects as genocide and dispossession (Lynch 2016). In politically charged atmospheres, curators also have to manage expectations and interests from historians, politicians and the wider public. Despite this, the 'new' national museums cannot help but symbolise a transcendental connection between generations, social groups and territories, and they teleologically endow nations with a tangible illustration of a common origin. In museums of national history, historical and national consciousness become materialised in the form of monumental buildings accommodating permanent and temporary exhibitions. As Benedict Anderson (1991, p. 178), concerned with this transcendental function of nationalism in modern societies, pointed out, 'museums, and the museumizing imagination, are both profoundly political.' With state-sponsored museums operating as highly political spaces for the recreation of the national past, they function as a crucial site for the on-going legitimisation of nationhood.

THE *HAUS DER GESCHICHTE DER BUNDESREPUBLIK DEUTSCHLAND*, THE *DEUTSCHES HISTORISCHES MUSEUM* AND THE '*HISTORIKERSTREIT*'

The *Historikerstreit* and the 'History Wars' have been acknowledged as *the* key controversies in the post-war historiographies of Germany and Australia. However, the relationship between these public historical controversies and the controversies surrounding national museums deserves more attention. After 1945, as the Cold War hardened, Germans engaged in a culture of suppressing the past rather than coming to terms with it. Those historians who had accommodated themselves to or supported Nazism reframed the narrative of their past in accordance with the requirements of the two new systems

of government in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the German Democratic Republic (GDR) after 1949 (Hohls and Jarausch 2000). In West Germany the first history controversy challenging the legitimacy of Germany's national history emerged in the early 1960s, with Fritz Fischer's (1961) claim that German imperialism had been responsible for the First World War. Fischer took a *longue durée* perspective of German history, arguing that Protestant traditions in German culture ultimately led to the catastrophic trajectory of the first half of the twentieth century. The FRG government cut Fischer's funding, and conservative historians such as Gerhard Ritter opposed Fischer's thesis (Moses 1975). With a climate of political change from the late 1960s, critical views of Germany's past became more acceptable and post-war German national narratives became increasingly contested. In 1969, Social Democrat Willy Brandt, who had been in the resistance movement and exiled during the Nazi era, became Federal Chancellor. Despite (or because of) the climate of change, his historic gesture of apology at the Warsaw Ghetto in 1970, the genuflection or *Kniefall*, was disapproved of by almost half the West German population (*Der Spiegel* 1970). Brandt and the Social Democrats dominated federal politics in the 1970s but the social democratic era came to an end with the chancellorship of the Christian Democrat, Helmut Kohl, in 1982.

Kohl, like John Howard his Australian counterpart discussed below, was a social conservative. Kohl had a PhD in history and, despite his transatlantic and Francophile commitments, employed a more nationalist rhetoric than his predecessors. He marketed his chancellorship as a conservative 'spiritual-moral turn' (*geistig-moralische Wende*) which would repair the cultural damages of the post-1968 period and bring 'historical consciousness' back to the younger generations of the divided country, a country that Kohl claimed would one day be again territorially unified and maintain a thriving Western, republican tradition (Wicke 2015). Kohl was also concerned about the competition over national history with the antagonistic regime in East Berlin, which was simultaneously popularising its Prussian and Lutheran heritage (Wicke 2015, pp. 159–160). At the same time West Berlin pushed for a permanent exhibition on German history. The alliance between politicians and historians becomes evident, for example, in the relationship between the conservative historian Michael Stürmer, one of the most important voices during the *Historikerstreit* (Augstein 1993), and Chancellor Kohl. Stürmer acted as Kohl's advisor and was a key promoter of Prussian history as German national history (Stölzl 1988). In 1982, Stürmer, with three other historians, had published a memorandum for the establishment of a German Historical Museum in Berlin. Stürmer would remain an important actor in the conservative historical movement of the 1980s, warning that Germany was about to become 'a land without history' (Stürmer, 25 April 1986) and supported his Chancellor's controversial memory politics, which were of domestic and international significance (Maier 1988).

