A 16th century manuscript showing Conquistadors being attacked in South America
carpentry techniques were Spanish. However the only human remains ever discovered at the site (unearthed several years prior to the present excavations) are those of three Native Americans – including one who may have been a chieftain. His skeleton had been interred in front of the earthen pyramid. Significantly, he was buried with high status grave goods — a smoking pipe, a turtle shell, a tool kit of stone implements, some arrow heads – and an iron knife which the archaeologists believe may have been presented to him by the Spanish as some sort of diplomatic gift.

But where the skeletal remains of the last Spanish conquistadors lie buried is as yet a complete mystery. Historical sources suggest that they died in the open when they were tricked into leaving their fort. There is a possibility that the Spanish may have been burnt alive in their houses during the fire arrow attack by the Native Americans. Yet, so far not a single Spanish bone has been found. But as the excavation is due to continue over the next few years, the archaeologists hope to learn what befell the conquistadors in their final few hours.

The dig, near Asheville, is being directed jointly by Dr David Moore of Warren Wilson College, North Carolina, Dr Robin Beck of the University of Oklahoma and Dr Chris Rodning of Tulane University in New Orleans – in collaboration with Pat and James Berry whose family has owned the site since it was granted to them by the English colonial government in the 1770s. David Keys

A garrison of Spanish soldiers was wiped out by a Native American uprising

that the campaign was “a very good idea” and stressed “the immediacy” of these diaries as opposed to retrospective history. She did, however, highlight the potential limitations of using these diaries. “The problem is that a lot of diaries are very little use to a historian because there is nothing that is illuminating other than what somebody did and the name of their cat. These observations do need to be subjective and personal but also to be connected to the bigger things.” She also felt that the information needed to be evaluated in some way, no easy task considering the huge amount of information that has been collected.

Social historian Pat Thane also sounded a cautionary note. “I wonder whether we need this given the large numbers of oral histories and other personal sources that exist. However, as a historian, I would rather have too much information than too little.” Rob Attar

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Poland’s ethnic cleansing

EUROPE’S LARGEST EPISODE of ethnic cleansing was carried out jointly by an unholy alliance of communists and extreme rightists, according to new research. An in-depth study of the expulsion of Poland’s German population after the Second World War has revealed that it was planned and implemented by Poland’s communist authorities in close co-operation with members of the National Democrats (the NDP, which was an illegal extreme right wing party in Poland).

The Communist Party came to power in Poland in 1944 and banned the vehemently anti-Semitic as well as anti-German NDP. However, in western Poland (what had been German East Prussia and Silesia) the government employed NDP members to carry out the ethnic cleansing program. An NDP front organisation, the Polish Western Union, received a government subsidy, ran many of the verification committees which determined who could stay and who should be expelled, and carried out virulent pro-expulsion propaganda against Poland’s ethnic German population. Hundreds of National Democrats were recruited by the government’s Ministry for Recovered Territories where they occupied many of the key positions.

“These extreme right wing officials were used by the communist government to seize German property and select Germans for final expulsion,” said Dr David Curp of Ohio University whose research on the subject is about to be published by Boydell and Brewer in a new book, A Clean Sweep: The Politics of Ethnic Cleansing in Western Poland.

Before the Second World War, Poland had been a multi-ethnic state, five per cent of whose population were ethnic Germans. During the war the communists had insisted that they were against the Nazis, not against the German people or against the ethnic German minority in Poland. Despite taking power in 1944, the Communist Party did not command the backing of most Poles and had to struggle to win popular support.

The German population of Poland had risen to 20 per cent with the change of international borders at the end of the war. The National Democrats wanted to launch a terror campaign to empty the newly enlarged Poland of its German and ethnic German population. An internal government report said that the Polish Western Union believed that Poland “needs something along the lines of the SS Aussiedlungsstab” (the SS organisation responsible for expelling Jews and Poles during the Second World War) to remove ethnic Germans from Poland. The communist authorities realised that nationalist anti-German sentiment could be harnessed to make their government more popular, so they decided to exploit the nationalist fervour to help boost their own popularity and to survive in power.

