Peitsch H, Sayner J. [Tendentiousness and Topicality: Buchenwald and Antifascism as Sites of GDR memory](#). *German Politics and Society* 2015, 33(1), 100-118.

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DOI link to article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.3167/gps.2015.330108>

Date deposited:

21/02/2017

Embargo release date:

01 June 2017

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This is a post-peer-review, pre-copyedited version of an article published in *German Politics and Society*. The definitive publisher-authenticated version 'Tendentiousness and Topicality: Buchenwald and Antifascism as Sites of GDR Memory', *German Politics and Society*, Issue 114 Vol. 33, No. 1/2 (Spring/Summer 2015): 100–118 doi:10.3167/gps.2015.330108 • ISSN 1045-0300 (Print) • ISSN 1558-5441 (Online) is available online at: <http://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/gps/33/1/gps.33.issue-1.xml>

Tendentiousness and Topicality: Buchenwald and Antifascism as Sites of GDR memory

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Abstract

This article examines two chapters from Martin Sabrow's 2009 edited volume *Erinnerungsorte der DDR*, one on antifascism and one on Buchenwald. These two case studies exemplify the complexities of the contemporary German memorial landscape. In particular, they thematize the remembrance of the Nazi past in the German Democratic Republic and how this GDR past has, in turn, been tendentiously remembered since unification. By examining the layering of memories in these two chapters, we argue that the theoretical models which often underpin contemporary German memory work, Sabrow's volume included, serve to obscure the role of the state as carrier of official memory. On the basis of this study, we show that concepts dominant in today's Germany promote a unified national narrative. In particular, terms such as the "culture of memory" (*Erinnerungskultur*) and cultural memory (*kulturelles Gedächtnis*) downplay conflicting, contentious and diverse memories relating to the GDR past. As such, the article provides a timely note of caution for memory studies and memory work, which increasingly applies these models to wider, non-German contexts.

Keywords

site of memory; culture of memory; cultural memory; antifascism; Buchenwald

In his introductory essay to a collection entitled *Bewältigte Diktaturvergangenheit? 20 Jahre DDR-Aufarbeitung* (Has the Dictatorial Past Been Dealt With? Twenty Years of Working through the GDR Past), the director of the Centre for Contemporary History in Potsdam, Martin Sabrow, describes the scholar of contemporary history as someone conversant in the same *Zeitgeist* that s/he analyzes.¹ Taking advantage of his involvement in the *Zeitgeist*, Sabrow refers to two terms that have acquired currency in the Federal Republic of Germany

since the 1990s. He maintains that, as a subject of the academic discipline “contemporary history,” the German Democratic Republic (GDR) has not yet “moved from the controversial communicative memory into the fixed categories of cultural memory.”² These terms, cultural and communicative memory, have been offered by Jan and Aleida Assmann over the last twenty years as subcategories of what the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs called collective memory, and Sabrow follows the Assmanns’ reading of Halbwachs when he introduces the key word of the title of his volume, *Erinnerungsorte der DDR* (Sites of Memory of the GDR). Sabrow writes that the term “site of memory” has become an established description for “anchor points of collective memory.”³ Two of the “anchor points” of this “collective memory of the GDR,” as presented in Sabrow’s volume—antifascism and Buchenwald—are the focus of this article.

The term “site of memory,” or “*lieux de mémoire*,” provided the framework for Pierre Nora’s now canonized seven-volume “history of memory” from the 1980s.⁴ Sabrow adopts Nora’s broad understanding of sites of memory as “real places and material things ... events and institutions as well as images, concepts, pictures and works of art,”⁵ but differentiates his usage of the concept from Nora’s and, in doing so, suggests a contemporary German approach to the past. Sabrow argues that the “*Erinnerungsort*” is not, as it is for Nora, linked to “national identity-building” (*nationalen Identitätsstiftung*) but to Germany’s current “culture of memory” (*Erinnerungskultur*): “Admitted into our contemporary culture of memory,” he argues, “the [site of memory] serves the need for the most genuine and immediate confrontation with the past.”⁶ Yet, at the same time, he qualifies the “immediacy” of this encounter with the past at a “site” of the “culture of memory.” He distinguishes between “blind identification” with the past and something he now sees as characteristic in Germany, namely the “conscious examination of the past.”⁷ He also claims a characteristically German

relationship to the “history of catastrophe of the twentieth century”⁸—a relationship that he describes as a process that involves both “analytical distance and practical participation” and a parallel (and paradoxical) “moving towards the past” and a “moving away” from it.⁹ This process, he implies, characterizes the contributions of his edited volume.

In this article, we examine two of these contributions in relation to this characterization. We focus on contributions about antifascism and Buchenwald, both of which are given prominence in the volume as the opening chapters of the first two sections of the book. These two chapters are chosen here as case studies because they exemplify the unique complexities of the German memorial landscape, that is, the prevalence of multiple layers of memory dealing with contentious national pasts. They deal with the remembrance of Nazism in the GDR and how these processes of remembering have in turn been remembered since unification. Before going on to examine these two chapters in detail, we shall first explore how they are further framed by the dominant intellectual legacies which Sabrow draws upon in his opening comments, and the implications of those legacies for understandings of memory in contemporary Germany. We suggest that theories of memory currently dominant in Germany obscure the role of the state, and that they promote conceptualizations of national identity that exclude the contradictions of lived experience.