In 1982 Kohl announced his plan to create a 'collection' pertaining to Federal Republican history in Bonn (which would become the *Haus der*

Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland; Kohl, 13 October 1982). In 1983, he also announced the construction of a national museum in Berlin (*Deutsches Historisches Museum*, DHM; Kohl, 4 May 1983). Both museums were from then on presented and discussed as complementary. Kohl in the meantime fueled the political-historical debate, when in January 1984 he visited Israel where he claimed the 'grace of late birth' (*Gnade der späten Geburt*) for his supposedly guiltless generation (Kohl, 25 January 1984).

The political debate over the two museums began when the West German minister for internal affairs sought to justify the decision to establish a museum in Bonn and the establishment of an expert commission to outline the historical narrative underpinning the exhibition. The commission consisted largely of conservative historians, including Lothar Gall, Klaus Hildebrand and Horst Möller (HGBD 1991, pp. 6–7). It was obliged to publish its report on the plans and take a great number of external opinions into account. Social Democrat Freimut Duve, for example, questioned the necessity of such a museum in Bonn (HGBD 1991, pp. 9–10, pp. 18–19). Social Democrat Richard Löwenthal believed such a museum was necessary as younger Germans 'had the need for a secure self-consciousness' (HGBD 1991, p. 10). The ambitions for finding a consensus were relatively strong, though left-wing historians such as Hans Mommsen or Helga Grebing remained sceptical of the nationalist rationale behind plans for Bonn (HGBD 1991, p. 14). Grebing moreover warned of homogenising a plurality of historical interpretations (HGBD 1991, pp. 14–15), an argument mounted by the left in Australia in the 2000s. Kohl defended himself against the claims of imposing a unitary version of history in arguing that the plurality of views was reflected in the museum policy and asserting that there wouldn't be any 'official image of history' dictated for the museums (HGBD 1991, pp. 19–20).

In mid-1986, the clash in West Germany's historical culture peaked as the political controversy about the two museums was mounting. This was a year after Kohl and Ronald Reagan had visited the Bitburg cemetery where SS soldiers were buried and, on the same day, commemorated the victims of the concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen (Jensen 2007). In the meantime the expert commission for the DHM in Berlin had also developed a programme for the museum's exhibition. Jürgen Habermas' subsequent article on the apologetic tendencies in Germany in many ways triggered the *Historikerstreit* over the singularity of the Holocaust (*Die Zeit*, 11 July 1986). But it was not only a reaction to Ernst Nolte's revisionist attempts of constructing the Holocaust as an element of a European civil war against the pre-existing communist threat (*FAZ*, 6 June 1986), but largely also to what Habermas perceived as the Kohl government's hegemonic attempt to promote national unity through a conservative account of history. The words of Habermas that caused the complete eruption of the *Historikerstreit* were also a critique of the Museum policies:

If one looks at the composition of the commissions of experts that have elaborated the concepts for the museums planned by the Federal Government – the German Historical Museum in Berlin and the House of the History of the Federal Republic in Bonn – it is difficult to resist the impression that the New Revisionism's ideas are also intended to be translated into the shape of exhibits, of display objects with the appropriate effect of a national pedagogy. (*Die Zeit*, 11 July 1986)

The editors of *Die Zeit* had asked Habermas previously to skip a section, which he, however, published the following year in a book volume (Habermas 1987, pp. 120–136), stating: 'Whoever does Bergen-Belsen in the morning and in the afternoon arranges a meeting of war veterans in Bitburg has a different conception of things—one which did not simply form the background to the eighth of May events yesterday, but is also the inspiration today for the planning of new memorials and new museum building.'

