

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: LEGACIES OF STALINGRAD:  
THE EASTERN FRONT WAR AND THE  
POLITICS OF MEMORY IN DIVIDED  
GERMANY, 1943-1989

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Directed By: Prof. Dr. Jeffrey Herf, Department of History

The two most monstrous and closely intertwined crimes committed by Nazi Germany, the Holocaust and the “war of extermination” against the Soviet Union, gave rise to two diametrically opposed official memories of the Nazi past in both Germanys: while over the years the annihilation of over six million Jews gained the most prominent position in West German memory of the war, official memory in East Germany centered around the Nazi war against the Soviet Union.

The divided political memory of the latter, the Eastern Front war, is the subject of this dissertation. It analyzes and contextualizes the ways in which these memories emerged in postwar German political culture as old alliances crumbled and new alliances formed in the unfolding Cold War. This study thus represents an important contribution to the history of German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. As the first comprehensive analysis of the Eastern Front memory it focuses on the intersection of memory and politics, of “meaning and power” (Herf). The politics of memory, i.e. the effort to place a narrative of past events into the service of a present political cause dominated both Germanys. Yet, the analysis pays close attention to the individual biographies of the protagonists arguing

that the often selective and ambiguous commemoration of the Eastern Front was not only the result of an ideology-driven instrumentalization of history in the shadow of the Cold War. Rather, it also rooted in the manifold individual encounters with the horrors of genocidal war on the various fronts of this unparalleled conflict.

In case of the East German communists' master narrative, the hitherto neglected centrality of the Eastern Front significantly alters the perception, that the German Democratic Republic was built upon an "antifascist founding myth." Rather the political memory of "Operation Barbarossa" was the central ingredient in the communist founding narrative crafted in order to legitimate the establishment of a socialist dictatorship allied in unconditional "friendship" with the Soviet Union. This calculated presence of the Eastern Front war stands in contrast to an enduring absence of the same event in West Germany. Here it served as rallying point against the perceived continuing "Bolshevist menace", both deriving from and sustaining the antitotalitarian consensus of the young Federal Republic. On either side of the Iron Curtain, the Eastern Front memory thus played a crucial role in a political culture of fear which pervaded both Germanys in the aftermath of World War II.

Yet, the respective founding narratives – German-Soviet friendship in the East, antitotalitarianism in the West – as well as the dominant mutually hostile Cold War context allowed the political elites to evade the question of individual guilt and to neglect the nexus between genocidal war and the Holocaust. The "myth of a clean Wehrmacht" facilitated in *both* Germanys the lasting separation of those two central *lieux de mémoire* which to this day embody the tremendous German sufferings and the unprecedented German crimes committed during World War II: Stalingrad and Auschwitz.



LEGACIES OF STALINGRAD: THE EASTERN FRONT WAR AND  
THE POLITICS OF MEMORY IN DIVIDED GERMANY, 1943-1989

by

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*To my husband and son,  
without whom  
everything would be nothing.*

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In a best-case scenario, writing a dissertation is not only a year-long, sometimes painstaking and often solitary undertaking but also an experience of growing up as scholar and writer under perfect conditions: an academic advisor oversees and supports the effort from the first to the last day, from the first page to the last, and a community of fellow graduate students and professors provide a network of diverse expertise, personal friendships and intellectual exchange. In my case it truly became a life-time experience. My doctoral advisor, Jeffrey Herf, offered me far more than what I had expected as a student coming from Germany to study abroad. He became my “doctoral father” in the truest sense of the German phrase; he has taught me European and German intellectual history with an unforgettable mix of personal passion and professional knowledgeability, and has offered me valuable comments, astute criticism, probing questions, and encouraging advice at every stage of this dissertation. His personal commitment and dedication to my project and my career as young historian have provided me with a lasting lesson, namely to seek the right measure between self-improvement as a student of history, never to cease questioning, rethinking and refining her own ideas and conclusions, and self-confidence as a future scholar. For all this I am very grateful.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction: War, Politics and the Study of Memory**

## **I. The Eastern Front Memory in Postwar German Political Culture**

War is the central theme of Germany's twentieth century. While the first half of the century saw unprecedented violence and destruction caused successively by the *Kaiserreich* and the Third Reich, the second half was no less influenced by the consequences of these wars and the realities of the resulting Cold War: total defeat, utter devastation, a divided nation under Allied occupation, and a second dictatorship on German soil. Naturally, studying modern German political-intellectual history entails dealing with war, its social, political, and cultural consequences as well as the memories and narratives it inspired in the aftermath.

The two most terrible, closely intertwined crimes committed by Germans during World War II, the Holocaust and the war against the Soviet Union, gave rise to two diametrically opposed official memories of the Nazi past in both postwar Germany: while over the years the annihilation of about six million Jews gained the most prominent position in the memory of the war in West Germany, official memory in East Germany centered around the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union. This fundamental difference derived to a great extent, but by far not only, from the realities of the Cold War, i.e. the West German alliance with the West and the integration of East Germany into the Soviet sphere of influence. It also resulted from a multitude of personal, political and ideological motives of those postwar politicians who came to dominate the political landscapes in divided Germany.

This comparative, political-intellectual study of governmental institutions, political parties, mass and veteran organizations, the historical professions as well as the speeches and writings of political leaders and public intellectuals, examines when and how the

Eastern Front war was discussed in public discourses about the past. It is concerned with the “public use of history.”<sup>1</sup> It investigates the relationship between memory and politics by seeking to elucidate how memory forms and informs political culture, and vice versa.

As I will demonstrate, the war against the Soviet Union – and its contested memory – was one of the most important and most contested themes forming and informing postwar German politics and society. At the center of the analysis stands the legacy of this war, a conflict often referred to as the Eastern Front and considered the costliest battlefield of World War II. The Eastern Front embodies the basic feature of postwar German memory: the conflict between the many sufferings endured by Germans on the one hand, and the historic crimes committed by Germans on the other. After the end of the war in 1945, any attempt to come to terms with this ambivalent legacy was further complicated by the growing political and ideological divide in the wake of the unfolding Cold War. Thus, the historical and political context in which a divided Eastern Front memory emerged was extremely complex. In East Germany, it was the calculated public *presence* of the Eastern Front memory, in West Germany its enduring *absence*, which bestowed the legacy of “Operation Barbarossa” with a tremendous potential for continuous (re-)negotiation and contestation.

Hitherto, historiography has neglected the crucial and ambivalent role of the Eastern Front memory in postwar German political culture. My dissertation represents the first systematic effort to trace comprehensively as well as comparatively the genesis of the Eastern Front memory in postwar Germany based on evidence from various archives and

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<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Habermas, Jeremy Leaman, “Concerning the Public Use of History,” *New German Critique*, No. 44: Special Issue on the *Historikerstreit*, (1988), 40-50.

published sources. Moreover, the critical reading and analysis of the texts, speeches and debates dealing with the legacies of “Operation Barbarossa” – the Nazi term for the invasion of the Soviet Union – can contribute significantly to our understanding of post-war German political culture. Particularly, the politics of fear characterizing both postwar German political cultures were built on and nurtured by respectively opportunistic interpretations and representations of the Eastern Front war. Even though what was articulated and debated about the Eastern Front differed greatly, looking at the past was a (conscientiously) selective undertaking in either Germany. After the remarkable Nuremberg Interregnum during which the causes and consequences of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union were discussed publicly and in detail, the “search for a usable past”<sup>2</sup> for many years did not entail a confrontation of the *full* historical truth on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

This study thus is an attempt to systematically investigate the formation and transformations of a complex and multi-layered set of memories and discourses at the heart of which one of the central features of German memory lies: the “stigma of violence” which derives from the conflict between memories of German crimes and German sufferings.<sup>3</sup> The battle of Stalingrad with which this study begins has since then become a symbol for the latter. Therefore, Stalingrad is treated here not only as historical event but is also understood as the most important metaphor codifying to many Germans (in East and West) the total defeat of their country in World War II. The battle itself

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<sup>2</sup> Robert G. Moeller, *War Stories: The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Michael Geyer, “The Place of the Second World War in German Memory and History,” *New German Critique*, no. 71 (1997), 5-40.

during which about 195,000 German soldiers perished – 60,000 died during the battle, 25,000 were injured and flown out by the German *Luftwaffe*, 110,000 went into Soviet captivity, and of those only 5,000 returned home after the war<sup>4</sup> – this battle was never remembered as a military event only. It became a symbol for the suffering, perceived senselessness and extreme brutality of the war on the Eastern Front. At the same time, however, remembering the dead of Stalingrad made it possible to elude – at least temporarily – the question of war crimes committed on Soviet territory. In postwar Germany, the politics of memory with regards to the memory of the war against the Soviet Union reflect this oscillation between memories of sufferings and crimes. In distinct ways and for varying reasons, the political elites have debated the dualism deriving from the “stigma of violence,” and thus contributed to the permanent inscription of the war’s memory in East and West German political culture.

One of my central concerns is therefore the intersection of memory and politics, of “meaning and power,”<sup>5</sup> and it is in this sense that I seek to enrich the study of memory and political culture. The politics of memory, i.e. the effort to place a certain narrative of events happening in the past into the service of a present political cause, dominated the political sphere in both postwar Germanys. In the Eastern part, the German Democratic Republic (GDR), the Eastern Front war became the central historical event in the leading party’s view of World War II. The communists gathered in the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) until 1946, and thereafter in the Socialist Unity Party (SED), forged a

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<sup>4</sup> Rüdiger Overmans, *Soldaten hinter Stacheldraht. Deutsche Kriegsgefangene des Zweiten Weltkriegs* (München: Ullstein, 2002), 38.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Herf, *Divided Memory. The Nazi Past in the two Germanys*. (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 9.

master narrative which included facts that in the West took years to find public acknowledgement: above all, the scale of suffering among Soviet POWs, the non-Jewish Soviet civilian population, and the Wehrmacht's involvement in war crimes. For the SED led by Walter Ulbricht, a front-line veteran of the antifascist movement in the Soviet Union, the Eastern Front memory constituted a key source promising political legitimacy. The party forged a narrative of the Eastern Front that underlined the Soviet Union's role as Hitler's prime victim, enemy and conqueror. This narrative one-sidedly denounced the crimes of the Wehrmacht against "Soviet citizens" while marginalizing other aspects such as the mass murder of the Jews, or the Western Front, or the wartime alliance between the Soviet Union, the United States and Great Britain.

The memory of the Eastern Front in the Western Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) long neglected the criminal legacy of the Nazi "war of extermination" until a genuine interest in the events emerged since the 1960s, and particularly in the wake of Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik*. This shift, as I will demonstrate, was crucial for the success of *Ostpolitik* which brought about a lasting improvement of relations between West Germany and the Soviet Union.

Yet, exploring the intersection of memory and politics requires to examine more than official statements and master narratives. It also must entail examining the biographical background of those political leaders who were in a position to formulate them, and assessing the impact personal experiences had on the formation of political memories. The major protagonists in this study are the East German communists led first by Walter Ulbricht and Wilhelm Pieck, and since 1971 by Ulbricht's successor Erich Honecker, most of whom were long-time KPD members and veterans of the antifascist resistance:

Anton Ackermann, Alexander Abusch, Albert Norden, Johannes R. Becher and Rudolf Herrnstadt. Aside from the influential positions these men held in various branches of the SED-state, they were also formally or informally involved in the “Association for German-Soviet Friendship” (DSF), a mass organization founded in 1947 in order to institutionalize and intensify the efforts to imbue East Germans with a lasting sympathy for the Soviet people and its alleged exemplary achievements. A second group of protagonists in the East German story are the “Stalingraders,” former Wehrmacht soldiers and officers whose asserted transformative experience of “reflection and return” (*Einkehr und Umkehr*) in Soviet captivity served as the starting point for their commitment to a socialist Germany as “fighters for peace.” As military antifascists, men like Wilhelm Adam, Vincenz Müller, Otto Korfes and Heinrich Homann joined the socialist project established by the civilian veterans around Ulbricht and Pieck. The founding of the National Democratic Party of Germany (NDPD) as “bloc party” within the SED-led “national front” in 1948 was a milestone in this process of political integration and ideological domestication. It further culminated in the establishment of the (GDR’s only) veteran organization, the “Working Group of former Officers” (AeO) in 1958, an elitist circle of Wehrmacht veterans whose members often belonged to the NDPD, or the SED, and the DSF.