History as Scholarship and Memory as (National) Identity

In the preface to *Erinnerungsorte der DDR* Sabrow thanks not only Aleida Assmann, but also the French historian Etienne François who, with Hagen Schulze, co-edited the three volumes of *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte* (German Sites of Memory) in 2001.¹⁰ The publication of these books prompted discussion in the German media about the relationship between “popular

memory” and history as scholarship.¹¹ Halbwachs himself had insisted on the difference between memory and history as scholarship, but this distinction was later blurred in Nora’s much-cited work.¹² When François wrote an introduction to the catalogue of the German Historical Museum’s exhibition “Myths of Nations 1945” in 2004, he similarly shrank the distinction, claiming that it was in the national public memory of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) that the common European master narrative of heroes and victims had been first and most effectively questioned and replaced with a new universalist narrative that “finally concentrated on the Holocaust.”¹³

There are dissenting views on the relationship between history as an academic discipline and the concept of “the culture of memory.” In an early review essay on this emerging field in 2003, Christoph Cornelißen excluded academic history from the culture of memory, when he described the culture of memory as “everything that belongs to the not-exclusively-academic use of history in public.”¹⁴ In contrast, Sabrow, as the editor of *Erinnerungsorte*, includes scholarship under the heading of “the culture of memory” through his choice of contributors to the volume: academics, freelance writers, political activists, and professional politicians. Nevertheless Sabrow’s “culture of memory of sites of memory” (*Erinnerungskultur der Erinnerungsorte*) shares a blind spot with Cornelißen’s definition: neither explicitly draws attention to the role that the state plays in so-called cultural memory or in the public sphere. Such a blind spot is particularly problematic given the dominance of the term “culture of memory” in contemporary Germany, reliant as it is on the Assmanns’ model of remembering,¹⁵ both of which are now “discursively established ... forms.”¹⁶

The hegemonic status of Assmanns’ model in Germany was highlighted in the first critique of their theory. In 2010, Ulrike Jureit criticized “contemporary practices of public remembrance” in the FRG as “the result of a societal appropriation of memory theories from

cultural studies.”¹⁷ In particular, she argued that the Assmanns’ equation of memory with identity had not only had “considerable influence” on the practices of memory but was even the basis of current practice (Jureit’s central point of criticism is directed at the Assmanns’ conception of collective memory as “a mechanism of ethnogenetic processes which form identity” in “communities which are [supposedly] homogenous.”)¹⁸ Jureit calls the conceptual framework of the Assmanns’ theory “almost clueless about the changed mechanisms of belonging and self-thematisation” in a globalized world.¹⁹ At the same time, however, she acknowledges that in the 1990s the Assmanns “seemed to deliver exactly the answers German society was searching for in its ongoing intoxication with remembering.”²⁰

Jureit’s questioning of the normative equation of memory and identity in the Assmanns’ theory does not suggest reasons for the widespread acceptance of their ideas, but the work of an influential West German historian of the 1980s may provide an answer: what Jureit criticizes as an inadequate “ethnogenetic” concept of memory-based identity was the core of Jörn Rüsen’s nationalistic program for a “culture of history” (*Geschichtskultur*). He wrote:

The “culture of history” brings into focus the different strategies of academic research, of artistic creation, of political power struggles, of institutional and extracurricular education, of leisure activities and of other processes of public historical remembrance in such a way that they can all be understood as the result of a single mental power. In this way, the “culture of history” synthesises all cultural institutions into an ensemble of sites of collective remembering and integrates the functions of education, entertainment, legitimation, critique, diversion, enlightenment, and other modes of remembrance into the overarching unity of historical memory.²¹

The “culture of history,” as Rüsen envisioned it, would be a synthesis of scholarship, arts, and politics as expressions of “one single mental power,” that is, the spirit of the nation.

Rüsen’s concept makes something explicit about which the Assmanns, François and Sabrow, but also Cornelißen and Jureit are silent: the role of the state as the carrier of official memory. Rüsen’s emphasis on “singularity” and “unity” seems to anticipate the Assmanns’

prioritization of the “individuality” and “unity of collective memory,” which leads not only to the marginalization of conflicts, but also to the naturalization of the “transition” from communicative to cultural memory as the result of generational change.²² Both consequences follow from the assumption that society as nation is the (collective) subject of remembering. What had, within the space of eighty years, been canonized, according to the Assmanns, by “climbing” (as the result of generational change) from communicative into cultural memory,²³ became the memory of the nation. This conceptual framework necessarily leads to the disappearance of “topical debates” about “competing pasts.”²⁴ It is in this context that the involvement of scholarship in the culture of memory shapes a hidden tendentiousness when academics deal with topical issues; when, to quote the blurb on the back cover of Sabrow’s volume, “journalists and contemporary historians from East and West present the most important points of reference in the remembrance of the defunct GDR.” It is to two of these “points of reference” that we now turn.

Competing Antifascisms

Historian and journalist Annette Leo contributed the first chapter to Sabrow’s volume, entitled “Antifascism,” opening with a section called “Faces of Power.” The decision to include a chapter on antifascism alongside essays on Bautzen, the Soviet Special Camp, the Stasi and its unofficial workers, and censorship, rather than in, for example, the following sections on “Ruling Culture” (*Herrschaftskultur*) or “Life in State Socialism” clearly delineates the volume’s approach to this contested and controversial cornerstone of GDR ideology. In contrast to the other chapters in this section, the author approaches the topic autobiographically, a decision which has several consequences: first, it unambiguously yet

contrarily sites antifascism as part of Leo's own identity; second, it foregrounds her memories of past antifascism and invites comparison with her earlier writings about the doctrine, which she refers to explicitly in the chapter; and third, it creates a tension between the dominant arguments of the chapter and the examples given.

Leo's chapter begins with an anecdote about a trip she made to Bonn in 1991 as a member of an expert commission invited by the Social Democrats (SPD) to rework the memorial sites at Sachsenhausen and Ravensbrück. When she introduces herself to the members of parliament as coming from an "antifascist family," she receives an incredulous rebuke in a query as to what that means. Her explanation that "most members of the family had been persecuted or were active in the resistance" causes embarrassment, and the narrator recognises that while her interlocutor heard only "a Communist slogan or simply a synonym for the state remembrance policies of the SED [Socialist Unity Party] regime" she used the term to refer both to specific historical action and also to "a very general engagement, a choice in favour of humanity and justice and against arbitrariness and terror."²⁵ Antifascism is thus situated as part of Leo's identity and at the same time as distinct from the "doctrine about fascism" (*Faschismusdoktrin*) of the GDR, from which she claims to maintain a critical distance that is evidenced by her role as a member of the expert commission.