Even though absolute post-nationalism was rare in any part of Germany, this ideology had a prominent and influential spokesperson. Habermas was strongly averse to conventional forms of national identity and introduced his concept of constitutional patriotism (*Verfassungspatriotismus*) into the debate of the German *Historikerstreit*, when he argued that this would be 'the only patriotism, which does not alienate us from the West' (*Die Zeit*, 11 July 1986). In his eyes, the museums were part of a neoconservative movement of revisionist historians, headed by the federal government with its apologetic and tendencies vis-à-vis the Nazi past. Despite employing a cultural understanding of the German nation, Habermas believed that 'a bond, rooted in convictions of universalist, constitutional principles, has unfortunately only evolved in the *Kulturnation* of the Germans after—and because of—Auschwitz' (ibid.). Many critical historians sided with Habermas, attacking the hegemonic cultural policies of the Government (see, e.g. a collection by the *Geschichtswerkstatt* Berlin of 1987). Around the same time, parts of the opposition (including members of the SPD and Greens) also sought to undermine and delegitimise Kohl's conservative idea of 'normality,' criticising his museum projects as an attempt to normalise right-wing perceptions of German history, but Kohl insisted that he only sought to save Germans from a loss of national identity during the difficult times of political division. The parliamentary *Kulturdebatte* (1986) in the *Bundestag*, discussing the museum policy of the government, can be seen as a parliamentary pendant to the academic *Historikerstreit*.

The process of the establishment of what today is the German Historical Museum seems much more chaotic than in the Australian case, especially with regard to the Berlin museum: the *Haus der Geschichte's* foundation in Bonn was established in 1986, but its director set an agenda in 1987 and the law for the Bonn museum was approved by the *Bundestag* (including the votes of the SPD) and by the *Bundesrat* in 1989 and 1990, respectively, enabling Kohl to open the museum's first permanent exhibition in 1994 while he was still chancellor. In 1987 the institution of the DHM was founded in Berlin

as part of the 750th anniversary celebrations of the city of Berlin, and the first exhibitions were displayed from 1989 in some industrial buildings in the district of Charlottenburg, followed by an exhibition in 1990 in the Gropius Building on 'Bismarck: Prussia, Germany and Europe' (Delius 1990), confirming the Habermasian fears of an overly teleological, nationalist and rehabilitating representation of the German past. The unification of Germany and Berlin was at that stage not expected. However, the realisation of its counterpart in Berlin was disrupted by geopolitical events. Instead of following the plan of establishing the museum next to the *Reichstag*, the fall of the Berlin wall opened the opportunity to use the old Prussian Arsenal at Unter den Linden. The DHM initially took over the former GDR 'Museum for German History' before new temporary exhibitions of German history were displayed from 2003. Chancellor Merkel finally opened the permanent exhibition space in 2006. Both museums can be seen as part of the rehabilitation of German 'normality.' The Habermasian faction of German historians was perhaps wrong in its anticipation of an overly conservative narrative that would promote an entirely positive national history and thus self-congratulatory national identity by exonerating Germans from their guilt for the Holocaust. The very existence of national museums and their representation of a cohesive national narrative, however, contradicts any claims to post-nationalism. Importantly, these museums were part of a political project that sought to relegitimise German history and German nationhood from its delegitimising genocidal past. Such a dynamic played out in Australia too as we show below.

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AUSTRALIA AND THE 'HISTORY WARS'

Although not seemingly causally related, Australian historians made links and comparisons between the Australian 'History Wars' and the German *Historik-erstreit* (Moses 2001; Bonnell 2004; Bendle 2009). The Australian 1990s are reminiscent of this German *Schlußstrich*-era, because, as with German politicians who sought exculpating treatment in the exposure of positive continuities in German history, the Australian Prime Minister John Howard sought to draw reassuring continuities from the Australian past. This was a past that the federal government presented in a positive light, in contrast to the 'negative' connotations of developments in Australian history coming from academia and especially when associated with the government-funded National Museum of Australia (NMA).

Based in Canberra, the federal capital, the National Museum of Australia opened to the public in 2001. It was considered the centerpiece of Australia's Centenary of Federation celebrations marked throughout that year. Yet even before it opened, the National Museum of Australia was criticised for presenting Australian history negatively. Rumours abounded that such negativity was even inscribed into the very fabric of the museum building, with an apology

to Australia's indigenous peoples inscribed in Braille on the museum's outer façade.