On the West German side, the main protagonists are the leading politicians, the chancellors, foreign ministers and federal presidents from Konrad Adenauer to Helmut Kohl, Clemens von Brentano to Dietrich Genscher, and Theodor Heuss to Richard von Weizsäcker – all of whose biographies are linked to the experience and aftermath of World War II. The two most important challengers of the political consensus built during



the Adenauer years – marginalizing the Eastern Front and neglecting the Soviet Union's war sacrifices and crucial contribution to Hitler's defeat – were the chancellors Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt. Both, in the widest sense, shared the veteran experience with their East German "counterparts" Honecker and Ulbricht respectively. Brandt was a soldier in the Norwegian resistance, Schmidt fought and witnessed the Eastern Front war as Wehrmacht officer. To a lesser extent Wehrmacht veterans outside the political establishment in Bonn, especially prominent and influential retired generals such as Erich von Manstein, played a key role as well. For in general, it were mostly the political elites and the veteran communities on either side of the Iron Curtain who publicly formulated and debated the political memory of the Eastern Front war and thus made a lasting and meaningful albeit often ambiguous contribution to the genesis of the official World War II memories in the political culture of divided Germany.

By paying close attention to the biographical background of these protagonists, my work seeks to contribute to the very recent tradition of viewing political memory as more than the result of ideology and political calculation, but also as the product of individual experience, world view and personal convictions. This seems particularly fruitful with regards to the East German case. As Catherine Epstein has recently shown, the experience of "fascism" and war during the first half of the twentieth century has had a decisive impact on the way communists shaped their worlds once they had attained

political power. It also explains to some extent their unwavering, often unscrupulous dedication to the communist cause.<sup>6</sup>

The communist memory of the war against the Soviet Union and its political-ideological exploitation in East Germany is an excellent case in point. Even though this is a comparative study, my primary research focused on the little explored East German case. The political memory of the Eastern Front was an important aspect of the SED's constant effort to place the past in the service of the present. The invocation of the "lessons of 'Barbarossa'" in connection with major events and political decisions, e.g. the June uprising in 1953, the creation of armed forces, or the building of the wall in 1961, illustrates the ideology-driven instrumentalization of history. Moreover, the communists sought to transplant this history into the present. In a constant fear-and-threat campaign, particularly during the 1950s, they claimed that the "imperialist West" conspired to launch "another Barbarossa" – a repetition of history which this time would lead to nuclear war. In contrast, the SED claimed that history's lessons were being implemented in the GDR with the project of German-Soviet friendship as a principal *raison d'être*. The fact, that the war between Germany and the Soviet Union was essential and politically much more relevant for the formation of the GDR's self-image than the rather moralizing notion of an "antifascist founding myth," has long been neglected in the historiography on East Germany. It is nonetheless insufficient to point out that the calculated canonical presence of the Eastern Front was the product of an opportunistic interpretation of history intended to legitimate and sustain a "proletarian dictatorship" in Germany. Aside from its

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<sup>6</sup> Catherine Epstein, *Last Revolutionaries. German Communists and their Century* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2003).

instrumental nature, this study argues, it was also the result of a worldview shaped by the personal memories of many East German communists coming from the antifascist resistance. This study pays attention to both crucial contexts.

Returning to a comparative perspective, it cannot be overemphasized that despite the division of the Eastern Front memory in postwar Germany, its basis was a shared past experience. For most Germans, World War II happened on the Eastern Front. The battle of Stalingrad was perceived not only as the turning point of the entire war, it came to symbolize mass death and senseless suffering. The for German society undeniably traumatic events following the battle of Stalingrad until the end of the war – between January 1943 and May 1945 over four million German soldiers or 78 percent of the total losses were killed on the Eastern Front – inspired diverse and contested memories of this horrendous past.<sup>7</sup> The central themes in these memories circled (or can be expected to have circled) around questions of guilt, responsibility, the “own” victims and the “others.” The unfathomable barbarity, which characterized the war against the Soviet Union unlike any other battle field of World War II, was not only the source of its suppression and evasion but also the reason why it remains unforgotten. Moreover, there is no question that without the war on the Eastern Front, the „final solution“ could not have been carried out the way it was.<sup>8</sup> At the least, *Wehrmacht* authorities in the occupied

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<sup>7</sup> On these numbers cf. Rüdiger Overmans, *Deutsche Militärische Verluste im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (München: Oldenbourg, 2000). Detailed on the German losses on the Eastern Front, see below Chapter 2. I.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. for example, Omer Bartov, *Germany's War and the Holocaust: Disputed Histories* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003). Christopher Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution: The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939 – March 1942* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004). Lucjan Dobroszycki and Jeffrey S. Gurock, eds., *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union: Studies and Sources on the Destruction of the Jews in the Nazi-Occupied Territories of the USSR, 1941-1945* (Armonk, New York; London, England: M.E. Sharpe, 1993). Hannes Heer, Klaus Naumann, eds., *Vernichtungskrieg:*

territories secured the rounding up of Eastern Europe's Jews; at the worst, *Wehrmacht* soldiers participated in executions of "partisans" and mass shootings of Jews and other civilians. The war on the Eastern Front was first of all a "war against the Jews," i.e. against "Jewish Bolshevism."<sup>9</sup> The memory of the sufferings of German soldiers on the Eastern Front thus always conflicted – openly or subconsciously – with an uncomfortable truth: it was the war against the Soviet Union which enabled the Nazi regime to execute the systematic mass murder of millions of Jews.

Coming to terms with this uncomfortable truth was and remains a necessary, tremendously difficult, ultimately perhaps even impossible undertaking. And the political and ideological division of Germany after World War II further complicated this process. In the two German states two most different general approaches to the past dominated the attempts to master the past.<sup>10</sup> In the East, the SED successfully built a *positive* historical narrative that underscored the German communists' share in the Red Army's victory over Nazi Germany. At the same time, it understood "fascism" as the most aggressive variant of capitalism/imperialism and claimed that with the building of socialism the basis for

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*Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944.* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1995). Rolf- Dieter Müller and Gerhard R. Überschaer, *Hitler's War in the East, 1941-1945. A Critical Assessment* (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War against the Jews, 1933-1945* (New York: Bantam, 1976). For a summary of the vast literature dealing with the context, planning and execution of the "final solution" see Michael Marrus, "The History of the Holocaust: A Survey of Recent Literature," *Journal of Modern History*, 59, 1 (1987), 114-160. And by Omer Bartov, "Defining Enemies, Making Victims: Germans, Jews and the Holocaust," *American Historical Review*, 103, 3 (1998), 771-816.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the brief and succinct recent overview by Christoph Classen, "Fremdheit gegenüber der eigenen Geschichte. Zum öffentlichen Umgang mit dem Nationalsozialismus in beiden deutschen Staaten," in Jan C. Behrends, Thomas Lindenberger, Patrice G. Poutrous, eds., *Fremde und Fremdsein in der DDR. Zu historischen Ursachen der Fremdenfeindlichkeit in Ostdeutschland.* (Berlin: Metropol, 2003), 101-126.

fascism was rooted out once and for all. West German political culture and self-image rested on a *negative* identification with the past, i.e. on the delayed but sincere realization and acceptance of responsibility for the Holocaust. In an influential essay, Rainer M. Lepsius has aptly described these processes as “externalization” in the East, and “internalization” in the West.<sup>11</sup> They are each closely connected to the central elements of the respective founding narratives – communist antifascism in the GDR, and democratic antitotalitarianism in the FRG.

With these general observations in mind, it can be inferred from the already existing historiography that the battle of Stalingrad and the war on the Eastern Front were integral parts of the postwar memorial cultures in divided Germany. In the Federal Republic, the Eastern Front initially codified the death, injury or imprisonment of millions of Wehrmacht soldiers in Hitler’s war against the Soviet Union. This memory of the soldier as victim during the late 1940s and 1950s was mainly shaped and articulated by a plethora of memoirs from former generals, by the so-called *Landserhefte* (dime novels for veterans) and the many media reports about the fate of German POWs in the Soviet Union.<sup>12</sup> Even the political mainstream subscribed wholeheartedly to the myth of a “clean

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<sup>11</sup> Rainer M. Lepsius, „Das Erbe des Nationalsozialismus und die politische Kultur der Nachfolgestaaten des ‚Großdeutschen Reiches,‘“ in Max Haller, Hans-Joachim Hoffmann-Nowotny, Wolfgang Zapf, eds., *Kultur und Gesellschaft*. (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 1989), 247-264. Münkler has summarized the difference by pointing to differing official identifications with regards to the Nazi past: in the GDR, the SED identified at once with the victim and victors of Nazism, in the Federal Republic, the political establishment gradually came to adopt a defeated perpetrator memory. Cf. Herfried Münkler, “Antifaschismus und antifaschistischer Widerstand als politischer Gründungsmythos der DDR,” *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, B45 (1998), 16-29.

<sup>12</sup> See for instance Jörg Bernig, *Eingekesselt: Die Schlacht von Stalingrad in deutschsprachigen Romanen nach 1945* (New York, 1997). Rolf Düsterberg, *Soldat und Kriegsliteratur. Deutsche militärische Erinnerungsliteratur (1945-1961) zum Zweiten Weltkrieg. Motive, Begriffe, Wertungen* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2000). Klaus F. Geiger, *Kriegsromanhefte in der BRD. Inhalte und Funktionen* (Tübingen: Tübinger Vereinigung für Volkskunde, 1974). Friedrich Gerstenberger, „Strategische Erinnerungen. Die

Wehrmacht” that had fought dutifully and honorably in the service of the fatherland. Only during the late 1960s and 1970s, historical scholarship began to focus on the Nazi plans for the conquest of the Soviet Union in general, and the role of the *Wehrmacht* in the execution of these plans, in particular.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the political rapprochement with the Soviet Union under Willy Brandt, first as foreign minister, then as chancellor, contributed to a more differentiated and more critical view of “Operation Barbarossa.” This critical memory of the Eastern Front emerged even later than the West German Holocaust memory.<sup>14</sup> It was not until the later 1980s, that political leaders addressed the true dimensions of the crimes committed during the “war of extermination” in the East. It has even been argued that there was a connection between the Holocaust entering West German memory since the late 1960s, and the lasting absence of the Eastern Front war: “Auschwitz was admitted by all Germans as ‘unfathomable crime’ – therefore the quicker and more thoroughly the war against the Soviet Union (and the guilt connected to it) was suppressed.”<sup>15</sup>

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Memoiren der deutschen Offiziere,“ in: Hannes Heer, Klaus Naumann, eds., *Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1995), 620-633. Moeller, *War Stories*. Oliver von Wrochem, „Stalingrad erinnern. Zur Historisierung eines Mythos,“ in *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History*, Online-Edition, vol. 1, 2 (2004), URL: <http://www.zeithistorische-forschungen.de/16126041-Wrochem-2-2004> (this article also reviews the valuable exhibition catalogue *Stalingrad erinnern. Stalingrad im deutschen und im russischen Gedächtnis* published by the Deutsch-Russische Museum Berlin-Karlshorst, ed. Peter Jahn (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2003)).