Her assertion that, until 1991, she had not noticed that "the term antifascism could have different meanings"²⁶ seems contrived because she follows it with examples of exactly such differing interpretations of antifascism in the GDR and immediately after the fall of the Berlin Wall. In a third-hand anecdote she describes how a group of young men, who had attempted to warn of neo-Nazis at a commemoration ceremony of the Society for the Victims of Fascism (OdF) in September 1989, were arrested by the police. By December of that year, this group of young men had been "adopted" by an older Jewish Communist antifascist, and now fought

not only against the “SED leadership’s authoritarian monopoly over remembering” and “attacks by neo-Nazi groups,” but also against the “indifference of many GDR citizens” who saw antifascism only as a “ritual exercise” (*Pflichtübung*).²⁷ The narrator points to a difference between the beliefs of one of the young men in the group and the antifascism of the newly formed Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), and then distances herself from his “radical fantasies.”²⁸ In the context of such multiple layerings of activity in the name of antifascism, the question, albeit a rhetorical one, “But did ‘an antifascism’ actually exist?”, is stylized und unreflexive.²⁹

Despite Leo’s assertion at the start of the chapter that in the GDR her understanding of antifascism was not synonymous with the politics of the SED,³⁰ she then goes on to describe how she was actively involved after 1989 in confronting “the image of the past valid until then.”³¹ The (supposedly singular) image of antifascism she refers to in this case was encapsulated in the Antifaschistische Traditionskabinett in Prenzlauer Berg. This was an East German exhibition about resistance, persecution, and the working class under Nazism that was reworked rather than dismantled, on the suggestion of the leader of the local Office for Culture. The reworking involved a group of historians and art historians from East and West writing commentaries and posting them alongside the existing exhibits. The exhibition and the commentaries were then published.³² Reflecting on this work in Sabrow’s volume, Leo claims that the majority of those involved were interested in two things: firstly, rescuing the “correct” understanding of antifascism from the incorrect one, a differentiation based on a moral judgment;³³ and secondly, of highlighting how the version of antifascism displayed in the exhibition encouraged “obedience,” “discipline,” and identification with state and party, in contrast to their antifascism which was based on “civil courage, tolerance, interpersonal solidarity and obviously also the defence of democratic rights.”³⁴ While Leo points to the state

instrumentalization of the Holocaust—"I think ... of the photos of mountains of bodies in Bergen-Belsen, the photos of mountains of hair, glasses and artificial limbs of the murdered Jews in Auschwitz under the caption 'Resistance until death'"³⁵—she makes no reference to the significance of such institutionalized images in the context of contemporary claims about their absence within the antifascism of the GDR.³⁶ In a peculiar shift, Leo sets the academics commentating on the exhibition against those "veterans of the resistance" whose protests accompanied their work, and who insisted on asserting their antifascist standpoint, which they equated with resistance to "neonazism, racism, and xenophobia"—something very similar to that which the narrator claims is the "moral" basis for her own, continued, antifascism after 1989.³⁷

Leo's stance was rather different in 1992 when she wrote the foreword to the exhibition volume. The text opens with a call for "contradictions and multiplicity," and a "thoughtful and careful dealing with the past."³⁸ While the expert group charged with writing the commentary approached the exhibition from different perspectives, they were, Leo writes, preoccupied by the question: "But how should we formulate our criticism without damaging the remembrance of resistance itself?"³⁹ The diversity of their approaches and their clashes with the "pressure groups of resistance fighters and the persecuted" are encapsulated in the inclusion of different perspectives in the text without aiming to promote "a new final truth."⁴⁰ Indeed, inciting continued conversation and controversy from all sides was, she states, exactly the purpose of their work.

While the volume from 1992 takes issue with the images of official antifascism portrayed in the exhibition, it also opens by pointing to other contrasting public representations of antifascism during the GDR. By the end of the 1980s, according to Leo, "academic, literary and documentary works had already thoroughly broken with taboos and conveyed a

differentiated historical picture.”⁴¹ Such an unambiguous portrayal of a differentiated antifascism in the GDR is, however, not her concern in the Sabrow volume. In a rather abrupt chronological shift, Leo writes a sweeping history of antifascism and its origins in 1920s Italy in which, among other things, the Communist Party is responsible for Hitler’s election in 1933 and, by the 1950s and 1960s, “the internally closed system of historical propaganda and memory rituals” had established itself “extensively in all areas of life for the citizens of the GDR.”⁴² In this teleology, it was only in the “final years of the GDR” that the image of antifascism once again opened up to include those who had been excluded.⁴³ Yet, Leo then refers to texts by Christa Wolf (*Kindheitsmuster*, Patterns of Childhood, 1976), Stefan Heym (*Schwarzenberg*, 1984), and to discussions that GDR citizens had after 1989 about their earlier encounters with the *Diary of Anne Frank*. There are thus contradictory assertions about a singular, omniscient antifascist image propagated by the SED state, a claim that the singular image had already collapsed before 1989, and reference to much earlier, high profile, public, literary examples which thematized responsibility, guilt, victimhood, and antifascist identity.

