

The Memories of Fascism in the Two Separate Germanys

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When I studied abroad in Berlin, memory of the Third Reich was everywhere. On the northwest side of my apartment was the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, and right next to the apartment complexes I lived in was the now demolished Führer bunker. Many had said the way Germany had come to terms with its horrifying past was a model for many nations, including that of the U.S. What I also noticed was the division between West and East, which was still there even 30 years precisely after the fall of the wall, which I celebrated fanatically on the 30th anniversary day. Still, many of those in the former GDR earned a lot less than those in the West, which was emphasized when the West Germans pay extra in their taxes to support and invest in the East German areas. The division was so great that while I was coming up with topics of memory to discuss for the final paper, I wondered, “is even memory of Nazism divided?” In this paper, I will discuss the division that existed not of the perception of the enemy, but the portrayal of who the heroes were. East and West German film will be some of the primary sources, such as the East German film *Lissy* from 1957 and the West German Film *Dogs, Do You Want to Live Forever?* from 1959, will explain “vergangenheitsbewältigung”, translated “coming to terms with the Nazi Past”, or the lack thereof in the beginning.

What were the narratives of memory in East and West, and was it redone after reunification? Right from the beginning of *Lissy*, the movie starts with an introduction of,

As the shadows of the Third Reich were already darkening Germany's skies, F.C. Weiskopf wrote a book not only of our recent past, but also a shocking tale from the history of the human heart...¹

The movie is about a woman from a socialist working class family, Lissy, who marries a man promising a better life until he gets fired during the Great Depression. The man, Freddy, is devastated and turns to the Nazi ideology, which has been getting more and more popular throughout Germany as many go unemployed. After working many low-end jobs, he blames one of his employers, a Jew, for firing him, and then becomes a Stormtrooper. Instantly the couple and their baby go from a cramped old apartment to a much bigger and more modern one. Lissy is always uneasy about Freddy's job with the SA, but then when her brother, Paul, joins the SA, after having worked with the Communists for years, she is stunned. Fast forward to when Hitler comes to power and the communists are blamed, the Nazi start wreaking havoc, murdering her communist friends, her brother, and ransacking her parent's apartment. In the last scene at Paul's funeral, when the SA attend to cover up their murder of him, Lissy tries to get them to admit it, but they only respond, "we must make sacrifices for Germany's future. You have to choose: you're either with us or against us." The film ends with commentary saying "yes, everyone has to decide, you may be lonely but not alone. We all have to find our own path but no one walks it alone."² This is used to set the narrative that the viewers in East Germany have to choose between Fascism and Communism, and that choosing Communism is the honest choice, and not

¹ Wolf, Konrad, Alex Wedding, F. C. Weiskopf, and Werner Bergman. *Lissy*. GDR: DEFA, 1957.

² Ibid.

being along means the state fully supports you. Already, it is easy to see that the GDR is tightly controlling the narrative of the communists as victims of Nazism and therefore are heroes that must be remembered.

The West German film *Dogs, Do You Want to Live Forever?*, takes on the Battle of Stalingrad in a different perspective. In this perspective, the Wehrmacht soldiers are seen as heroic, and when they are beaten in Stalingrad, they suddenly go from loyal Nazis to completely blaming their blunder in the battle on Hitler and his followers. In the process, the main character, Lieutenant Wisse, slowly realizes that he has completely lost touch with reality and that the German war machine is not invincible as more of his fellow soldiers die after being confident in achieving victory. While the movie does not mention any of the atrocities committed during the Holocaust, the narrative the film pushes is that all the Germans were misled by “incompetent and crazed cowards”.³ Wisse himself is quite a caring and capable character, compared to all the arrogant and incompetent fellow soldiers he fought along with. He befriends a Russian and even returns a captured Soviet Soldier, suggesting to the audience that his transformation from a loyal Nazi to a person with a big heart is what Germany as a society can do in order to make a better Germany instead of going back to the fascist past. Another big point that the historian Mark Gagnon notes about the film is this:

Religion also plays an important role in the transformation of Wisse as he gradually learns its value in comparison to the self-reliance preached by National Socialism. In one scene, Wisse takes the prayers of Russian children as confirmation that Bolshevism cannot replace Christianity. Later in the film, Wisse notices that even the bleakest conditions in Stalingrad cannot dampen spirits at the Christmas service celebrated by

³ Gagnon, Mark. “Cinematic Conversion in Frank Wisbar's *Dogs Do You Want to Live Forever?*” [sic] – a *Journal of Literature, Culture and Literary Translation* focuses on theoretical, empirical and artistic research in the fields of culture, literature and literary translation. *SIC Journal*, June 2018. <https://www.sic-journal.org/Article/Index/498>.