<sup>13</sup> Important in German historiography Andreas Hillgruber, *Hitlers Strategie: Politik und Kriegsführung, 1940-1941* (Frankfurt/Main: Bernard & Graefe Verlag für Wehrwesen, 1965); Manfred Messerschmidt, *Die Wehrmacht im NS-Staat. Zeit der Indoktrination* (Hamburg: Deckers Verlag, 1969). And Christian Streit, *Keine Kameraden. Die Wehrmacht und die sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen 1941-1945* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1978).

<sup>14</sup> On the memory of the Holocaust in West Germany, Herf, *Divided Memory*, 267-362.

<sup>15</sup> Wolfram Wette, “Erobern, zerstören, auslöschen. Die verdrängte Last von 1941: Der Rußland Feldzug war ein Raub- und Vernichtungskrieg von Anfang an,” *Die Zeit*, November 20, 1987, 51.

In the GDR, the SED established a narrative which claimed that the *Wehrmacht's* invasion of the Soviet Union constituted the greatest crime committed by the “Hitler-clique.” Having learned the “right lessons” from history, East Germany was to become the Soviet Union’s “eternal” friend and ally. Hitherto, historians have argued that the SED relied on the “antifascist founding myth” to legitimize the establishment of a socialist state in East Germany.<sup>16</sup> My study suggests that the SED’s claim of an organic, historically generated German-Soviet friendship not only complemented the antifascist narrative but it constituted the other, equally central founding narrative of the GDR. Both elements, of course, derive from the same historical master narrative: the Soviet Union had been Hitler’s prime victim and conqueror, and the Red Army along with German communists had been the driving forces in the antifascist struggle. The battle of Stalingrad was a central event in this narrative symbolizing the beginning of the end of the Nazi regime. The Red Army’s victory proved once and for all the historical – that is the ideological, military, economic and moral – supremacy of Soviet communism. To the East German communists, the Eastern Front war thus represented a true “Hegelian moment:” with the victory of the Red Army and the subsequent rise of the Soviet Union as a world power, the *Weltgeist* had found its fulfillment at the end of World War II, just as the German philosopher Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel had claimed the *Weltgeist*

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<sup>16</sup> Jürgen Danyel, „Die Opfer- und Verfolgtenperspektive als Gründungskonsens?“ in idem, ed., *Die geteilte Vergangenheit. Zum Umgang mit Nationalsozialismus und Widerstand in den beiden deutschen Staaten*. (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1995), 31-46. Rainer Gries, „Mythen des Anfangs,“ *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte (ApuZ)*, 18-19/2005, 12-18. Antonia Grunenberg, *Antifaschismus. Ein deutscher Mythos*. (Reinbeck b. H.: Rowohlt, 1993). Sigrid Meuschel, *Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft in der DDR. Zum Paradox von Stabilität und Revolution in der DDR, 1945-1989*. (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), 29-80. Münkler, „Antifaschismus und antifaschistischer Widerstand.“ Idem, „Das kollektive Gedächtnis der DDR.“

had materialized in Prussia in the nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup> Stalingrad was the pivotal moment in this Hegelian moment, history's culmination point, the ultimate turning point. The SED's official narrative presented the National Committee Free Germany (NKFD), the anti-Hitler movement founded on the Eastern Front by German exile communists and captured Wehrmacht officers after the defeat at Stalingrad in 1943, as the origin of a collective, antifascist transformation movement, which every remorseful soldier and citizen could join after total defeat in 1945. By supporting the establishment of a socialist state in the Soviet occupation zone, the veterans of the Eastern Front war could make up for the historic crimes committed in its course.<sup>18</sup> Hence, this narrative addressed the criminal nature of the Eastern Front war in very general terms. At the same time it offered former Wehrmacht soldiers – and every East German willing to join the socialist project – collective redemption. In this “red version”<sup>19</sup> of the “Wehrmacht myth,” the ordinary soldier was just as innocent as in the West German counterpart.

It was not until after Germany's reunification in 1990, that the war on the Eastern Front and the role of the Wehrmacht in the war of extermination received late but surprisingly intense public attention during the debates over a photo exhibition which

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<sup>17</sup> Jeffrey Herf, „Hegelianische Momente.' Gewinner und Verlierer in der ostdeutschen Erinnerung an Krieg, Diktatur und Holocaust,“ in Christoph Cornelißen, Lutz Klinkhammer, Wolfgang Schwentker, eds., *Erinnerungskulturen. Deutschland, Italien und Japan seit 1945* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 2003), 201.

<sup>18</sup> See for example Frank Biess, “Pioneers of a New Germany’: Returning POWs from the Soviet Union and the Making of East German Citizens, 1945-1950,” *Central European History*, vol. 32, no. 2 (1999), 143-180. Cf. most recently, Frank Biess, *Homecomings. Returning POWs and the Legacies of Defeat in postwar Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), esp. chapters 4 and 5, in which Biess draws a number of parallels between the “redemptive memories” or narratives of West and East German returnees.

<sup>19</sup> Karen Hartewig, „Militarismus und Antifaschismus. Die Wehrmacht im kollektiven Gedächtnis der DDR,“ Michael Thomas Greven, Oliver von Wrochem, eds., *Der Krieg in der Nachkriegszeit. Der Zweite Weltkrieg in Politik und Gesellschaft der Bundesrepublik* (Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 2000), 251.



presented shocking visual evidence for the participation of the Wehrmacht in Nazi war crimes on the Eastern Front.<sup>20</sup>

The long-term approach enables us to view recent German history from a comparative yet integrative perspective, acknowledging the fact that the two Germanys were parts of one nation. It realizes a the very recent suggestion to no longer address either the East German or the West German case; it moves beyond the writing of a divided history of divided Germany.<sup>21</sup> However, the analysis will never lose view of the fact that the conditions for the public discourses about the past differed fundamentally due to the two contrasting political systems – democracy in the West, dictatorship in the East. Still, a comparison enables us to identify striking similarities in the way political thought, discussions and actions were influenced by the elites' use and misuse of history. It allows for some general observations on the “public use of history,” i.e. the way political leaders chose to address the intricate connections between past and present, history and memory, guilt and suffering. In this sense, then, this is a comparative study of

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<sup>20</sup> A good summary is Hannes Heer, „Vom Verschwinden der Täter: Die Auseinandersetzung um die Ausstellung ‚Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941-1944,““ *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft (ZfG)* 50 (2002), 869-898. See als Hans-Erich Volkmann, “‘Vergessen prägt unser Dasein.’ Rede zur Eröffnung der Ausstellung ‚Verbrechen der Wehrmacht. Dimensionen des Vernichtungskrieges 1941-1944,‘ Berliner Ensemble, Berlin am 27. November 2001,“ *Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift* 60, no. 2, 2001, 501-515.

<sup>21</sup> Konrad Jarausch, „‘Die Teile als Ganzes erkennen’. Zur Integration der beiden deutschen Nachkriegsgeschichten“, *Zeitgeschichtliche Forschungen* 1/2004. See also Christoph Kleßmann, „Verflechtung und Abgrenzung. Aspekte der geteilten und zusammengehörigen deutschen Nachkriegsgeschichte,“ *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, no. 29-30 (1993), 30 - 41. And idem, ed., *The Divided Past. Rewriting Post-War German History* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2001). And Christoph Kleßmann, Peter Lautzas, eds., *Teilung und Integration. Die doppelte deutsche Nachkriegsgeschichte* (Schwalbach: Wochenschau Verlag, 2006). A rare older example is Peter Bender's extended essay *Deutsche Parallelen. Anmerkungen zu einer gemeinsamen Geschichte zweier getrennter Staaten* (Berlin: Siedler, 1989).

the “contingencies and choices that accompanied the emergence of the political memory” of the Eastern Front focusing on those junctures where “meaning and power intersect.”<sup>22</sup>

Further, the chronological scope of this dissertation arises from one fundamental assumption underlying this study: although two different states emerged after the war – along with two distinct political systems, political cultures, and societies – 1945 was no “zero hour.” The Nazi state collapsed but the population did not change over night. This historical continuity amidst radical historical change is an important aspect of postwar German history. My narrative thus begins with the National Socialist master narrative of the Eastern Front war and the battle of Stalingrad, and follows the story up until the years of Détente, a time during which not only German-German-Soviet relations changed fundamentally but also the views, interpretations and questions asked of the past. The end of the Cold War in 1989 and German unification in 1990 mark the end of this study even though I occasionally refer to the post-unification debates about the Wehrmacht’s warfare on the Eastern Front stirred by the controversial exhibit “War of Extermination. Crimes of the Wehrmacht, 1941-1944” during the 1990s.<sup>23</sup>

## II. Historiography and Approach

The following paragraphs provide a pointed discussion of the relevant scholarship, the historiographical debates this study seeks to address as well as some theoretical and

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<sup>22</sup> Herf, *Divided Memory*, 9.

<sup>23</sup> Hannes Heer, Klaus Naumann, eds., *War of Extermination: The German Military in World War II, 1941-1944* (New York: Berghahn, 2000). The catalogue of the exhibit was published under the title *Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht, 1941-1944. Ausstellungskatalog* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1996).

methodological reflections. There is certainly still a need to constructively expound – both in theoretical and methodological terms – the study of memory. Much of the historical work done during the two decades has not ventured to go beyond a descriptive analysis of memory artifacts such as texts, pictures, monuments, rituals, places, ect.<sup>24</sup> My work is not yet another one of these studies despite the fact many of them are important contributions to our understanding of modern cultural and political-intellectual history.

The body of literature dealing with history and memory is vast.<sup>25</sup> It can generally be classified into two genres following two different approaches. On the one hand, much of the recent work on the issue of history and memory has been of conceptual or essayist nature, focusing mostly on the summary, commentary or interpretation of debates dealing with the past, the past in the present, and presents past.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, there is a growing number of works dealing with the construction of memory and its political-

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<sup>24</sup> Maoz Azaryahu, *Von Wilhelmplatz zu Thälmannplatz: Politische Symbole im öffentlichen Leben der DDR*. (Gerlingen: Bleicher Verlag, 1991). Etienne Francois, Hagen Schulze, eds., *Erinnerungsorte*, 3 vols. (München: C.H. Beck, 2001). Brigitte Hausmann, *Duell mit der Verdrängung? Denkmäler für die Opfer des Nationalsozialismus in der Bundesrepublik, 1980-1990*. (Münster: Lit, 1998). Michael Jeismann, ed., *Mahnmal Mitte. Eine Kontroverse*. (Köln: DuMont, 1999). Harold Marcuse, *Legacies of Dachau: The Uses and Abuses of a Concentration Camp 1933-2001* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Herbert Pietsche, et.al., eds., *Nun hängen die Schreie mir an... Halbe. Ein Friedhof und seine Toten*. (Berlin, 1995). Christoph Stölzl, ed., *Die Neue Wache unter den Linden. Ein deutsches Denkmal im Wandel der Geschichte*. (Berlin: Köhler & Amelang, 1993).

<sup>25</sup> An overview provides Jan-Werner Müller's essay "The Power of Memory, the Memory of Power and the Power over Memory," in idem, ed., *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1-35.

