The Hamburg Flood in Public Memory Culture

Felix Mauch

Summary

Today, the Storm Flood of 1962 forms an integral part of local and national memory culture. Public commemoration events, monuments, and media coverage assure that the disaster is not forgotten.

On 20 February 1962, some 150,000 people gathered on Hamburg's Rathausmarkt for a commemoration of the victims of the great flood that had inundated large parts of the city in the night of 16 and 17 February.



Temporary memorial during the 50th anniversary of the flood at Hamburg's Rathausmarkt

2012 Felix Mauch

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In his speech, Mayor Paul Nevermann formulated the first call for commemoration of the flood: "Only in the nights of bombing in the year 1943 and the fire of 1842 was our city hit by an affliction that was as grave as this last blow. This experience of suffering will act as both a warning and an exhortation." This appeal did not go unheard, and became the starting point of a lasting memory culture surrounding the Great Flood. Disaster

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memory became a veritable duty. A committee of experts responsible for dealing with the disaster warned the city against the perils of not being constantly aware of potential danger. Memories of previous storm floods had faded away —the last major flood, which took place in 1825, had occurred more than one hundred years earlier— allowing people to forget about the possibility of recurrence. Collective memory became more than just commemoration. It provided not only a historic perspective, but also a perspective for the future, functioning as a medium through which to cope with the disaster and to warn against and prevent the next storm flood. Still today, commemoration events and medial or material acts of remembrance make up an integral part of local and national memory culture. Elements of this "memory landscape" include speeches, memorials, high water marks, signs, newspaper articles, photographs, and films.



Flood memorial in Hamburg-Oevelgoenne.

Photograph by Felix Mauch, 2011

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High-water mark of the 1962 flood at a church in Hamburg-Moorburg.

Photograph by GeorgHH, 2006.
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Aside from the commemoration of victims and destruction caused by the flood, local and national identity was strongly influenced by memories of rescue operations, social cohesion in the wake of the flood, and successful reconstruction thereafter. Recently, memory culture has also developed "from below," a trend visible in private initiatives and the personal archives of eyewitnesses who bear remembrance to and pass on memories of the flood.

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Water Histories

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Further readings:

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- Kempe, Michael. "'Mind the Next Flood!' Memories of Natural Disasters in Northern Germany from the Sixteenth Century to the Present." *The Medieval History Journal* 10, no. 1 (2007): 327–354.
- Mauelshagen, Franz. "Flood Disasters and Political Culture at the German North Sea Coast: A Long-term Historical Perspective." *Historical Social Research* 32, no. 3 (2007): 133–144.
- Paech, Frauke. "'Die ganzen menschlichen Geschichten.' Die Hamburger Sturmflut von 1962 im Bewusstsein der Wilhelmsburger Bevölkerung." In *Wilhelmsburg: Hamburgs große Elbinsel*, edited by Geschichtswerkstatt Wilhelmsburg Honigfabrik, 161–174. Hamburg: Medien-Verlag Schubert, 2008.
- Pfister, Christian. "'The Monster Swallows You.' Disaster Memory and Risk Culture in Western Europe, 1500–2000." *RCC Perspectives* 2011, no. 1.

Related links:

- Project "Katastrophenerinnerung" at the Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut in Essen (KWI)
  http://www.kwi-nrw.de/home/projekt-49.html
- "Werkstatt der Erinnerung" at the Forschungsstelle für Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg (FSZ)
  http://www.werkstatt-der-erinnerung.de/index.php
- 50 years after the Flood
  http://sturmflut.hamburg.de/

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Websites linked in this text:

- https://www.environmentandsociety.org/arcadia/great-flood-1962-hamburg

Websites linked in image captions:

- https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:Flutmarke_1962_Moorburg.jpg

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