Pastor Busch. Finally, Wisse stands as an example to the new Germany in breaking down class barriers. Although he was criticized for the abundance of officer roles in the film, Wisbar emphasizes the importance of Wisse's contact with the enlisted ranks.⁴

Religion guides Wisse's way, compared to the narrative of the GDR which were converting most of the population to state atheism from Protestantism. Already, we can see the same narrative, but with different goals. Both wish to distance the German public from its Nazi ideals. In the West, however, the Germans themselves can be the heroes and the victims at the same time in order to portray the fact that they had been fooled by the previous regime, and that acknowledging it can bring Germany forward to a new and better future. The folks in the GDR, on the other hand, are being told that not only are the Nazi the ones that betrayed them, but capitalism did too, and that communism triumphed over the Nazis and is key to the success of Germany. As the decades passed, there was also a division on the memory of anti-Semitism as well, which Jeffery Herf goes into full detail about it.

Anti-Semitism did not disappear after the end of World War II in Europe, and certainly not after the Nuremberg Trials, which exposed the complete terror of the Holocaust. In fact, victimhood of Nazism in East Germany was more likely to be directed towards the communists rather than the Jews. Herf explains further that,

Between 1945 and 1948, the issues of *Wiedergutmachung*, modes of official memory, definition of heroes and victims of the antifascist struggle, and the implications of the Nazi era

⁴ Gagnon, Mark. "Cinematic Conversion in Frank Wisbar's *Dogs Do You Want to Live Forever?*" [sic] – a Journal of Literature, Culture and Literary Translation focuses on theoretical, empirical and artistic research in the fields of culture, literature and literary translation. SIC Journal, June 2018. <https://www.sic-journal.org/Article/Index/498>.

for postwar democracy and dictatorship were debated both in public and behind the scenes in intraparty and intragovernmental forums in the Soviet Occupied Zone.⁵

In order to secure a grip on power within the Soviet Zone, denazification was carried out by member of the Socialist Unity Party, the successor of the former German Communist Party. Almost all who had worked for the Nazi Party, really anyone who was accused of being a Nazi or a fascist, were denazified. Many used the process to also accuse critics of the Socialist Unity Party and purge others inside the party itself. Around 240,000 were imprisoned in camps in the Soviet Sector, and at least 78,500 died “of sickness”.⁶ One of these camps that housed those detained was the infamous Sachsenhausen, one of the first concentration camps opened by the Nazi Party, and the closest one to the capital. The camp was reused to detain former Nazis, including former Wehrmacht, even those who worked in the factories, from 1945 to 1950. Around 12,500 of the 78,500 who died in the Soviet prison camps died at Sachsenhausen.⁷ I visited Sachsenhausen during my stay in Berlin, and at that time, both Holocaust memory and Post-War memory was kept and put on display. It seemed rather ironic that the punishments being used during Denazification in the Soviet Sector was the reopening of the concentration camps and use of the same methods the Nazis themselves used against the prisoners. There was one monument that was put up in the center of the camp, which had been built during the GDR

⁵ Herf, Jeffrey. *Divided Memory The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997, 71.

⁶ *Ibid*, 73.

⁷ Kinzer, Stephen. “Germans Find Mass Graves at an Ex-Soviet Camp.” *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, September 24, 1992. <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/09/24/world/germans-find-mass-graves-at-an-ex-soviet-camp.html>.

period. It was an obelisk with 18 red triangles which were attached to the camp outfits of political prisoners in Sachsenhausen. The memorial was really emphasizing the political prisoners who were mostly communists over all the other groups that were kept in the camp.



The memorial at Sachsenhausen dedicated to the communist prisoners, made during the GDR era. Taken 10/18/19 by me.

Throughout its history, the GDR ranked the Jews below Communists as the victims of fascism. However, they were still given recognition as “victims of racial persecution”. Herf notes the reasons why Jews were marginalized by the state by saying,

Jewish member of the OdF and their non-Jewish argued that the Communists’ support for restitution articulated in the “Aufruf” should apply to Jews as well. The Communists’ initial impulse was to limit the numbers of those honored as “victims of fascism” mostly to Communists but also to some non-Communists—Protestant ministers, Catholic priests, and Social Democrats—who had actively engaged in political resistance. They were not willing to include the majority of Jews, Gypsies, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and homosexuals as “victims of fascism.: In the fall of 1945, the OdF did recognize 2,352 persons in Berlin as victims of political persecution, and over 6,000 persons, mostly Jews, as *rassisch Verfolgte*, “victims of racial persecutions.”⁸

And West Germany? The memory was very divided even after Nuremberg. OMGUS, or Office of the Military Government, United States, did many surveys on certain subjects involving race and politics in the non-Soviet occupied zones. In 1947, between 47-55 percent believed National Socialism was a good idea planned horribly, while in 1948, around 55 to 65 percent believed “some races of people are fit to rule than others.” 39 percent of Germans in the American occupied zones were still classified as anti-Semites. But even so, 78 percent of the German population thought the Nuremberg verdicts were fair.⁹ In fact, the Nuremberg trials were crucial in getting the message out to the German public that the Nazis and fascism were a horrible fit for Germany and must never be accepted. What also contributed to a more open memory and acceptance in West Germany were policies of the Western Allied occupiers,

⁸ Herf, Jeffrey. *Divided Memory The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997, 81.