<sup>26</sup> See for instance Aleida Assmann, Ute Frevert, *Geschichtsvergessenheit – Geschichtsversessenheit. Vom Umgang mit deutschen Vergangenheiten nach 1945* (Stuttgart: DVA, 1999). Helmut Dubiel, *Niemand ist frei von der Geschichte. Die nationalsozialistische Herrschaft in den Debatten des Deutschen Bundestages* (München: Hanser, 1999). Philipp Gassert, Alan E. Steinweis, eds., *Coping with the Nazi past: West German Debates on Nazism and Generational Conflict, 1955/1975* (New York: Berghahn, 2006). Olaf Groehler, Ulrich Herbert, *Zweierlei Bewältigung. Vier Beiträge über den Umgang mit der NS-Vergangenheit in beiden deutschen Staaten* (Hamburg: Ergebnisse Verlag, 1992). Charles S. Maier, *The Unmasterable Past. History, Holocaust, and National Identity* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1988). Peter Reichel, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung in Deutschland: Die Auseinandersetzung mit der NS-Diktatur von 1945 bis heute* (München: Beck, 2001). Gesine Schwan, *Politik und Schuld. Die zerstörerische Macht des Schweigens* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1997).

cultural implications based on extensive archival research. Most of the latter have been dedicated to the study of the Holocaust memory in Germany,<sup>27</sup> to the “politics of the past” (*Vergangenheitspolitik*) and the judicial reckoning with the Nazi past.<sup>28</sup> The history of the Eastern Front memory in *East* Germany must be placed within the growing scholarship on the specificity of memory formation and political culture in the former communist societies, especially the Soviet Union.<sup>29</sup> In addition, and transcending the boundaries between dictatorial and democratic societies, a number of multinational studies about the connection between memory and power<sup>30</sup> as well as comparative analyses of national memorial cultures in postwar Europe<sup>31</sup> have contributed innovatively to memory studies.

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<sup>27</sup> For example Nicolas Berg, *Der Holocaust und die westdeutschen Historiker. Erforschung und Erinnerung* (Göttingen: Wallstein-Verlag, 2003). Bernd Faulenbach, Rainer Bölling, *Geschichtsbewußtsein und historisch-politische Bildung in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Beiträge zum „Historikerstreit“* (Düsseldorf: Landeszentrale für politische Bildung, 1988). Hausmann, *Duell mit der Verdrängung?* Herf, *Divided Memory*. Marcuse, *Legacies of Dachau*. Klaus Neumann, *Shifting Memories. The Nazi Past in the New Germany* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

<sup>28</sup> Ulrich Brochhagen, *Nach Nürnberg. Vergangenheitsbewältigung und Westintegration in der Ära Adenauer* (Hamburg: Junius, 1994). Norbert Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik. Die Anfänge der Bundesrepublik und die NS Vergangenheit* (München: C.H. Beck, 1997). Moeller, *War Stories*. Peter Reichel, *Politik mit der Erinnerung: Gedächtnisorte im Streit um die nationalsozialistische Vergangenheit* (München: Hanser, 1995). Stephen Remy, *The Heidelberg Myth. The Nazification and Denazification of a German University* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002). Annette Weinke, *Die Verfolgung von NS-Tätern im geteilten Deutschland. Vergangenheitsbewältigungen 1949-1969 oder: Eine deutsch-deutsche Beziehungsgeschichte im Kalten Krieg* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2002). Edgar Wolfrum, *Geschichtspolitik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Der Weg zur bundesrepublikanischen Erinnerung, 1948-1999* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1999).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. the important programmatic essay by Tony Judt, „The Past is Another Country. Myth and Memory in Postwar Europe,“ *Daedalus*, vol. 121, vol. 4 (1992), 83-118. See also, for example, on the memory of the October Revolution Frederick C. Corney, *Telling October. Memory and the Making of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); and for a view from “below” cf. Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on my Mind. Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); on the memory of WWII in the USSR, Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead. The Rise and Fall of the Cult of WWII in Russia* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War. The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>30</sup> Jan-Werner Müller, ed., *Memory and Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>31</sup> Cornelißen, Klinkhammer, Schwentker, eds., *Erinnerungskulturen*. Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner and Claudio Fogu, eds. *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006). And Müller, ed., *Memory and Power*.

The memory of war, and in particular the *politics* of war commemoration, receive growing attention among scholars concerned with the social and political implications of modern violence.<sup>32</sup> Finally, the end of the Cold War has inspired a comparative interest in the various national debates pertaining historical truth, memory, democracy, and justice in Europe as a result of which a number of excellent national studies on memory and society have been published.<sup>33</sup>

Despite the obvious centrality of the war on the Eastern Front in the history of the Third Reich, the process of its retrospective political, societal and historiographical reckoning has not yet been the subject of comprehensive historical research. Obviously, the recent discussions about the criminal conduct of the Wehrmacht in the war of extermination are relevant for this project, and much excellent and critical research has been done on Hitler's army and the Eastern Front.<sup>34</sup> These studies focus largely and with

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<sup>32</sup> T. G. Ashplant, Graham Dawson, Michael Roper, eds., *The Politics of War Memory and Commemoration* (London: Routledge, 2000). Joanna Bourke, "Introduction 'Remembering War,'" *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 39, no. 4 (2004), 473-485. Martin Evans, Ken Lunn, eds., *War and Memory in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 1997). Michael Geyer, "The Place of the Second World War." And with a focus on the Great War, Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

<sup>33</sup> See for example Anne Applebaum, *The Gulag. A History* (New York: Doubleday, 2003). Tony Judt, Istvan Déak, Jan T. Gross, eds., *The Politics of Retribution in Europe* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000). Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect. French Intellectuals, 1944-1956* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). Pieter Lagrou, *The Legacy of Nazi Occupation: Patriotic Memory and National Recovery in Western Europe, 1945-1965* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). Michael Marrus, Robert Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (New York : Basic Books, 1981). Henry Russo, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). Weiner, *Making Sense of War*.

<sup>34</sup> See for example Omar Bartov, *Hitler's Army, Soldiers, Nazis, and the War in the Third Reich* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). Omer Bartov, *The Eastern Front, 1941-45. German Troops and the Barbarization of Warfare* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986). Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men. Reserve Battalion 101 and the final solution in Poland* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993). Heer, Naumann, eds., *Vernichtungskrieg*. And the essays in the section VI „Die Wehrmacht als Teil des NS-Unrechtsstaates“ in Rolf Dieter Müller, Hans Erich Volkmann, eds., *Die Wehrmacht: Mythos und Realität* (München: Oldenbourg, 1999), 739-963. Christoph Rass, „Menschenmaterial.“ *Deutsche Soldaten an der Ostfront. Innenansichten einer Infanteriedivision 1939-1945* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2003).

good reason on the event itself and not on its immediate aftermath and long-term legacies. Still, in his seminal studies on the Eastern Front and the barbarization of warfare, Omer Bartov has pointed to the fact that it was this war which has shaped postwar (West) German memory most crucially: “the war in the East constituted not only the climax of the Nazi regime, but also the most important element of its postwar memory.”<sup>35</sup> Thusfar this important observation has not yielded a detailed historical analysis of the Eastern Front memory’s role in postwar German society. In the East German case, this dissertation represents the first attempt at all to trace the genesis and to investigate the functions of the memory of the war against the Soviet Union in the SED’s politics of the past. And even though there are a few scattered works<sup>36</sup> which allude to the marginal role of the Eastern Front’s criminal legacies in the political culture of the Federal Republic, this study also constitutes the first systematic account of the West German Eastern Front memory.

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<sup>35</sup> Bartov, *Hitler’s Army*, 182. Bartov points to the interesting fact, that the “distortion of reality” with characterized the years 1941-1945 – with most Germans believing that the Russians were a real, existential threat despite the knowledge that Germany had started the war – was a mechanism which also determined German postwar memories of this war: “Surviving [the Eastern war’s] reality and living with its recollection necessitated a process of inversion. When the soldiers returned home, they brought with them the images and horrors of the war, the perverted morality which had formed its basis, and the distorted perception which had made living through it bearable. All of these were combined into Germany’s collective memory of the war, for only this could postwar society ‘come to terms’ with its past. ‘Auschwitz’ could be ascribed to a minority, numerous as well it might have been. Not so the war. Every family had sent at least one soldier to the front. ... It was inconceivable that they had all taken part in a huge criminal undertaking. Thus the same psychological mechanism which had facilitated fighting a barbarous war was employed to facilitate living with its memory. ... Cause and effect were reversed: barbarism was perceived as the outcome of the enemy’s bitter resistance to occupation, not as its trigger. The troops’ suffering were vividly remembered, their victims’ repressed.” Ibid., 182f.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. most importantly, the older works by Reinhard Rürup, ed., *Der Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion 1941-1945. Eine Dokumentation* (Berlin: Aargon-Verlag, 1991), esp. „Der Umgang mit dem Erbe,“ 261-281; Wette, “Erobern, zerstören, auslöschen;“ Ralph Giordano, *Die Zweite Schuld oder von der Last Deutscher zu sein* (Hamburg: Rasch und Röhning, 1987). And more recently the essays in section „Erinnerung“ in Heer/Naumann, eds., *Vernichtungskrieg*, 601ff. All of these works deal exclusively with the Eastern Front in West German memory.

The battle of Stalingrad itself has been the subject of a few studies albeit with a focus on its myth-making potential, the postwar “metamorphoses” of this “German myth” and its metaphorical function as “sign of history”<sup>37</sup> and *lieu de mémoire*.<sup>38</sup> The general implications of the experience of World War II for political and military culture as well as its impact on popular mentalities in both postwar German states have found more attention than the actual emergence, content and instrumentalizations of the Eastern Front memory.<sup>39</sup> The intersection of memory and politics has only recently received broader attention among historians interested in the relationship between ideas and actions.<sup>40</sup> Popular forms of remembrance, such as literature and film, have also been the subjects of a number of studies, even if, with regards to East Germany, this area is still in its infancy.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Jay W. Baird, „The Myth of Stalingrad,“ *The Journal of Contemporary History* vol. 4, 3 (1969), 187-204. Jürgen Förster, ed., *Stalingrad. Ereignis, Wirkung, Symbol*. (München: Piper, 1992). Michael Kumpfmüller, *Die Schlacht von Stalingrad. Metamorphosen eines deutschen Mythos*. (München: Fink, 1995). Helmut Lethen, Sabine Behrenbeck, „Stalingrad als Geschichtszeichen,“ in Heinz-Dieter Kittsteiner, ed., *Geschichtszeichen*. (Köln: Böhlau, 1999), 153-180, 181-198. Bernd Wegner, „Der Mythos „Stalingrad“ (19. November 1942 - 2. Februar 1943),“ in Gerd Krumeich, Susanne Brandt, eds., *Schlachtenmythen. Ereignis - Erzählung - Erinnerung* (Köln 2003), 183-197. Wolfram Wette, Gerd R. Überschar, eds., *Stalingrad. Mythos und Wirklichkeit einer Schlacht*. (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1992).

<sup>38</sup> Bernd Ulrich, “Stalingrad,” in Francois, Schulze, eds., *Erinnerungsorte*, vol. 2, 332-348. On the battle itself, Antony Beevor, *Stalingrad* (London: Viking, 1998). William Craig, *Enemy at the Gates. The Battle for Stalingrad* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000).