There is clearly a tension in the chapter between the examples given, the memories relied upon, and the overarching argument. It is a tension that pervades Leo’s work on antifascism. In 1999 she advocated “close examination” when it came to the topic of antifascism, maintaining that further research was necessary to examine the extent to which traces of an “antifascism from below” were visible,⁴⁴ and yet, she fails to refer to any work that has since been done on this topic in her chapter in Sabrow’s volume ten years later.⁴⁵ She draws on what she describes as complex antifascist autobiographical experiences,⁴⁶ and yet, in an echo of now entrenched discourse, maintains that East Germans did not consider the Nazi past to be linked to their own identity but as “something far away, that didn’t have a lot to do with them.”⁴⁷ Rather than advocating the multiplicity and diversity of antifascist stories, she refers

only to the “the very one-sided image of the past,” and to misguided GDR citizens caught up in the “sweeping antifascism of the GDR period.”⁴⁸ Whereas in the past she insisted that controversy and confrontation about antifascism (which were undoubtedly part of changing discourse in the GDR) were at the heart of her research, she writes nearly two decades later about the lack of a “collective self-understanding” in unified Germany and implies that fragmented, contradictory memories in relation to the GDR past are inherently problematic.⁴⁹

In 1992, Leo insisted that “reflection on the image of antifascism in the GDR can provide a key for the understanding of the past forty years.”⁵⁰ Nearly twenty years later, her approach promotes the narrative, and perceived necessity, of “inner unity,” a narrative that is being built on an antitotalitarian consensus founded on an anti-antifascism which at best marginalizes those forms of antifascism which did not belong to the official state memory of the GDR and, at worst, excludes them altogether.⁵¹ The reduction of GDR antifascism to official, state memory is encouraged by models of memory which do not differentiate between the official, the public and the familial and presuppose a reductive equation of official memory with individual and national identity.

Memories of Buchenwald

Volkhard Knigge wrote the entry on Buchenwald in Sabrow’s volume. Knigge is not only director of the Buchenwald Memorial, but also Professor of History at the University of Jena. A comparison of Knigge’s contribution with three earlier publications on Buchenwald, from 1993 to 2009, similarly highlights both Knigge’s changing reference to the conceptual framework of the Assmanns’ theory of memory and the way in which the civil servant of the federal state of Thuringia positions himself in both the academic and the wider public sphere.

In the concluding remarks of his chapter, Knigge, echoing Sabrow, presents the “memorial work” (*Gedenkstättenarbeit*) he has directed at Buchenwald as building on “recent West German approaches” which conceive of the culture of memory as “historical-critical reflection founded in the science of history.”⁵² The scholarly basis of such memorial work plays a decisive role in the argument put forward. In the GDR, “*the Buchenwald memory*” to which Knigge, in spite of the singular, ascribes a “transnational and politically heterogeneous” character, was, he argues, limited by antifascism’s compensatory function with respect to the state’s lack of legitimacy.⁵³ In the 1990s, the discussions about the three topoi of the so-called “Buchenwald memory of the GDR,” that is, solidarity in suffering, the struggle of resistance led by communists, and the narrative of liberation as victory—and about the Soviet Special Camp 1945-1949—had, in Knigge’s words, “revitalized” the “defensive reflexes” of the former communist prisoners who had held positions within the camp’s administration and who, to protect themselves against accusations by Walter Ulbricht, had supported, as Knigge terms it, a “screen memory” (*Deckerinnerung*) in Buchenwald.⁵⁴ In the 1990s, commissions of the Federal and the Thuringian Government had, Knigge argues, made research on Buchenwald possible and the aesthetic design of the GDR memorial, which had “staged salvation as the religious meaning of history” (*heilsgeschichtliche Sinnstiftung*), had to be replaced by the “exposure of historical traces.”⁵⁵

In the GDR, Knigge claims, the international success of Bruno Apitz’s novel *Nackt unter Wölfen* (Naked Among Wolves) proved the readiness for “exculpatory idealization” (*entlastende Idealisierung*) by confusing “fiction and documentation” in either communist-humanist or humanist “myths.”⁵⁶ Contemporary memorial work, Knigge maintains, as something “supported by the state but not politically determined,” operates, by contrast, beyond the conflicting political front lines of antifascism and antitotalitarianism.⁵⁷

Two thirds of Knigge's article covers the 1990s.⁵⁸ When he does refer to the Buchenwald memory in the GDR, he does so not only in the singular (despite his earlier assertions of political and geographical diversity), but also using only three examples: the questioning of the "red Kapos" by the Central Party Control Commission in 1952, the design of the memorial in 1958, and the canonized novel by Apitz. Knigge's reference to scholarly research is limited to two references: to the book on *Der gesäuberte Antifaschismus* (The "Cleaned" Antifascism, 1994)) by Lutz Niethammer, Knigge's colleague in Jena's history department—a book that Bill Niven referred to in 2007 as "a predominantly negative, rather than differentiated, view"⁵⁹—and to an article on Apitz's novel by Harry Stein, an employee of the Buchenwald Memorial, published in a brochure by the Thuringia Institute for Teachers' Further Education, Curriculum Development, and Media in cooperation with the Memorial. Whereas, in the preface to *Erinnerungsorte*, Sabrow stresses the necessity of "agreement about the treatment of different GDR memories,"⁶⁰ in Knigge's contribution there is barely a hint of the fact that before 1989 Buchenwald had not just been remembered in the way Knigge presents as "the" GDR memory.⁶¹ Knigge's silence on the role of books like Jorge Semprun's *Die große Reise* (The Long Voyage, 1963) or Fred Wander's *Der siebente Brunnen* (The Seventh Well, 1971) follows from his adherence to an influential thesis put forward first by Herfried Münkler. In an essay for the catalogue of an exhibition organized by the German Historical Museum in Berlin, Münkler wrote: "The founding myth of the GDR was reliant from the outset on cultural forms in order to gain access to collective memory."⁶² From Münkler's equation of collective and cultural memory, the conclusion has been drawn that communicative memory in the GDR was "repressed" by antifascism.⁶³ Historian Susanne zur Nieden has insisted: "the official image of fascism and the experiences of the majority ... existed in parallel and did not interact."⁶⁴

For the years from 1945 to 1989, Knigge's Buchenwald article presents his views on the official memory of the SED without any attempt at differentiation as far as GDR society is concerned.⁶⁵ For the 1990s, the existence of conflicting Buchenwald memories, for instance those institutionalized in organizations of groups of victims, of either the Nazi or the Soviet camp, within the society of "united Germany," is only referred to when Knigge equates the strategies of antifascist and anti-Stalinist victim groups as irrational, naïve, and interested in a political functionalization of Buchenwald memory. Knigge positions himself as the self-critical scholar, only interested in research as an open-ended process of "unlimited confrontation with the reality of the concentration camp."⁶⁶ He does this by equating, and thus dismissing, the supposed "myths, legends, and clichés" of all those on opposite sides of the debates about antifascism.⁶⁷

