

# The Semantics of Political Integration: Public Debates about the Term 'Expellees' in Post-War Western Germany

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*In the immediate period following the Second World War the Western occupation zones of Germany received eight million ethnic Germans from Central and Eastern Europe. Initially these newcomers were lumped in Western German discourse under the term 'refugees'. Yet, within less than a decade, the term 'expellees' emerged as a more popular denotation. Scholarship has offered two explanations for this semantic change, emphasising the political influence of both the Allies and the 'expellee' leadership. This article presents a complementary reason for this discursive shift. We argue that 'expellees' marked the symbolic weight that the ethnic Germans offered as expulsion victims in order to balance out German guilt for Nazi crimes.*

Refugees or expellees? The question of how to refer to the eight million ethnic Germans who had lost their homes in Central and Eastern Europe after the end of the Second World War and found refuge in the Western occupation zones of Germany,<sup>1</sup> which were to become the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) in 1949, preoccupied the Western German public in the immediate post-war period.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, the terms West Germany (the Federal Republic of Germany) and East Germany (the German Democratic Republic) are used in reference to the period of statehood following 1949, Western occupation zones of Germany and Soviet occupation zone are employed for the pre-state period of 1945–49 and Western Germany and Eastern Germany denominate the time-frame spanning both periods.

<sup>2</sup> Matthias Jung, Thomas Niehr and Karin Böke, *Ausländer und Migranten im Spiegel der Presse: Ein diskurshistorisches Wörterbuch zur Einwanderung seit 1945* (Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 2000), 27.

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