<sup>39</sup> Donald Abenheim, *Reforging the Iron Cross: The Search for Tradition in the West German Armed Forces* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988). Thomas Berger, *Cultures of Antimilitarism. National Security in Germany and Japan* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998). David Clay Large, *Germans to the Front. West German Rearmament in the Adenauer Era* (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 1996). Jay Lockenauer, *Soldiers as Citizens: Former Wehrmacht Officers in the Federal Republic of Germany 1945-1955* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001). Müller, Volkmann, eds., *Die Wehrmacht*. Bruno Thoß, „Volksarmee schaffen – ohne Geschrei!“ *Studien zu den Anfängen einer verdeckten Aufrüstung in der SBZ/DDR 1947-1952* (München: Oldenbourg, 1994). Gerhard Wettig, *Entmilitarisierung und Wiederbewaffnung in Deutschland, 1943-1955. Internationale Auseinandersetzungen um die Rolle der Deutschen in Europa*. (München: Oldenbourg, 1967).

<sup>40</sup> See for example Herf, *Divided Memory*. Moeller, *War Stories*. Schwan, *Politik und Schuld*. Müller, ed., *Memory and Power*. Reichel, *Politik mit der Erinnerung*. Wolfrum, *Geschichtspolitik*.

<sup>41</sup> Wolfgang Becker, Norbert Schöll, *In jenen Tagen ... Wie der deutsche Nachkriegsfilm die Vergangenheit bewältigte* (Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 1995). Rolf Düsterberg, *Soldat und Kriegserlebnis*. Peter Fritzsche,

Methodologically, I seek to combine the history of ideas with political-cultural history. Stuart H. Hughes defines intellectual history as dealing with “thoughts and emotions of men – with reasoned argument and with passionate outburst alike.” Following his lead, this study is concerned with “the whole range of human expression” as manifested in writing, speech, practice and tradition.<sup>42</sup> Yet, I suggest to open Hughes’ understanding of intellectual history to the political dimension for it can be much more than a “way of treating [the historical] material from the standpoint of the thought rather than of the deed.”<sup>43</sup> What makes political-intellectual history so appealing, after all, is the synthetic understanding of human thought and action. In this particular case, the focus on the intersection of war, memory and politics takes the story beyond the mere descriptive analysis of memorial sites and rites.

In his contribution to the conceptual foundations of political-intellectual history, François Furet, following in Hughes’ footsteps, distinguished between two approaches to history, namely a „periodized history, chronological narrative” which aims at the “reconstruction of human experience – an “empiricism of ‘facts’ as opposed to preconceived ideas.” The second approach, of which Furet himself was a strong

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„Volkstümliche Erinnerung und deutsche Identität nach dem 2. Weltkrieg,” in Martin Sabrow, Konrad Jarausch, eds., *Verletztes Gedächtnis. Erinnerungskultur und Zeitgeschichte im Konflikt* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus Verlag, 2002), 75-97. Neil Gregor, “‘Is he still alive, or long since dead?’ Loss, Absence, and Remembrance in Nuremberg 1945-1956,” *German History*, vol. 21, 2003, 183-203. Wolfgang Hardtwig, „Fiktive Zeitgeschichte? Literarische Erzählung, Geschichtswissenschaft und Erinnerungskultur in Deutschland,” in Sabrow, Jarausch, eds., *Verletztes Gedächtnis*, 99-123. Eric L. Santner, *Stranded Objects. Mourning, Memory and Film in Postwar Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990). Michael Schornsteimer, *Die leuchtenden Augen*. Irmgard Wilharm, „Die Nachkriegszeiten im deutschen Spielfilm,” *Geschichtswerkstatt*, vol. 17, 1989, 21-32.

<sup>42</sup> See his introduction “Some preliminary observations” in Stuart H. Hughes, *Consciousness and Society. The Reorientation of European Social Thought 1890-1930*. (New York: Vintage, 1958), 3-32, quote on 3.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.



advocate, is a „problem-oriented history, the analytical examination of a single question over reputedly heterogeneous periods, the interpretation of human experience with the aid of a theory or idea,“<sup>44</sup> the latter of which are often borrowed from other disciplines. It is such an understanding of history that inspires this study, the way I ask questions and formulate problems. For Furet, history as a social science can only advance if a historical work „builds its data explicitly on the basis of conceptually developed questions,“ if it “pays far closer attention to the formulation and reformulation of problems, and [makes] a far clearer distinction in historical writing between documentary evidence and interpretation.”<sup>45</sup> This set of rules, Furet acknowledges, „is not enough to define a good conceptual history, for it does not guarantee a choice of sound analytical tools; but it does lay down a minimum requirement.” And, it can be an essential methodological approach for it “accepts the limits of historical objectivity” and abandons “the fallacy of ,bringing the past back to life,‘ or the temptation to tell a mere story.”<sup>46</sup>

This dissertation does not represent an attempt to merely tell the story of the post-war memory of the war on the Eastern Front in East and West Germany. Following Furet, it is based on a “searching formulation of a question:”<sup>47</sup> it seeks to unearth and analyze the

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<sup>44</sup> Francois Furet, “Beyond the Annales”, *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 55, no. 3 (1983), 389-410, quote on 407. Furet acknowledges that the boundaries between the two approaches are often blurred: “Actually, the distinction I am trying to draw between two types of history ... locates an imaginary boundary, which is constantly being crossed by mixed genres.” Yet, he also reminds us elaborately that “to visualize extremes” can always be “useful for the clarity of argument.” Ibid., 407.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 409.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 410.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. The context for this phrase is the historian’s rootedness in the present which, Furet reminds us, is one central reason for the lasting fascination with the past: „History has never lost sight of the fact that part of its curiosity is rooted in the present. ...history’s relation to the present is one of the ingredients of its relation to truth .. [therefore] a *searching formulation of a question* allows the historian to avoid being trapped inside a period and enables him to use the past as a repository of experiments that are in some ways comparable even if not concomitant.” [Emphasis added.]

connections between war, memory and politics in the broadest sense: I not only explore the genesis of the Eastern Front memories in post-war Germany. I further ask how these memories of a (self-inflicted) catastrophe shaped public discourses about the past and in which way these memories informed political thought and actions, or served as ideological resource in the quest for political legitimacy.

Apart from Hughes' and Furet's theoretical reflections on writing the history of ideas in general, Alon Confino and Peter Fritzsche have recently made an important conceptual contribution to the study of memory in particular. They propose to focus more on "how memory *forms* social relations", and to seek understanding of "the practical uses of the category 'memory', the way it comes to structure perception, to inform thought, to construct identities, to determine politics, and to explain situations."<sup>48</sup> This perspective indeed promises to enrich the study of memory as it places memory within the larger socio-political context. Yet, the opposite perspective is equally relevant: inquiring which factors determine the formation and content of political memory, thus paying attention to individual historical experience, ideological beliefs, group mentalities, political needs of the day and political culture alike is just as important.

In order to realize such an undertaking one needs to clarify the terms and concepts used. The notion of a "collective memory" has been widely discussed, yet often there is very little effort to conceptualize or even define what is meant by that. Even though Aleida Assmann, Harald Welzer, and others have made important theoretical contributions to the study of collective memory, I refrain from claiming to decipher the

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<sup>48</sup> Alon Confino, Peter Fritzsche, eds., *The Work of Memory: New Directions for the Study of German Society and Culture*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 5.

“collective” or “social” memory of the Eastern Front in postwar Germany.<sup>49</sup> Rather, I use the term “political memory” to signify that I am primarily concerned with the narratives forged and communicated publicly by the political elite.<sup>50</sup> Naturally, political memory shapes collective memory, and vice versa. Yet, it is important to point to the limitations of the empirical study of collective memory. It is impossible to reconstruct what an entire “society” thought, remembered, narrated about the past. Moreover, in focusing on the political aspect, I stress the fact that “political memory” is more than about *commemorating* the past. It is political precisely because it transports a certain historical *knowledge* into the public sphere. During the Nuremberg Interregnum, for example, most Germans *knew* about the realities and legacies of the Eastern Front war because the Allied war crimes trials presented a well-documented case against the Nazi and Wehrmacht leadership for conspiring to wage aggressive war, violating international law, and committing war crimes and crimes against humanity (by far not limited to the Eastern war). Yet, with the formal division of Germany and the beginning of the Cold War these facts, or certain aspects thereof, vanished from political memory and public conscience in both Germanys. The history of the Eastern Front memory in postwar Germany is the history of a political memory because its principal purpose was not to mourn the dead, to

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<sup>49</sup> Aleida Assmann, Ute Frevert, *Geschichtsvergessenheit – Geschichtsversessenheit*, 36ff. Aleida Assmann, *Mnemosyne. Formen und Funktionen der kulturellen Erinnerung* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1991). Lutz Niethammer, *Kollektive Identität. Heimliche Quellen einer unheimlichen Konjunktur* (Reinbeck: Rowohlt, 2000). Richard Terdimen, *Present Past. Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993). Harald Welzer, *Das soziale Gedächtnis: Geschichte, Erinnerung, Tradierung* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2001).

<sup>50</sup> Herf, *Divided Memory*, 1-12. Herf also uses synonymously the term “public memory.” With political elite I mean not only active politicians but all those societal groups who participate *publicly* in the discourses over the past; my analysis includes veterans, historians, lawyers, public intellectuals and literary artists – thus, groups which form the political life of a society.

commemorate past events for the sake of not forgetting them, but to serve certain political interests. Political leaders chose to selectively communicate historical knowledge about the Eastern Front, and thus “shaped the way society thinks about its past,”<sup>51</sup> thereby molding its collective memory. For that reason, my study also examines the trends in historiography on the Eastern Front war, and wherever possible, traces the impact historical knowledge had on the public discourse over the past. It should become clear, in view of the existing World War II historiography, what *could* and *should* have been known and communicated by the political elites in East and West, each insisting to have fully addressed and overcome the Nazi past.

Since in my understanding political memory entails not only commemorating the past but publicly communicating historical knowledge, a few words on the term “propaganda” seem in place.<sup>52</sup> Especially with regards to the East German narratives, I occasionally and conscientiously use the word propaganda. However, it is important to distinguish the SED’s concerted propaganda campaigns launched, for example, in context of important anniversaries or political decisions, from the communists’ continuous effort to establish and maintain a certain historical world-view among East German citizens – with Walter Ulbricht leading this effort in person. SED officials themselves referred to

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>52</sup> Recently historians have started to rethink the conceptual basis of the study of „propaganda“ as phenomenon of modern mass communication. Cf. Rainer Gries, Wolfgang Schmale, eds., *Kultur der Propaganda* (Bochum: Winkler, 2005), and the useful historical overview of propaganda concepts by Thymian Bussemer, *Propaganda. Konzepte und Theorien* (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2005). On the GDR in particular, Monika Gibas, *Propaganda in der DDR, 1949-1989* (Erfurt: Landeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2000).

this effort as “history propaganda,”<sup>53</sup> and as in other communist parties across Eastern Europe the concept had an expressively positive connotation for it served the “enlightenment” and “conscience formation” of the masses.<sup>54</sup> I am cautious in using this term because it implies that most of the propagated information were potentially flawed. It also, in my view, hinders what Martin Sabrow has called “engaging in the peculiar communist mind-set,” the “world of meaning (*Sinnwelt*).”<sup>55</sup> In essence, Sabrow simply stresses that communist historical narratives ought to be taken seriously as they constituted more than just “propaganda,” and that a genuine interest in the genesis and content of these narratives requires reconstructing them instead of dismissing them in hindsight of communism’s ideological and material demise. Last but not least, more than half a century ago, the writer George Orwell has already pointed to the “positive” intentions of those seeking to spread a certain world view or view of history by way of propaganda: in aspiring to “control your thoughts,” a totalitarian regime not only “forbids you to express – even to think – certain thoughts, but it dictates what you *shall* think, it

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<sup>53</sup> Cf. Helmut Meier, Walter Schmidt, *Geschichtsbewußtsein und sozialistische Gesellschaft. Beiträge zur Rolle der Geschichtswissenschaft, des Geschichtsunterrichts und der Geschichtspraganda bei der Entwicklung des sozialistischen Bewußtseins* (Berlin (Ost): Dietz, 1970). Occasionally, GDR historiography and Geschichtspraganda are treated as two sides of the same coin, cf. for example Joachim Kappner, *Erstarrte Geschichte. Faschismus und Holocaust im Spiegel der Geschichtswissenschaft und Geschichtspraganda der DDR* (Hamburg: Ergebnisse-Verlag, 1999).