In the rhetoric of Knigge's text, his own self-assurance in claiming scholarly authority as the guardian of historical reality contradicts his constant appeal to self-criticism. Thus, in particular, his claim to "knowledge" is opposed, in general, to "second-hand perspectives"⁶⁸ and "pre-existing interpretations,"⁶⁹ while at the same time he pays more attention to the communist "presenting of salvation as the meaning of history" than to "smoothing out of all kinds."⁷⁰ Knigge's claim to knowledge is, however, not at all positioned "beyond" political lines, instead the political line to which Knigge adheres is hidden by the conceptual framework of the culture of memory.

Knigge does not address the issue of the official memory of "united Germany" although he briefly mentions that Buchenwald was part of the Unification Treaty, highlighting only that the funding for the Memorial has been secured. Wolfgang Bergem, however, has convincingly argued that the Unification Treaty "marked the start of the pattern of negative identification"⁷¹ by characterizing the German nation as conscious of the "continuity of

German history and bearing in mind the special responsibility, resulting from our past, for democratic development in Germany, which remains duty bound to respect human rights and peace.”⁷² In passing, Knigge takes for granted two key elements of the official memory of unified Germany: first, the view of the Holocaust as the central crime of National Socialism (when the term is used in a way which excludes all other non-Jewish victims of persecution) and, second, the relationship to GDR socialism. Both of these were also elements of West German memory culture.

The formula of the (Jewish) Holocaust as part of German identity, which has frequently been used by federal chancellors and presidents, ethnicizes the contradistinction of victims and perpetrators as homogenous, namely one exclusively Jewish in contradistinction to one non-Jewish, therefore German, collective passed down through the generations and which hands on “equality” in suffering as well as in guilt. This exclusively German-Jewish interpretation of fascism and World War II has been elaborated on by the historian Dan Diner through the term “collapse of civilization” (*Zivilisationsbruch*):⁷³

The perspective of the Jewish victim and the viewpoint of the German perpetrator nation cannot be connected; the collapse of civilization caused a definite fracture between the perspective of the victims and of the perpetrators—and this fracture still has an effect on the descendants of the perpetrators. The *distance* ... serves as the basis.⁷⁴

Knigge uses the term *Zivilisationsbruch* as a synonym for the reality of the concentration camp, which contradicts all myths, legends, and clichés because it stands for *the* experience of the (Jewish) victims rather than any interpretation of it.

The ethnicizing centralization of the Holocaust in official memory, however, allows for the equation of the victims of both totalitarianisms⁷⁵ with the proviso of another formula which the historian Bernd Faulenbach coined in the Enquete Commission on “Working Through the History and Consequences of the SED-Dictatorship” of the Federal Parliament

1992-1994 and that is commonly referred to as “the Faulenbach formula:” “Nazi crimes cannot be relativized with reference to postwar crimes, but similarly postwar injustice cannot be trivialized with reference to Nazi crimes.”⁷⁶ Knigge is implicitly citing Faulenbach when he states in relation to his memorial work that it examines both the Nazi and postwar Soviet Buchenwald camps “without relativizing Nazi crimes or playing down Stalinist injustice”⁷⁷

In sum, Knigge’s contribution to *Erinnerungsorte der DDR* legitimizes the official memory of the Federal Republic by presenting its interpretation of fascism as scholarly proven facts. It does so by delegitimizing not only the former official SED memory of Buchenwald, but at the same time those Buchenwald memories of the present that are part of two competing versions of the GDR past, which, in his introduction, Sabrow distinguishes from the current official memory of the revolution: the so called “Wende memory,” as well as “the Anschluss memory.” Knigge’s chapter thus echoes the narrative that Bill Niven detects in his study of the new interpretation at Buchenwald of Stefan (Jerzy Zweig)’s “salvation:” it “is a negative foundation myth because its function is to legitimize the exclusion of the communist heritage from the basis of the new German state.”⁷⁸ In doing so, Knigge’s chapter contains traces of pre Wende West German memory discourses, which he has previously criticised.

This tendentiousness of Knigge’s most recent intervention in topical debates about the “place” of Buchenwald in German social memories becomes, perhaps, even clearer when his contribution to the *Erinnerungsorte* volume is briefly compared with three of his earlier articles. In 1991, before becoming director, Knigge engaged in research in the archive of the not yet “reformed” Buchenwald Memorial. It was part of a project entitled “Reified Memory” (*Vergegenständlichte Erinnerung*), financed by the Volkswagen Foundation and led by Jörn Rüsen.⁷⁹ Knigge chose the title “Antifascist Resistance and Holocaust” for the publication of his findings which he summarized in four answers to a question about the “status of the Shoah

in [the GDR] structure of remembering.”⁸⁰ The first three of his answers rejected, with qualifications, the view widely circulating in the early 1990s⁸¹ that, in Buchenwald as well as in the GDR memory of fascism in general, Jews were not mentioned at all; the fourth more expansive answer, however, told “a story from the files of the Buchenwald Memorial,” the story of Stefan Jerzy Zweig. The story is in fact interpreted—before being told—in the fourth answer of the summary: “If the extermination of the European Jews had been understood as a singular crime, that is, as a collapse of civilization, then the historical, eternal legitimization of the GDR would have been destroyed.”⁸² Accordingly, Knigge’s main point in telling the story of Zweig is to criticise Fritz Cremer’s statue of “The Boy of Buchenwald,” of whose Polish-Jewish origin “there is no indication.”⁸³ Knigge is, at that point, highly critical of the GDR historians who treated the survivors of Buchenwald only as “witnesses” (*Sachzeugen*), “but not as entitled to interpretation and evaluation;” the survivors, he maintained, had to “adapt their experience to the patterns of interpretations” of the historians of the Museum of German History in Berlin.⁸⁴