For some, however, the idea of a national museum offered the hope of redemption and renewal, rather than just a monument to a troubled past. Therefore, two years after its opening, the museum underwent a period of government review, in which a cohesive and positive national narrative was recommended in order to overcome the fragmentation of national consciousness that had been brought about by the so-called 'history wars' of the 1990s. The past had been fiercely contested in the years preceding the opening of the National Museum as noted above. This politicised history focused on the dispossession of land belonging to indigenous peoples during colonisation and, most damagingly, claims that Australian governments pursued eugenic and genocidal policies in the twentieth century towards Aboriginal peoples. It was for this reason that the NMA became a crucial site of state-sponsored history in Australia and the contested location of an attempt to relegitimise the Australian past.

The idea of establishing a national museum for Australia had been raised during the debates immediately before and after Federation at the turn of the twentieth century. However, the National Museum of Australia only began collecting artefacts once an Act of Parliament established it as a statutory authority in 1980. Thus the period of its existence coincided with a significant shift in understandings about Australia's past. From the late 1960s, historians in Australia increasingly concerned themselves with the effects of colonisation, but not as a celebration of the extension of civilisation into a far-flung part of the globe, but instead for its negative effects on Australia's indigenous peoples. This newer approach entailed criticism of prevailing narratives of the past that were increasingly seen as involving conscious or unconscious acts of forgetting with regard to the more disturbing aspects of Australia's history, dispossession, discrimination, exploitation, murder and even genocide (Reynolds 1981).

In 1945, the dominant national narrative in Australia was still predominantly one that stressed the civilising effects of hard-working, egalitarian white settlers in which Australia was a 'social laboratory,' pioneering innovations such as the secret vote, votes for women and wages set for working men that allowed them to support a family as the sole breadwinner. This narrative was given added legitimacy in the twentieth century by successful participation in the global struggles against totalitarian militarism. In contrast to German post-war national narratives, the dominant national narrative prior to the 1980s positioned Australians as *victims*: convicts as victims of empire, settlers as victims of the environment, and the Anzac troops as victims of British incompetence (Curthoys 2003, p. 188). This sense of victimhood made it difficult for many Australians to identify their forebears as *perpetrators*, tainting their ancestors with criminal, inhuman and immoral acts towards Australia's indigenous peoples. However, in the last decades of the twentieth century, it was exactly this that they were asked to do. By the 1980s, as the

Historikerstreit was gaining political salience in Germany, Australian historians were writing a version of history that challenged longer established national narratives of victimhood and civilisation in Australia.

In 1988, during the official celebrations in Sydney Harbour marking the Bicentenary of the settling of the Australian continent by the British, indigenous peoples and their nonindigenous supporters staged a counter-demonstration claiming the event as 'Invasion Day.' The counter-demonstration, attended by indigenous peoples who had travelled from across the Australian continent to attend, gave settler-indigenous relations a high public profile. Settler-indigenous relations gained political salience following an official enquiry into the disproportionately high number of Aboriginal deaths in police custody in 1991 that led to a decade-long political process of 'Reconciliation.' The following year the High Court of Australia's decision in the *Mabo* case overturned the legal notion of *terra nullius* meaning that Australia could not be claimed as empty land when the British arrived in 1788 and began dispossessing indigenous peoples of their land. In 1993 the prime minister and leader of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) acknowledged offences against the indigenous population carried out by state agencies, arguing that 'We [the settlers] took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the diseases; the alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers (Keating 1993 [1992], p. 4).

Settler-indigenous relations were further politicised by the publication of the *Bringing Them Home* report in 1997 by a parliamentary enquiry into the policies of indigenous child removal carried out by federal and state government agencies from 1901 until the 1960s that created the so-called 'Stolen Generations.' State Parliaments subsequently issued apologies for the past treatment of mixed-race children forcibly removed from their parents and brought up in 'civilised' (white) society. This politicisation of the past forced debates about history into the public realm just as construction on the National Museum in Canberra began.