<sup>54</sup> Bussemer, *Propaganda*, 222.

<sup>55</sup> Martin Sabrow, „Einleitung: Geschichtsdiskurs und Doktringesellschaft,“ in idem, ed., *Geschichte als Herrschaftsdiskurs. Der Umgang mit der Vergangenheit in der DDR* (Köln: Böhlau, 2000), 9-35, esp. 12f. Even though I do not share Sabrow’s view that any reality is construction, I value his call to take other memorial cultures – as the GDR’s „culture of the past“ – seriously, with the primary goal of reconstructing, not evaluating it. This suggestions can only be understood in the inner-German context: I think, especially among West German GDR historians, such an approach would contribute significantly to the overcoming of still prevalent Cold War paradigms (the existence of which became apparent most recently during the controversy over the so-called Sabrow-Commission’s suggestions for reforming the GDR memorial landscape, cf. Martin Sabrow, Rainer Eckert et.al., eds., *Wohin treibt die DDR-Erinnerung. Dokumentation einer Debatte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007)).

creates an ideology for you, it tries to govern your emotional life as well as setting up a mode of conduct.”<sup>56</sup> At least in that sense, the SED regime was totalitarian because it aspired a monopoly over how people remembered World War II. Ulbricht and his followers were equally aware of memory’s potential to influence human emotions and to forge a sense of identity.

The story of the Eastern Front memory in the GDR is so complex because the SED understood how to play with historical *facts*, with a selective historical *reality* aimed at inspiring a lasting compassion and political bias for the Soviet Union among East Germans. True, the Eastern Front was the costliest, decisive front in World War II, the Soviet Union incurred most losses, many German industrialists profited from Hitler’s “war of conquest and extermination” (*Raub- und Vernichtungsfeldzug*) and thus were accomplices in Nazi war crimes, and the German communists indeed fought a courageous battle against Hitler’s regime. Yet, the SED selectively put together these and other elements to compose a memory of the Eastern Front war which had little room for Jewish victims, the non-Communist resistance, the Western allies’ contribution or the crimes of the Red Army. Still, only rarely, this “propaganda” produced and spread fabrications. More commonly it operated with distortions, omissions, and exaggerations to make the past fit (into) the present.

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<sup>56</sup> George Orwell, „The Frontiers of Art and Propaganda,“ in Sonia Orwell, Ian Angus, eds., *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell, Vol. 2: My Country Right or Left, 1940-1943* (Boston: Nonpareil Book, 2000), 123-127, quote on 135.

Returning to the German-German perspective, these considerations point to the role of political culture – characterized not only by two differing political systems, but also by two divergent “historical *Sinnwelten*” with specific modes of appropriating the past – in the formation of political memory.<sup>57</sup> Maurice Halbwachs has stressed that the formation of memory is not a “clinical” process but takes place within individual and societal boundaries and under the influence of respective preconceptions of reality, values, traditions, customs, ect. Collective memory operates within certain “social frameworks,” it “reconstructs its various recollections to accord with contemporary ideas and preoccupations.”<sup>58</sup> If collective memory – and in this study the *political memory* in a already-defined narrower sense – is treated as a social phenomenon it is also possible to say something about its role in a society’s political culture because the two are closely connected and, in fact, are mutually conditional.

The concept of political culture has its roots in American civic culture studies of the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>59</sup> Gabriel A. Almond, one of the fathers of the concept, defined political culture as “a particular pattern of orientations to political action.”<sup>60</sup> In *The Civic Culture*, Almond and Verba proposed a “scientific theory of democracy” and suggested that by measuring the population’s “attitudes toward the political system,” political scientists

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<sup>57</sup> Sabrow, „Einleitung: Geschichtsdiskurs und Doktringesellschaft,“ 12, in Sabrow’s words: „zwei unterschiedliche historische Sinnwelten mit spezifischen Modi zur Vergesellschaftung der Vergangenheit.“

<sup>58</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*. Edited and translated by Lewis A. Coser (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 224f.

<sup>59</sup> Glen Gendzel, „Political Culture: Genealogy of a Concept,“ *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, vol. 28, no. 2 (1997), 225-250, quote on 226.

<sup>60</sup> Gabriel A. Almond, “Comparative Political Systems,” *Journal of Politics*, vol. 18 (1956), 319-409.

would be able to identify the “operating characteristics of the democratic polity itself.”<sup>61</sup> The strong emphasis on quantitative analysis, and the relatively limited understanding of political culture as a set of subjective “beliefs about political reality, feelings with respect to politics and commitments to political values”<sup>62</sup> was soon criticized within the political science profession as well as in neighboring disciplines such as history, cultural studies, and sociology. One main accusation was that the Almond/Verba model “completely omitted history and politics from their construction of political culture.”<sup>63</sup> The study of German political culture, in particular, has led to the extension and sophistication of the concept, adding to the empirical-descriptive understanding of political culture a “theoretical-normative dimension.”<sup>64</sup> Scholars like Dirk Berg-Schlosser and Ralf Rytlewski have widened the concept by arguing that studying changes in political culture encompasses paying attention not only to “beliefs and attitudes, but also [to] the *interpretations of history and politics of the groups and persons involved.*”<sup>65</sup> If society is made up of three subsystems, the social-cultural, the economic and the political system, then one will find that the social-cultural system reflects the “basic values of each society and gives meaning to its existence:” “common rituals and symbols can be observed

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<sup>61</sup> Gabriel A. Almond, Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture. Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 5-13. See also Gabriel A. Almond, ed., *The Civic Culture Revisited* (Boston: Little Brown, 1980).

<sup>62</sup> Gabriel A. Almond, “The Study of Political Culture,” in Dirk Berg-Schlosser, Ralf Rytlewski, eds., *Political Culture in Germany* (Houndsmill: MacMillan, 1993), 13-28, quote on 15.

<sup>63</sup> Gendzel, “Political Culture,” 229.

<sup>64</sup> Kurt Sontheimer, Wolfgang Bergem, *Deutschlands Politische Kultur* (München: Piper, 1990), 11-13. The two essays in this book are strongly influenced by the good-evil rhetoric of the last Cold War years, yet they represent the only serious attempt at describing comparatively the political cultures in East and West Germany after the war. Yet, Sontheimer’s essay on the FRG in particular makes no reference at all to the importance of history, i.e. the memory of National Socialism and World War II, for the formation of political culture!

<sup>65</sup> Dirk Berg-Schlosser, Ralf Rytlewski, “Political Culture in Germany: A Paradigmatic Case,” in Berg-Schlosser, Rytlewski, eds., *Political Culture in Germany*, 3-12, quote on 3. [Emphasis added.]



which give meaning to political life by referring to constitutive historical events in the light of some universally claimed values.”<sup>66</sup> These values not only contain the basic “rules for the resolutions of conflicts in society (e.g., in a more consensual or more antagonistic way) and of decision making (for example, in an authoritarian or more democratic manner) in the political system,” but they also closely “interact with the basis of legitimacy of the political system proper.” In other words, “the ‘core’ of political culture can be found in the sources and the extent of legitimacy of the political system.”<sup>67</sup> The emphasis on the role which historical experiences and their public memory play for the formation of cultural values, and the generation and maintenance of political legitimacy draws attention to the interdependence of memory and political legitimacy. These interrelated parameters constitute the theoretical framework for my analysis of the Eastern Front memory in postwar German political culture. Far from treating memory simplicistically as an “independent variable determining political culture and ultimately politics,” my study underlines that “memory to some extent *is* political culture.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 8-9. Obviously, the fact that two different political systems existed in East and West Germany has strong implications for the definition, analysis and study of the respective political cultures. On theory see Archie Brown’s intro stressing the aspect of force: the clash of old and new (imposed) political cultures in communist societies and accordingly between a dominant political culture (in the population) and official (propagated) political culture. Brown distinguishes four types of political culture: unified, dominant, dichotomic, fragmented. See Archie Brown, “Introduction,” in Archie Brown, Jack Gray, eds., *Political Culture and Political Change in Communist States* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 5ff. See also Hermann Rudolph, *Die Gesellschaft der DDR – eine deutsche Möglichkeit? Anmerkungen zum Leben im anderen Deutschland* (München: Piper, 1972.) Idem, „Wie sieht das Selbstverständnis der DDR-Gesellschaft aus?“, in Werner Weidenfeld, ed., *Die Identität der Deutschen* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 1983), 193-209. And Peter Christian Ludz, *Mechanismen der Herrschaftssicherung* (München: Hanser, 1980), 246-256. For a good, albeit dated overview of the relevant older literature see Irma Hanke, *Alltag und Politik. Zur politischen Kultur einer unpolitischen Gesellschaft* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1987), 7-20.

<sup>68</sup> Müller, “Introduction”, in Müller, ed., *Memory and Power*, 26.

Some concrete remarks regarding the practical application of these conceptual ideas seem in place. Based on the considerations above, I define political culture as a society's dominant mode of discussing and resolving political problems, of communicating and (re)negotiating current values and convictions in light of collective traditions and social conventions, and of debating historical experiences in their full or partial perception and reflection. This mode of communication is, of course, determined by such fundamental factors as the political system, the distribution of power, knowledge and material resources in a society, and the degree of popular participation in matters of communal interest.<sup>69</sup> The representation, interpretation and (mostly opportunistic) invocation of the past is naturally one of the main concerns of the political and intellectual elites, and for that reason my main interest rests on these groups.

The intersection of memory and political legitimacy can be exemplified with one central motif shaping the discourses over the place of the Second World War in both postwar Germanys: fear. In both German states, fear became a central component of the respective political cultures. The SED nurtured an atmosphere of fear by constantly pointing to the threat of "another Barbarossa" looming in the West, and the West German political establishment maintained a similarly fearful atmosphere by warning of the continuous threat posed by expansionist "Bolshevism" in the East. The war on the

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<sup>69</sup> This definition was inspired in part by Lucian Pye's essay about political culture in the *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*: Political culture comprises "the set of attitudes, beliefs, and sentiments which give order and meaning to a political process and which provide the underlying assumptions and rules that govern behavior in the political system. It encompasses both the political ideals and the operating norms of a polity. Political Culture is thus the manifestation in aggregate form of the psychological and subjective dimensions of politics. A political culture is the *product of both the collective history of a political system and the life histories of the members of that system, and thus it is rooted equally in public events and private experience.*" See Lucian Pye, "Political Culture," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*. vol. 11 (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 216. [Emphasis added].

Eastern Front – in whatever form it was retold and remembered – served as the source of this fear and constituted an important historical reference point for political leaders on both sides insofar as a “usable” memory thereof promised political legitimacy and factual power.