Eleven years later, following a conference held in Buchenwald in 2000, Knigge produced an edited volume with another Jena historian, Norbert Frei, and wrote the afterword: “Farewell to Remembering: Notes about a Necessary Change in the Memorial Culture of Germany.” The reasons for the change that Knigge outlines are given in terms of the Assmanns’ theory—as resulting from the ongoing transition from communicative to cultural memory, thereby replacing the experience of the witnesses with the knowledge of the historians. What is not seen as changing, however, is the “process of the nationalization of negative memory” that “with growing speed, has taken place since the reunification of the Federal Republic.”⁸⁵ Knigge does not speak of official memory, but presents the “nationalization of negative memory” as both taking place through its “culturalization” and its

“historicization:”⁸⁶ He locates the “culture of negative memory” as “—normatively— anchored within German society” and views it critically as “inevitably historicizing the Nazi past.”⁸⁷ There is no reference to the political function of delegitimizing the GDR and its memories, but a rather general disclaimer of politics: “it is obviously easier to play politics with memory than with critical historical consciousness.”⁸⁸ In spite of this apparent distancing from any kind of politics, Knigge repeats the formulas of the Federal Republic’s official memory: “central crime” (*Zentralverbrechen*) and “collapse of civilization” when it comes to describing negative memory.⁸⁹ In this definition, the continuity between generations depends on a German as opposed to a Jewish identity, as Knigge makes clear when he presents “historization” as a change from communicative to cultural memory: “this process finds its concrete and metaphorical personification in the disappearance of the generation of those who experienced the events on both sides—victims as well as perpetrators.”⁹⁰

The very title of the third article to be compared with the Buchenwald contribution reveals the self-contradictory nature of the supposedly “unpolitical,” scholarly rhetoric of Knigge’s contributions to topical debates. Knigge’s title presents an alternative: on the one hand, what he is *actually* doing as an actor of the official memory of the state, and, on the other, what he *claims* he is doing: “Identity Politics or Critical-Communicative Historical Self-Awareness.”⁹¹ Knigge denies being involved in identity politics, but what he defines as negative memory is the official memory of “united Germany.” At the same time, he claims to be self-critically involved in communication about the past, but the article which appeared in a volume *Vom kritischen Gebrauch der Erinnerung* (On the Critical Use of Memory) is, in fact, only critical of Germany’s European partners in its rejection of the Europeanization of public debate.

There is one sentence, however, in which Knigge hints at the problem, but only to draw the wrong conclusion, a conclusion offered by a culturalist instead of social approach to memory:

“In short, the cultural-political decision to create structures of cultural memory is at the same time largely a substantive, that is, (historical) political decision.”⁹² Knigge appeals not only to liberation from political party and state tutelage, but to a “separation” from politics altogether.⁹³ By claiming a position in communicative memory the professional historian obscures his role as an actor of official memory.⁹⁴

(Un)national Sites of Memory?

On the publication of Sabrow’s volume in 2009, Klaus-Dietmar Henke, a member of the Institute for Contemporary History (IfZ), dismissed the project in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* as “a subsection [*Unterkapitel*] of German history” that had found “pieces of memory” (*Erinnerungsstücke*) rather than the intended “*Erinnerungsorte*.”⁹⁵ He argues that Sabrow’s “dramatized” approach to competing conceptualizations of memory of the GDR did not reflect the “beautifully supported process of working through the Communist dictatorship” that were “successful from the start and which can be judged in retrospect as having been extremely efficient, not really socially divisive, and without any serious differences of opinion among academics.” It was, he claims, a process in which “the nation” had become reconciled with itself. That he can come to such a conclusion, while praising Knigge’s essay as one of several “brilliant sketches of the history of memory,” is illustrative of the reductive tendencies in the chapter and highlights the role that national identity plays in narratives that homogenize the past. Leo’s chapter is seldom mentioned in reviews, although Michael Schwarz (IfZ) simultaneously praises it for highlighting competing understandings of official and personal antifascism, while also pointing to the absence of examples from the cultural sphere which could have given nuance to the analysis.⁹⁶ This lack of nuance is

important not least because the Federal Office for Political Education published a shortened edition of Sabrow's volume in 2011, including thirty of the original forty-nine contributions and retaining the chapters by Knigge and Leo (along with all the others in the section "Faces of Power,") thus institutionally establishing the significance of these very topical and tendentious versions of memory.

If we read the contributions by Leo and Knigge, as Sabrow suggests, as characteristically German, then they suggest that in the contemporary German culture of memory, it is not a "paradoxical parallelism" of simultaneously "moving towards the past" and "away from" it that is prevalent,⁹⁷ but instead a unidirectional movement away from previous memory work on the GDR. The contradictions highlighted by our diachronic examination of Leo and Knigge's texts, however, suggest that their contemporary "analytical distance" still bears the traces of the complexities of past and present "practical participation" in memory work.⁹⁸ In these two cases, the *Erinnerungsort* is not something that simply provides "genuine" and "immediate" access to the past but is a "place" in which alternative narratives could continue to complicate the culture of memory or cultural memory of a "united" Germany. The German example is of wider significant precisely because it highlights the problematic effects of these dominant models of memory and draws our attention to constructions of official memory and the role of historical scholarship, and scholars, within it.

Biographies

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Notes

¹ Martin Sabrow, "Wem gehört '1989'?" in *Bewältigte Diktaturvergangenheit? 20 Jahre DDR-Aufarbeitung*, ed. Martin Sabrow (Leipzig, 2010), 16.

² All translations are our own. Sabrow (see note 1), 16.

³ Martin Sabrow, "Die DDR erinnern" in *Erinnerungsorte der DDR*, ed. Martin Sabrow (Munich, 2009), 22.