But not everyone in the Australian community felt comfortable with the need to atone for past sins. In 1993, the conservative historian Geoffrey Blainey coined a term for the emerging revisionist attitudes to the past: 'black-armband history' (Blainey 1993). Blainey presented the dispossession of Aboriginal land, and the attack on Aboriginal culture, as inevitable vis-à-vis the technological superiority of the British: 'Here were the inhabitants of the land which had just invented the steam engine meeting people who making no pottery and working no metals, did not know how to boil water. Here was an utter contrast in peoples... even with goodwill on both sides they were incompatible' (Blainey 1994, p. 22). From the mid-1990s, the term 'black armband history' was broadly applied to any view of history that conservatives in Australia deemed unduly negative. Henry Reynolds, a leading figure on the left-liberal side of the spectrum in this debate, then attacked 'several generations of nationalist and self-congratulatory writing, which had banished the Aborigines from text to a melancholy footnote' arguing that

‘Black-armband history is often distressing, but it does enable us to know and understand the incubus which burdens us all’ (Reynolds 1999, p. 258).

It was the change of government in 1996 that truly began the ossification of political opinion about the past into a Manichean debate that pitted ‘black armbands’ against ‘white blindfolds.’ The new Prime Minister and leader of the Liberal Party of Australia, John Howard, was a neoliberal social conservative who sought to restore national pride by disassociating himself and the Australian people from more ‘negative’ aspects of the Australian past, just as Kohl had done for himself and Germany in the 1980s. As prime minister from 1996 to 2007, Howard made it clear that he did not support the critical view of Australia’s past that had emerged in the preceding decades. Importantly he refused to apologise to the ‘Stolen Generations’ on behalf of the nation because present-day Australians could not carry any culpability for past crimes (see the Chap. 44 by Francesca Dominello in this volume). Howard was supported by historians, politicians and public figures who sought to counter what they saw as the overly-negative and damaging view of Australia’s past stemming from the cultural left and left-wing-dominated faculties of arts including departments of history. It was the latter that provided the historical research on which the new exhibits at the NMA would have to be based with, critics claimed, a corrosive effect on national pride.

Evidence emerged that these debates about the past were entering national consciousness. Mark McKenna demonstrated that during the 1990s, remembering the past in Australia became more contested and traumatic characterised by guilt, pain, denial and defensive pride (McKenna 2002, pp. 202–215). In federal parliament, the right-wing populist Pauline Hanson was elected in 1996. Her One Nation Party entered the debate with racist views on settler-indigenous history that pushed the public debate to the right. Outside of parliament, the former academic, Keith Windschuttle, emerged as a key critic of Aboriginal history and the NMA. With support from the right-wing think tank the Institute for Public Affairs (IPA) and support within government, he criticised the methodology of Aboriginal history and the conclusions about massacres and genocide reached thereby. He claimed that ‘black armband history’ was too reliant on dubious oral history, that many of the claims about massacres could not be documented and that many allegedly genocidal moments in Australian history were ‘fabricated’ (Windschuttle 2002).

The stakes in the debate were high. Windschuttle claimed he was defending nothing less than ‘the legitimacy of the British occupation of the Australian continent and of its commitment to the rule of law and civilised values’ (Windschuttle 2000, p. 20). This growing polarisation of the debate placed those curating the exhibits at the soon-to-be-opened National Museum in a difficult position. The museum was a statutory authority; that is, it was funded by the federal government but was notionally independent of direct government control, although highly exposed to political scrutiny. As a

taxpayer-funded institution with an expectation of impartiality in its presentation of the past, it was not clear if 'impartiality' meant presenting all views potentially offending everyone; taking a median position between the increasingly opposed sides of the debate at the risk of pleasing no one; or imposing an institutional consensus at variance with the stated views of the government of the day.

In 2001 the National Museum opened its doors into this politicised atmosphere with three main galleries: *Tangled Destinies*, dealing with human interactions with the Australian environment; *Nation*, charting the development of Australian national identity from 1901; and *First Australians*, devoted to indigenous cultures of Australia. Windschuttle quickly paid a visit to the new Museum and described it as 'a profound intellectual mistake,' labelling it—and social history more generally—as 'a tasteless blanchmange of worthy sentiment' (Windschuttle 2001, p. 16).

Indigenous sovereignty and newer understandings of the past that stressed the dispossession and genocide threatened the legitimacy of the Australian nation and undercut the idea of a positive national narrative. But once nationalists have identified threats to the nation and identified potential or actual sources of division they then seek to overcome them. These divisions can be based on class, race, gender or age. In this case, the division to be overcome was between past and present, a division that reflected the fragmentation of ideas about nationhood. Therefore some conservatives did not reject the NMA in its entirety but thought that it held out the possibility of healing a divided nation by presenting the Australian past in a more cohesive and consensual way.