The SED regime constantly referred to the “lessons” of World War II and simultaneously established a rhetoric of peace (“Never again!” – “*Nie wieder!*”) and a rhetoric militant pacifism (“Resist the beginnings!” – “*Wehret den Anfängen*”). Sigrid Meuschel has highlighted the importance of historical motifs in these key concepts of the SED doctrine. She has pointed out the intricate connection between efforts to secure the interpretative monopoly over history and the East German communists’ struggle for legitimacy in the early years of their rule.<sup>70</sup> The SED, resuming older German anti-modern and anti-liberal sentiments, cultivated a political culture based mainly on “*Angst*,” most of all on a fear of the main enemy, heterogeneity, of the chaos of modernity embodied by Western decadent civilization. The SED’s politics of history aimed at maintaining this atmosphere of fear, because it both nurtured and legitimized in

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<sup>70</sup> Meuschel identifies a number of political-cultural traditions which the SED resumed in order to establish power over an essentially still “unpolitical [not a-political!] society.” Essentially, the SED pursued the “reproduction of the political culture of an unpolitical society” and therefore invoked a number of older German ideological traditions, for example the anti-cosmopolitanism of the German *Kultur vs. Zivilisation* ideology, anti-Westernism/anti-cosmopolitanism; escaping the pitfalls of modernity by reconciling the workers’ state with science and technology; the claim that the dismissal of democratic rules of engagement in the capitalist systems (and in its imperialist variant National Socialism) has proven bourgeois democracy’s failure and obsolescence; and the striving towards the unity of all social, cultural and political forces resonating an old longing for an “*Epochenschwelle*” – the threshold of a new epoch, to be achieved only in a seemingly unending battle for a better future. Meuschel, *Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft*, 15-22. See also in this context Martin Sabrow, *Verwaltete Vergangenheit. Geschichtskultur und Herrschaftslegitimation in der DDR* (Leipzig: Universitätsverlag, 1997). For a broad discussion of (West-) German political culture and the “unpolitical society” notion see Dirk van Laak, “Der widerspenstigen Deutschen Zivilisierung. Zur politischen Kultur einer unpolitischen Gesellschaft,” in: Eckart Conze, Gabriele Metzler, eds., *Fünfzig Jahre Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Daten und Diskussionen*. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt), 1999, 297-315.

spirit and in practice the fundamental principles of communist rule in East Germany: force, struggle, discipline, and obedience to the authority of those fighting for a better future.<sup>71</sup> I argue that for the maintenance of this public, fearful mindset it was crucial for the SED to invoke a *homogenous*, coherent memory of the war against the Soviet Union. Because learning the “right lessons” from the Eastern Front war offered the pretext for an unrelenting twofold fear-and threat-campaign, firstly aimed against the West, which was accused of preparing for another “Day X,” another crusade against the Soviet Union, another World War, and secondly against domestic “neo-fascist” resistance against the socialist dictatorship. On the Cold War front, the SED denounced Adenauer’s “policy of strength,” i.e. the Federal Republic’s *Westbindung* and NATO-integration, based on this interpretation of the Eastern Front war. On the domestic front, the regime applied this reasoning most explicitly on the uprisings in June of 1953, and on the building of the wall in 1961. In both instances historical coincidence created a superb opportunity to connect the “lessons of June, 22, 1941” with the events happening in the early summer of 1953, and in the later summer of 1961. In both cases, the SED deployed the *political* memory of the Eastern Front war in the worst sense of the word.

As already indicated, the element of fear in German political culture was not limited to the Eastern part of Germany. Fear of the “other” totalitarian threat posed by the Soviet Union was an essential element of West German political culture during the 1950s and 1960s, and even beyond. Yet, here the war against the Soviet Union functioned not as monumental warning not to repeat history – at least not initially – but mainstream

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 19.

political rhetoric focused on the continuing threat posed by “Soviet Bolshevism” and “world communism.” Even though it seems difficult to assess the degree to which this rhetoric was rooted in the National Socialist propaganda about the “Russians” and the “Bolshevist threat to Western civilization,” and to what extent it hindered a genuine interest in the Eastern Front legacy, the issue of ideological continuities will nonetheless be the subject of critical investigation in the course of my study.

I want to conclude my theoretical remarks by briefly considering the implications of studying the political memory of events which were experienced by individuals, and which are thus also remembered individually. Whilst I am mostly concerned with the public expression and political implications of the Eastern Front memory, the individual war memories cannot and should not be left aside all together. War veterans in particular, usually feel the “need to ‘bear witness’” and to make sense of their war experience.<sup>72</sup> Yet, since individual memories are often communicated by and in groups – defined by shared experience, profession, social status, political views – this work contains a number of focused studies addressing the Eastern Front memory of certain groups – veterans, historians, and literary artists. It might then become possible to connect the moral-political aspects of the Eastern Front memory in divided Germany with the societal and personal implications of the war’s interpretation and remembrance. To some extent, I thus follow a recent suggestion to juxtapose memory formed “above” with the memories

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<sup>72</sup> Joanna Bourke, “Introduction ‘Remembering’ War,” 480.

from “below” in order to come closer to comprehending an entire nations’ attempts at mastering its “shattered past.”<sup>73</sup>

### III. Sources

The range of primary sources for this undertaking is extensive, and it must be both diverse and limited in terms of origin, form, scope and content. My source base includes the relevant published and archival records on the government level (especially of the Adenauer and Brandt administrations in the West; SED’s party apparatus, the Central Committee (ZK), and Politburo in the GDR), parliamentary records, and the speeches and writings of the key political players. Furthermore, I have consulted the records of a major mass organization in the GDR – the Association for German-Soviet Friendship (DSF). The DSF, founded in 1947 in the Soviet Occupation Zone “for the study of Soviet culture,” was the second largest mass organization in the GDR and by 1989 counted 6.3 million nominal members (every third citizen).<sup>74</sup> The primary function of the DSF was to reeducate East Germans and instill in them a positive image of and genuine respect for the Soviet Union, its peoples and culture. The way the DSF fulfilled these tasks in context of the Eastern Front legacy has not yet been studied in depth.<sup>75</sup> In addition, I have

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<sup>73</sup> Jarausch and Geyer view German memory as fractured, and argue that it can be reconstructed by looking at the way the resulting varying memories are formed: first, they identify individual life stories focused normally on suffering and survival; secondly, collective or group recollections inspire sometimes congruent, sometimes incompatible patterns of remembrance; and finally, a nation’s “public memorial culture” reflects how society as a whole remembers its past. See Konrad Jarausch, Michael Geyer, *Shattered Pasts: Reconstructing German Histories*. (Princeton, Oxford, 2003), esp. chapter 11.

<sup>74</sup> A general overview over the DSF’s history provides Jan C. Behrends, “Sowjetische ‘Freunde’ und fremde ‘Russen’. Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft zwischen Ideologie und Alltag (1949-1990),” in Behrends, Lindenberger, Poutrous, eds., *Fremde und Fremdsein in der DDR*, 74-98.

<sup>75</sup> In West Germany no such organization, which could serve as counterpart existed. In the course of my research I have discovered, however, that DSF had a West German branch, founded in 1950. The leaders of

consulted the records and publications of the little known “Working Group of former Officers” (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft ehemaliger Offiziere*, AeO) – a SED-sanctioned organization of former high-ranking Wehrmacht officers and Eastern Front veterans who became important messengers of the official Eastern Front memory in the GDR. In order to reconstruct West German veteran memories of the Eastern Front, I have systematically read and analyzed two of their main publications, *Soldat im Volk* and *Wehrkunde*.

Aside from the SED’s party archive, my study also refers to the archival records of the National Democratic Party of Germany (NDPD) which – contained within the SED-led “National Front” – served as a “collecting basin”<sup>76</sup> for former Nazi party members and Wehrmacht veterans in the GDR. For the analysis of what I call the “Rites of June” and the “Rites of November,”<sup>77</sup> i.e. the ritualized commemoration of the beginning of “Operation Barbarossa” in East and West Germany, I have examined speeches, ceremonies, and press reports surrounding important anniversaries.

Last but not least, I have also attempted to pay attention to the way the political memory of the Eastern Front changed “public opinion” over the years with regards to the war against the Soviet Union as well as the image of “Russians” in both post-war Germanys. The study of “public opinion” and images of the enemy (*Feindbilder*) is a

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the DSF-West were arrested in 1953 and charged with “preparation of high treason” before the FRG’s highest court at that time, the *Bundesgerichtshof*. See BA/SAPMO DY 32/10054, materials of the 5<sup>th</sup> congress of the DSF, 8-10 December 1955, p. 58.

<sup>76</sup> Dietrich Staritz, „National-Demokratische Partei Deutschlands (NDPD),“ in Martin Broszat, Hermann Weber, eds., *SBZ-Handbuch. Staatliche Verwaltungen, Parteien, gesellschaftliche Organisationen und ihre Führungskräfte in der Sowjetischen Besatzungszone Deutschlands 1945-1949* (München: Oldenbourg, 1993), 574-583, quote on 574.

<sup>77</sup> In the GDR, the Eastern Front war was mainly commemorated on June 22. In the FRG, politicians referred to the war, if at all, during the ceremonies held to commemorate the nation’s dead – every November on the *Volkstrauertag* („National Day of Mourning“).

contested field, and a critical reading of the sources (i.e. the opinion polls available for both Germanys) is required.<sup>78</sup> Especially in the East German case, the thus far largely ignored comprehensive polls taken by the SED ZK's Institute for Opinion Research between 1964 and 1978, and by the more "independent" Institute for Youth Research between 1966 and 1990, must be treated with caution. Nonetheless, the results of these scientifically standardized polls provide us with a refreshing and unique view into the minds of ordinary East Germans. Contrasting them with the West German Allensbach polls reveals that even the latter was far from "objective" public opinion research. The kinds of questions asked – none, in the West, ever addressing the Eastern Front war – speak to the predominance of the Cold War paradigm.

Apart from these primary sources, this study is based on an extensive reading of both German and English scholarly literature. Without frequent reference to the valuable

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<sup>78</sup> For the GDR, I have also searched the records of the Ministry of State Security (MfS) expecting to find extensive material on the MfS's activities in connection with the surveillance and documentation of attitudes and opinions about the Soviet Union particularly close to important anniversaries and ceremonies remembering World War II. Yet, to my surprise, this search has not yielded much relevant material aside from a few documents on occasional "attacks" on Soviet cemeteries, or anti-Soviet slogans, and loads of papers detailing the organization and execution of "protection measures" securing mass demonstrations and parades on historical anniversaries such as May 8. The most noteworthy incident I found was a bomb attack on the Central House of German-Soviet Friendship in Berlin, "Unter den Linden" in 1962. No one was hurt. The MfS suspected the perpetrators in West-Berlin, but apparently never got hold of them. Cf. the report "Ermittlungen und Ergebnisse zur Detonation einer Zeitbombe in den Ausstellungsräumen des Zentralen Hauses der GSDF unter den Linden," BSTU, ZKG, 7612.

That MfS records nevertheless can offer valuable insight into "public opinion" among East Germans, I have demonstrated in my masters thesis, i.e. with regards to East German reactions to the release and return of German POWs – "war convicts" as the SED called them after 1949 – from the Soviet Union in the 1950s. Cf., Christina Mayer, "Friends or Enemies: The Return of German Prisoners of War from the Soviet Union and their Reintegration into a Socialist Society in East Germany, 1945-1955." (MA thesis manuscript, Ohio University, Athens, OH, 2002).



research already done on various aspects of my subject it would have been impossible to cover the period from 1943 to 1989 from a comparative perspective.

## Chapter 2

### **Towards Total Defeat: Nazi Propaganda and the Other Narratives of the Eastern Front War, 1941-1945**

„...And what got the soldier's wife  
from the wide Russian lands?  
From the wide Russian lands she got the widow's veil,  
to the funeral the widow's veil,  
that's what she got from the Russian lands.”