⁴ Pierre Nora, *Les Lieux de mémoire* (Paris, 1984).

⁵ Sabrow (see note 3), 22.

⁶ Ibid., 22.

⁷ Ibid., 23.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 9, 24.

¹⁰ Martin Sabrow, "Vorwort," in *Erinnerungsorte der DDR* (see note 3) 10.

¹¹ Claus Leggewie, “Kein staatstragendes Projekt: Die Geschichtsforschung entdeckt immer mehr das ‘populäre Gedächtnis.’ Beispielhaft dafür ist das große Werk ‘Deutsche Erinnerungsorte,’ herausgegeben von Etienne Francois und Hagen Schulze,” *taz*, 10 October 2001.

¹² Pierre Nora, *Zwischen Geschichte und Gedächtnis* (Berlin, 1997), 28.

¹³ Etienne François, “Meistererzählungen und Dammbrüche. Die Erinnerung an den Zweiten Weltkrieg zwischen Nationalisierung und Universalisierung” in *Mythen der Nationen. 1945—Arena der Erinnerungen*, vol.1, ed. Monika Flacke (Berlin, 2004), 18.

¹⁴ Christoph Cornelißen, “Was heißt Erinnerungskultur? Begriff—Methoden—Perspektiven,” *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 54 (2003): 550.

¹⁵ Sabrow refers several times to the term “communicative memory” in his introduction. Sabrow (see note 3), 14, 20.

¹⁶ Martin Hartmann, “Die Muster auf der Tapete. Ein von Harald Welzer herausgegebener Sammelband widmet sich dem Phänomen des sozialen Gedächtnisses,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 28 February 2002.

¹⁷ Ulrike Jureit and Christian Schneider, *Gefühlte Opfer. Illusionen der Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (Stuttgart, 2010), 55.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 67, 68. Jureit’s point is valid, but her concession that the so called memory boom in the FRG has “diverse causes and backgrounds” (54) unfortunately undermines her argument that current memory practices are based on the Assmann’s theory.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

²¹ Jörn Rüsen, “Was ist Geschichtskultur? Überlegungen zu einer neuen Art, über Geschichte nachzudenken” in *Historische Faszination. Geschichtskultur heute*, ed. Klaus Füllmann et al. (Cologne, 1994), 4.

²² Jan Assmann, “Kulturelles Gedächtnis und kollektive Identität” in *Kultur und Gedächtnis*, ed. Jan Assmann and Tilo Hölscher (Frankfurt/Main, 1988), 11, 13, 15, 16.

²³ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁴ Bernd Faulenbach, “Konkurrierende Vergangenheiten. Zu den aktuellen Auseinandersetzungen um die deutsche Erinnerungskultur,” *Deutschland-Archiv* 37 (2004): 648-659.

²⁵ Annette Leo, “Antifaschismus” in *Erinnerungsorte der DDR* (see note 3), 30-31.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

³² Kulturamt Prenzlauer Berg, Aktives Museum Faschismus und Widerstand in Berlin, ed., *Mythos Antifaschismus. Ein Traditionskabinett wird kommentiert* (Berlin, 1992).

³³ Leo (see note 25), 33-34.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 35.

³⁶ Dan Diner, “On the Ideology of Antifascism,” *New German Critique* 67 (1996): 123–132.

³⁷ Leo (see note 25), 34, 35.

³⁸ Annette Leo, “Die zwiespältige Ausstellung” in *Mythos Antifaschismus Ein*

Traditionskabinett wird kommentiert, ed. Kulturstadt Prenzlauer Berg, Aktives Museum

Faschismus und Widerstand in Berlin (Berlin, 1992), 7, 8.

³⁹ Ibid., 9.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 10.

⁴¹ Ibid., 7.

⁴² Annette Leo and Regina Scheer, “Die Antifaschisten von Prenzlauer Berg,” in *Mythos Antifaschismus* (see note 38), 36-38.

⁴³ Ibid., 40.

⁴⁴ Annette Leo and Peter Reif-Spirek, “Plädoyer für den genauen Blick” in *Helden, Täter und Verräter: Studien zum DDR-Antifaschismus*, ed. Annette Leo and Peter Reif-Spirek (Berlin, 1999), 9.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Simone Barck, *Antifa-Geschichte(n). Eine literarische Spurensuche in der DDR der 1950er und 1960er Jahre* (Cologne, 2003); and including her own edited volume from 2001 with Peter Reif-Spirek, Annette Leo and P. Reif-Spirek, eds., *Vielstimmiges Schweigen. Neue Studien zum DDR-Antifaschismus* (Berlin, 2001).

⁴⁶ In more recent texts, she has also helped others to do the same. Agnès Arp and Annette Leo, eds., *Mein Land verschwand so schnell....16 Lebensgeschichten und die Wende 1989/90* (Wiesbaden, 2009).

⁴⁷ Annette Leo, “Keine gemeinsame Erinnerung. Geschichtsbewusstsein in Ost und West,” (2008) available at <http://www.bpb.de/themen/JH31QR.html>, accessed 11 March 2010.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Leo (see note 38), 11.

⁵¹ Andrew H. Beattie, *Playing Politics with History. The Bundestag Inquiries into East Germany* (New York, 2008), 165-187.

⁵² Volkhard Knigge, "Buchenwald," in *Erinnerungsorte der DDR* (see note 3), 127.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 118-119.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 119-121.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 121-125.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 125-126.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 126-127; see also 118, 120, 127.

⁵⁸ For a very different focus compare the entry by Peter Reichel on Auschwitz in *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte*, ed. Etienne François and Hagen Schulze (Munich, 2001), 600-621. This volume contains no entry on Buchenwald.

⁵⁹ Bill Niven, *The Buchenwald Child. Truth, Fiction, and Propaganda* (New York, 2007), 202.

⁶⁰ Sabrow (see note 3), 9.

⁶¹ Knigge refers to a quotation by Hermlin that proves the exception to the rule.