There was debate within the government as to whether people should be expelled purely on the basis of their German ethnicity or whether German anti-Nazis should be spared. The Polish Western Union intervened and backed by some communist leaders, defeated those elements within the Communist Party who took a more liberal stance. Thus hundreds of German communists – some of whom had suffered in Nazi camps – were among those expelled. In total, two million Germans were forced to flee the emerging new Poland by the Red Army in 1944/45, and five million were expelled by the Poles in 1945-47. Two million Poles from Eastern Poland were also ethnically cleansed by the Soviets. David Keys

Expelled Germans leave Poland’s western territories after the Second World War.
NE OF the most romanticised episodes of British history – the Jacobite Rising and Bonnie Prince Charlie’s bid for the throne in 1745 – is about to undergo a potentially controversial makeover. One of Scotland’s key historical attractions at the battlefield of Culloden, the site of the final Jacobite defeat in 1746, is to be transformed into a spectacular yet impartial museum committed to giving equal space to anti-Jacobite and Jacobite views.

The interpretation centre at Culloden is currently oriented toward Bonnie Prince Charlie. However it is to be demolished and will be replaced by a larger museum which will seek to tell the story in more objective terms.

Over the years, the National Trust for Scotland, which owns the site, has received many complaints accusing the interpretive centre’s content of being biased in favour of the Jacobites. “Without doubt the current display tells the story of Bonnie Prince Charlie in a highly romanticised way – using Jacobite songs and a very gentle narrative,” said Alexander Bennett, the senior National Trust official in charge of the Culloden make-over. “The new interpretation centre will be totally different. It will simply present the facts in an impartial, though nevertheless exciting way and let the visitors make up their own minds as to who was right and who was wrong,” he said.

The new interpretation will reflect the complex political issues of the time. The ‘45 will be explained as part of a Scottish civil war – and indeed as part of a wider pan-European conflict, the War of the Austrian Succession. It will look in detail at the conflict between Highland Episcopalians and Catholics and Scottish Tories on the one hand and Scottish Lowland and east coast Presbyterians, Anglicans and Whigs on the other hand. It will examine the military participation of the French and will ask what has hitherto been a semi-taboo question in Scotland: namely, was the British Hanoverian government right and a force for progress and were the Jacobites wrong and a force for reaction?

The new exhibition will also look more closely at Culloden’s appalling aftermath – the floating prisons established on the Thames for Jacobite POWs, the public execution of rebel leaders on the whole operation was deniable. He explained:

“In the event of discovery that a special case has got into this country and is a Russian subject, there will be no reason to suppose that anyone in this country knew anything special about him. Nothing can then be fastened on anybody, except that the individual was wrongly registered in Germany as a DP”. Peter Day
The right to deny

Historians express reservations about French decision on Armenian genocide law, reports ROB ATTAR

T HE FRENCH parliament has recently voted to make it an offence to deny the Armenian genocide of 1915. The deaths of 1–1.5 million Armenians through deportations and murder are recognised as genocide by the International Association of Genocide Scholars. Ottoman Turkey has been accused of instigating the massacres and expulsions. Turkey asserts that the deaths were not genocide and has reacted angrily to the French vote.

Some historians have criticised the move: “It is a very bad idea,” said Dr Donald Bloxham, author of The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians. “It is an attack on freedom of speech and however much one deplores the deniers, there are other ways of tackling them.”

Turkish-born academic Taner Akcam agreed. “This opens the way for the state to impose how we should think about history and it does not address the underlying pain it purports to fix.” Akcam was also worried that such a law would “accelerate the hate and animosity between Turkish and Armenian people and move us further away from ending denial.”

Armenian-American scholar Peter Balakian, author of Burning Tigris: A History of the Armenian Genocide is “opposed to all laws that restrict opinion or thought” but notes that the situation is complicated by “the fact that one of the most horrendous human rights crimes in history was never followed by any form of justice or acknowledgement by the perpetrator”.

This is not the first time that parliamentarians have sought to legislate on historical matters. Similar laws against Holocaust denial are on the statute books in many European states and in February this year British historian David Irving was sentenced to three years in prison in Austria on such a charge.

But Professor Richard J Evans of Cambridge University, an expert on Nazi Germany, believed there was less justification for the proposed new law. “It is understandable, though still regrettable, to have a law against Holocaust denial in countries that bear direct responsibility for the extermination of European Jews and where there is a danger of neo-Nazism. It is a different matter to pass a law against the denying of the Armenian genocide because countries like France do not bear a direct responsibility for what happened and there is no political threat to democracy involved in denial, however reprehensible it may be.”