⁹ *Ibid*, 205-206.

political beliefs of the West German leaders, and the voices of Jewish survivors being heard throughout the country. It took time, however. French journalist, Oleg Panev, noted that,

During the 1960's and 70s, West Germany focused on mourning and acceptance of guilt. Various intellectuals and historians, like the Mitscherlichs, stressed the importance of remembering the past. They rejected the convenience of people identifying themselves as victims and not participants in the Third Reich. They reasoned that only through mourning and acceptance of guilt could Germans overcome and master their past. Antifascism and the "marginalization" of the Holocaust became major trends during the 1970s, while criminal processes against perpetrators of Nazi crimes mostly took place in the 1960s. Antifascism identified Germans with the Western World and pushed the Holocaust to the fringes of memory.¹⁰

In that way, multiple narratives on memory are being accepted without government interference and are being expressed freely, although it takes a while to come to acceptance. The GDR, on the other hand, pushes a clear single narrative and marginalizes the other from the very beginning, and interferes with anyone who criticizes it, essentially using the same tactics as their predecessors. This is a very divided memory, so divided that it gets even harder to bridge the two together should reunification happen. After 41 years of division, it happened. How was the memory used?

¹⁰ Penev, Oleg. "Breaking with Nazism: National Identity and Memory in West Germany after the Second World War." *Le Panoptique*, October 1, 2007.

<http://www.lepanoptique.net/sections/histoire/breaking-with-nazism-national-identity-and-memory-in-west-germany-after-the-second-world-war/>.

Reunification was an indescribable puzzle. On the one hand, there were now huge economic differences as East German enterprises were state owned and the wages of those in the East were far lower than those from the West. However, the memory of the past and how to deal with it is what made reunification go a lot smoother. Towards the end of the GDR, the first democratic election was held, and the elected government of the Volkskammer approved a resolution that accepted joint responsibility for the crimes of the Holocaust and recommended reparations and establishing diplomatic ties with Israel, as their Western counterparts did many years earlier. The Volkskammer specified in their statement that,

Immeasurable suffering was inflicted on the peoples of the world by Germans during the time of National Socialism. Nationalism and racial madness led to genocide, particularly of the Jews in all of the European countries, of the people of the Soviet Union, the Polish people, and the Gypsy people. Parliament admits joint responsibility on behalf of the people for the humiliation, expulsion, and murder of Jewish women, men, and children. We feel sad and ashamed and acknowledge this burden of German history.¹¹

During the 50th anniversary of V-E Day, almost five years after reunification, German political leaders visited former concentration camps and recall the crimes of the past and spoke for human rights. This seemed to have a greater impact on how Germans saw the dark past of Fascism than during the Allied Occupation. January 27th became a day of national remembrance for the victims of Nazi persecution and genocide, the day that Auschwitz-Birkenau was liberated.¹² Many new monuments commemorating the victims complementing the Soviet memorials were built, many of which I have been to. The Topography of Terror was built over the former Gestapo headquarters, a wide memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe was built a couple blocks away from the Brandenburg Gate. Additional memorials for those killed under

¹¹ Herf, Jeffrey. *Divided Memory The Nazi Past in the Two Germanys*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997, 365.

¹² *Ibid*, 370.

Nazism were made for the Sinti and Roma, and also the Homosexuals, placed in Tiergarten close to the Soviet Soldiers memorial.



Entrance to the Topography of Terror. Taken 9/8/19



Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe at Night. Taken 10/30/19

Was the memory of National Socialism and the persecution and genocide divided? Yes, because the political perception of memory was different, but towards the beginning of reunification of the two Germanys, the memory of shared guilt and acceptance of what happened existed in both sides, which made reunification much more manageable. This is because guilt, shame, and acceptance of what happened enabled the reunified Germany to move forward into the future together without worrying or complaining about opening old wounds or forgetting everything. This has certainly made Germany a country to learn from when it comes to understanding the horrifying history. It takes time, but the shared interest is what moves the country forward without being constantly stuck dealing with its past.