⁶² Herfried Münkler, "Das kollektive Gedächtnis der DDR" in *Parteiauftrag: Ein neues Deutschland. Bilder, Rituale und Symbole der frühen DDR*, ed. Dieter Vorsteher (Berlin, 1996), 462.

⁶³ For example, as argued in a later catalogue for the exhibition "Myths of the Nations." Monika Flacke and Ulrike Schmiegelt, "Aus dem Dunkel zu den Sternen: Ein Staat im Geiste des Antifaschismus" in *Mythen der Nationen. 1945—Arena der Erinnerungen*, ed. Monika Flacke, vol. 1 (Berlin, 2004), 187.

⁶⁴ Susanne zur Nieden, "Antifaschismus und Kalter Krieg. Vom Hauptausschuß für die Opfer des Faschismus zur Vereinigung der Verfolgten des Naziregimes" in *Von der Erinnerung zum Monument. Die Entstehungsgeschichte der Nationalen Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Sachsenhausen*, ed. Günter Morsch (Berlin, 1996), 82.

⁶⁵ On non-official antifascism in the GDR see: Hasko Zimmer, *Der Buchenwald-Konflikt. Zum Streit um Geschichte und Erinnerung im Kontext der deutschen Vereinigung* (Münster, 1999), 46-50.

⁶⁶ Knigge (see note 52), 126.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 119.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 127.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 123.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 125.

⁷¹ Wolfgang Bergem, "Barbarei als Sinnstiftung. Das NS-Regime in Vergangenheitspolitik und Erinnerungskultur der Bundesrepublik" in *Die NS-Diktatur im deutschen Erinnerungsdiskurs*, ed. Wolfgang Bergem (Opladen, 2003), 97.

⁷² Ibid., 97.

⁷³ Dan Diner, "Zwischen Aporie und Apologie. Über Grenzen der Historisierbarkeit des Nationalsozialismus" in *Ist der Nationalsozialismus Geschichte? Zu Historisierung und Historikerstreit*, ed. Dan Diner (Frankfurt/Main, 1987), 72.

⁷⁴ Michael Hofmann, *Literaturgeschichte der Shoah* (Münster, 2003), 49.

⁷⁵ Ingrid Drechsler et al., ed., *Getrennte Vergangenheit, gemeinsame Zukunft. Ausgewählte Dokumente, Zeitzeugenberichte und Diskussionen der Enquete-Kommission "Aufarbeitung von Geschichte und Folgen der SED-Diktatur in Deutschland"* des Deutschen Bundestages

1992-1994 in vier Bänden. Bd. 4: *Das SED-Regime in vergleichender Perspektive und die Bedeutung seiner Aufarbeitung* (Munich, 1997), 142.

⁷⁶ Bernd Faulenbach, “Vergangenheitsaufarbeitung und Erinnerungskultur nach 1989 im europäischen Kontext. Ein Gespräch” in *Abgrenzung und Verflechtung. Das geteilte Deutschland in der zeithistorischen Debatte*, ed. Frank Möller, Ulrich Mählert (Berlin, 2008), 109.

⁷⁷ Knigge (see note 52), 120.

⁷⁸ Niven (see note 59), 215.

⁷⁹ Volkhard Knigge, “Antifaschistischer Widerstand und Holocaust. Zur Geschichte der KZ-Gedenkstätten in der DDR” in *Erinnerung. Zur Gegenwart des Holocaust in Deutschland-West und Deutschland-Ost*, ed. Bernhard Moltmann (Frankfurt/Main, 1993), 73.

⁸⁰ Knigge (see note 79), 75.

⁸¹ For a critique of the terms “taboo” and “marginalization” see Bill Niven, “Remembering Nazi Anti-Semitism in the GDR” in *Memorialization in Germany since 1945*, ed. Bill Niven and Chloe Paver (Basingstoke, 2009), 205-213.

⁸² Knigge (see note 79), 75.

⁸³ Ibid., 76.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 71.

⁸⁵ Volkhard Knigge, “Statt eines Nachworts: Abschied der Erinnerung. Anmerkungen zu einem notwendigen Wandel der Gedenkkultur in Deutschland” in *Verbrechen erinnern. Die Auseinandersetzung mit Holocaust und Völkermord*, ed. Norbert Frei (Munich, 2002), 423.

For the term “negative memory” he refers to Koselleck’s conference contribution, now reprinted as Reinhart Koselleck, “Formen und Traditionen des negativen Gedächtnisses” in

Vom Sinn und Unsinn der Geschichte. Aufsätze und Vorträge aus vier Jahrzehnten, ed.

Carsten Dutt (Berlin, 2010), 241-253.

⁸⁶ Knigge (see note 85), 438.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 432.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 434.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 435; see also 423, 424-425, 437.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 428.

⁹¹ Volkhard Knigge, "Europäische Erinnerungskultur. Identitätspolitik oder kritisch-kommunikative historische Selbstvergewisserung" in *Vom kritischen Gebrauch der Erinnerung*, ed. Thomas Flierl and Elfriede Müller (Berlin, 2009), 69-80.

⁹² Ibid., 79.

⁹³ Ibid., 79.

⁹⁴ See a similar move in Lutz Niethammer, ed., *Der "gesäuberte" Antifaschismus. Die SED und die roten Kapos von Buchenwald* (Berlin, 1994), 1052.

⁹⁵ Klaus-Dietmar Henke, "Ein Unterkapitel deutscher Geschichte. Erinnerungsorte der DDR gesucht, aber nur Erinnerungstücke gefunden," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2 November 2009.

⁹⁶ Michael Schwarz, "Review of *Erinnerungsorte der DDR* (München: C.H.Beck, 2009) by Martin Sabrow, ed.," *sehepunkte* 12, no. 3 (2012); available at <http://www.sehepunkte.de/2012/03/17011.html>, accessed 15 March 2012.

⁹⁷ Sabrow (see note 3), 9, 24.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 9.