But to perform this function the NMA would first have to be removed from the intellectual grip of 'black-armband history' and be given a new purpose. In this emerging conservative view, the National Museum was the institution that would help transcend or even eradicate such 'rival symbolic repertoires' (Hutchinson 2005, p. 87), thereby strengthening the nation. The means of this transcendence was to shift the debate about history, and the museum's displays, away from a vision of plurality and towards one where an imposed consensus was paramount (Hansen 2005). Yet imposing such a consensus risked excluding marginal voices and opinions. Graeme Davison, historian and advisor to the museum's council and director during installation of the three galleries, posed a solution to balancing the tensions between the role of a government-funded national museum presenting a singular narrative and an institution representing the nation's diversity. Davison wondered whether 'rather than suppressing difference by imposing an institutional consensus, might it not be better if national museums recognised that the imagined community that we call the nation is by its very nature plural and in flux?' (Davison 2001, p. 26).

Conservative commentators and some museum council members close to the Liberal (conservative) government rejected this pluralistic vision.

A government-sponsored review of the NMA was delivered in July 2003 (*Review of the National Museum of Australia Its Exhibitions and Public Programs*, hereafter *Review*). It noted that the museum risked 'presenting an assembly of ill-coordinated fragments, merely serving to confuse the visitor' instead of telling a cohesive story of the nation. It recommended a curatorial approach to exhibits that emphasised European and broader Western and classical traditions embodied in and by the Australian nation-state. It also recommended drawing a stronger link between Australia's natural environment and its national character, a device it was suggested that could transcend pre- and post-European settlement and bridge the settler-indigenous divide (*Review* 2003).

In a political move designed to catch the NMA's supporters off-guard, the *Review* only dwelt briefly with Australia's darker past and instead directed its attention to the primacy of national unity and the lack of gravity in presenting Australian culture. It is important to note the *Review* misunderstood the concept of 'imagined communities,' a concept that had indeed underpinned one of the three main galleries concerning the development of the Australian nation since 1901, but in doing so revealed the concern of the government and conservative response to the NMA:

The Panel is inclined to read more consensus than plurality at the core of that national collective conscience. The concept of 'imagined communities,' which is drawn from Benedict Anderson's book of that title, implies that the national character is a sort of fictitious construct, fluid and subject to rapid change, and therefore ephemeral. (*Review* 2003, p. 9)

This perceived fragmentation and delegitimisation of the Australian nation was combatted through asserting a singular—and positive—national narrative through the National Museum of Australia; an approach that later broadened out into the teaching of history. Summing up the conservative victory in the 'History Wars' in 2006, Prime Minister John Howard argued that 'too often, history, along with other subjects in the humanities, has succumbed to a post-modern culture of relativism where any objective record of achievement is questioned or repudiated.' He warned that 'young people are at risk of being disinherited from their community if that community lacks the courage and confidence to teach its history.'² The politics of the past that played out at the National Museum of Australia was part of a wider project to relegitimise the Australian past and hence the nation.

CONCLUSION

The nation-state (or governments in control of it) engaged in a form of state-sponsored history by creating national museums in an era that some sought to characterise as 'post-national.' This was an attempt to reimpose a 'state-sponsored' consensus on a narrative that not only was portrayed as having become fragmented, but that also threatened the legitimacy of the nation

itself as heir to a genocidal past. In both Germany and Australia debates over different kinds of 'genocidal pasts' undermined the legitimacy of the nation. In both countries the New Left, the new social movements that came into existence after 1968 and the subsequent constructivist turn in academia, paved the way towards more pluralistic and critical views of national history. Thus state-sponsored history in Germany and Australia played out against the backdrop of wider social and political debates about the past. When viewed as part of a national and nationalist project, national museums became the arena for contestation about the past and in particular attempts by conservative governments to re-establish a single national narrative in response to pluralist 'post-national' reconfigurations of the recent past.

NOTES

1. We are grateful for the constructive feedback by the editors.
2. Howard (2006).

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