From Bertholt Brecht's *Und was bekam des Soldaten Weib?* (1942)

## I. The Battle of Stalingrad and the War on the Eastern Front in Nazi Propaganda, 1941-1945

The legacy of the propaganda war that accompanied the National Socialist crusade against Europe between 1939 and 1945 was, despite its effectiveness and omnipresence, ambivalent. The relentless efforts of Joseph Goebbels' Propaganda Ministry to create a sworn-together "national community" (*Volksgemeinschaft*) sharing not only common racial ancestry but also the same moral and political worldview, nonetheless left the German people atomized and isolated at the end of the Third Reich in 1945. As the alert contemporary philosopher Karl Jaspers (1883-1969) observed at the time: what Germans had in common was "non-community." For after the collapse of the Nazi regime they "may have only negative basic features in common: membership in a nation utterly beaten and at the victor's mercy; lack of common ground linking us all; dispersal – each one is essentially on his own, and yet each one is individually helpless." Jaspers summed up these observations by pointing to the paradoxical legacy of the twelve-year long Nazi propaganda war. Despite the drive towards ideological uniformity, public opinion in Germany was quite scattered: "In the silence beneath the leveling public propaganda talk of the twelve years, we [Germans] struck very different inner attitudes."<sup>1</sup> Beneath the uniformity of the Nazi propaganda war, and as a result of the widely differing individual experiences, a plurality of opinions, attitudes and world views prevailed.

What Jaspers described in his famous 1946 lecture, *The Question of German Guilt*, contains the main issues to be tackled with in this chapter. It will examine the various

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt* (New York: Dial Press, 1947), 18.

narratives of the battle of Stalingrad and the war on the Eastern Front in and outside Germany by focusing on the official Nazi propaganda effort, the counter-narratives from both within Germany and abroad, and the reception of these competing narratives among the German population. In contrast to the Holocaust memory, the memory of Stalingrad refers to a historical event that symbolized both, Nazi Germany's aggressiveness and failure. It thus encapsulated the main elements of the Eastern Front perception among Germans during the war. It was the most audacious but also the costliest front of World War II. Even though the Nazi leadership kept the staggering numbers of fallen soldiers on the Eastern Front secret, the population naturally felt the impact of these horrendous losses.

It should be recalled that over half of the 5.3 million German soldiers killed in World War II died on the Eastern Front (2.7 million or 51 percent, compared to 6.4 percent on the Western Front). In his important study on German military losses, Rüdiger Overmans distinguished between the fighting on the Eastern Front, lasting from September 1, 1939 until December 31, 1944, and the so-called final battles (*Endkämpfe*) in the East and West lasting from January 1, 1945 until May 9, 1945. He thus added to the Eastern Front casualties about 800,000 soldiers who died during the *Endkämpfe* in the East.<sup>2</sup> Thus, overall 3.5 million soldiers or 66 percent of all German military casualties died during the fighting on the Eastern Front. If one further adds to this number those German POWs who died in Soviet captivity, about four million German soldiers perished on the Eastern

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<sup>2</sup> Overall, he estimates that 1,230 000 million soldiers died during the *Endkämpfe* (January 1, 1945 to May 9, 1945), two thirds (about 811,000) of which on the Eastern Front alone. See Overmans, *Deutsche Militärische Verluste*, 265.

Front. Hence, 75 percent of all losses including killed POWs occurred on the Eastern Front, compared to 20 percent in the West, and another 10 percent on other fronts.<sup>3</sup> Most of these losses occurred after the attack against the Soviet Union in 1941: between September 1, 1939 and June 22, 1941, “only” 130,000 German soldiers perished; however, during the last ten months of the war alone, as many soldiers died as during the previous four years together – 300,000 to 400,000 men per month. Limited to the Eastern Front this meant that between June 22, 1941 and July 1944, about 2,000 soldiers died each day; during the *Endkämpfe* between January and May 1945 the numbers increased to an average of 5000 men dying every day in the fights against the advancing Red Army.<sup>4</sup>

These losses had a tremendous impact on German society. Germans perceived and later remembered the Eastern Front as the costliest battle field of the entire war.<sup>5</sup> Yet, in order to trace the origins of its memory, it is necessary to reach back to the very beginning of what the National Socialists called “Operation Barbarossa.” Although a number of scholars have studied the propaganda campaign accompanying the war on the Eastern Front as well as its impact on the German army and home front, this chapter builds upon the most important published primary sources and suggests new interpretations. Two main arguments have long been made with regards to the German

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., with „other fronts“ Overmans refers mainly to the losses incurred during the fighting on the German home land, and to navy losses for which it is difficult to determine a corresponding land front.

<sup>4</sup> In fact, more than half of all military losses occurred after the failed assassination of Hitler in July 1944: 300,000 to 400,000 soldiers died per month. The single most costly battle was not Stalingrad with 60,000 killed in action, and 110,000 soldiers dying in captivity, but the battles during the summer months of 1944 in the Southern Ukraine. In August 1944, 277,465 soldiers died on that front, the highest monthly casualty rate on the Eastern Front before the *Endkämpfe*.

<sup>5</sup> Bartov, *Hitler's Army*, 182ff.

population's attitude towards the war against the Soviet Union and the striking impact the battle of Stalingrad has had on the relationship between the Führer and his people. First, this chapter takes issue with the view that following the *Blitzkrieg* successes of the years 1939 and 1940, Germans were far from enthusiastic about "Operation Barbarossa" launched on June 22, 1941 – an operation the population was neither practically nor propagandistically prepared for by the regime.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, many reacted with surprise, even shock, and worried about the prospects of winning this war.<sup>7</sup> Yet, even though the Nazi leadership had not "prepared" the German population for the war against the Soviet Union as an immanent military undertaking, there was, as the sources will show, a wide acceptance and sense of rightfulness for this war which should be explained in light of the Nazis' most effective ideological campaign against the "Jewish-Bolshevist world conspiracy" since the early 1920s.<sup>8</sup>

The second argument pertains to the defeat of the Sixth Army at Stalingrad, namely to its perceived symbolic power as the epiphany of the heroic and costly fight on the Eastern Front. It holds that once the battle of Stalingrad was over, Germans lost faith both

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<sup>6</sup> Wolfram Wette, „Die propagandistische Begleitmusik zum deutschen Überfall auf die Sowjetunion am 22. Juni 1941“ in Gerd R. Ueberschär and Wolfram Wette, eds., *Der deutsche Überfall auf die Sowjetunion: „Unternehmen Barbarossa“ 1941* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1999), 45-52.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 45. Hans Mommsen, „Der Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion und die deutsche Gesellschaft,“ in Bianka Pietrow-Ennker, ed., *Präventivkrieg? Der deutsche Angriff auf die Sowjetunion* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 2000), 56-73. Norbert Frei, „Der totale Krieg und die Deutschen“, in Norbert Frei, Hermann Kling, eds., *Der nationalsozialistische Krieg* (Frankfurt/Main, New York: Campus Verlag, 1990), 283-285.

<sup>8</sup> Hillgruber, *Hitlers Strategie*. Eberhard Jäckel, *Hitler's World View. A Blueprint for Power* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1995). Saul Friedlander, *Nazi Germany and the Jews, vol. 1: "The Years of Persecution, 1933-1939"* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997). Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte, vol. 4: „Vom Beginn des Ersten Weltkrieges bis zur Gründung der beiden deutschen Staaten 1914-1949“* (München: C.H.Beck, 2003), 600-690, 881-902.

in their Führer and in the possibility of winning this war.<sup>9</sup> Stalingrad has since been perceived as the turning point of the war. War-weariness, “defeatism” and the every-day perils of the air-war in Germany’s bomb-stricken cities were, so the argument goes, the main sentiments on the home front after the defeat on the Volga. Indeed, Security Service (SD) intelligence from the Reich during that time (January until March 1943) was full of such reports. However, what can also be inferred from the same reports was a continuing belief among many Germans that another summer-offensive of the Wehrmacht and a mobilization of all – supposedly hitherto unused – resources would bring final victory on the Eastern Front. The fear of a Soviet invasion and the deep-seated faith in the historically lawful inevitability of Bolshevism’s ultimate defeat kept the home front on Hitler’s side.<sup>10</sup>

The resolution of both these arguments has major implications for the analysis of the Eastern Front war in German memory after 1945. By stressing the continuities between the war and postwar era in German political culture, this chapter serves as the departure point from which the memory of the war on the Eastern Front will be traced through the occupation years and the division of Germany. Even if we accept Jaspers’ dictum of a scattered nation that had nothing in common but its “non-community,” the experience of war was *the* unifying factor for German post-war society. Since June 1941 the Eastern

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<sup>9</sup> Jay W. Baird, „The myth of Stalingrad“, *Contemporary History*, vol. 4, no. 3 (1969), 187-204. Marlis Steinert, „Stalingrad und die deutsche Gesellschaft“ in Jürgen Förster, ed., *Stalingrad. Ereignis, Wirkung, Symbol* (München: Piper, 1992), 171-185. Bernhard R. Kroener, „'Nun Volk, steh auf...!' Stalingrad und der ‚totale‘ Krieg 1942-1943“, in *ibid*, 151-170. Wolfram Wette, „Das Massensterben als ‚Heldenepos.‘ Stalingrad in der NS-Propaganda“, in Wette, Ueberschär, eds., *Stalingrad*, 43-60. Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936-1945: Nemesis* (New York: Norton, 2000), 543-557.

<sup>10</sup>Hans Mommsen, „Der Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion“, 58. Kurt Pätzold, „Antikommunismus und Antibolschewismus als Instrumente der Kriegsvorbereitung und Kriegspolitik“, in Frei, Kling, eds., *Der nationalsozialistische Krieg*, 122-145.

Front was the main theatre of the entire war in German hearts and minds – a centrality, though quite obvious, that has been much neglected in the historiography on the World War II memory in Germany. German memory of World War II was primarily shaped by popular perceptions, beliefs and opinions about what had happened on the Eastern Front, why it had happened and to what effect. It is thus crucial to closely examine the various narratives that were propagated on the German home and military fronts from within the National Socialist propaganda apparatus as well as from external sources such as enemy radio stations that could be overheard inside Germany (BBC), or leaflets printed on the Eastern Front by exiled German communists and the Red Army. Rather than claiming to fully reconstruct the general contemporary perception of the war in the East, I recall and detail a variety of counter-narratives which had the *potential* to shape those collective perceptions. Yet, even if these “other narratives” are treated here almost at equal length, there is no question that they represented no real alternative to the much more effective daily propaganda produced by the Nazi regime under the conditions of a monopolized press and media.

#### “BARBAROSSA” - DEFENDING GERMANY, SAVING EUROPE

On Sunday, June 22, 1941, at 3 o'clock in the morning, Germany launched what Adolf Hitler called the “greatest struggle of world history.” About 3.6 million German and axis soldiers, around 3.600 tanks, and over 2.700 air planes opened the war against the Soviet Union on the Eastern Front.<sup>11</sup> After a two-year period of complete official

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<sup>11</sup> Gerd R. Ueberschär, „Das Scheitern des Unternehmen ‚Barbarossa‘“, in Ueberschär, Wette, eds., „*Unternehmen Barbarossa*“, 145, fn. 18. Hitler referred to the war on the Eastern Front as „the greatest



silence with regards to German-Soviet relations following the Nazi-Soviet-Pact of 1939, the NS propaganda apparatus immediately began justifying the attack against the hitherto allied Soviet Union.<sup>12</sup> Hitler's proclamation to the German people and the soldiers on the Eastern Front on the morning of the attack encapsulates the National Socialist master narrative of "Operation Barbarossa." Four main motifs ran through this propaganda campaign: Germany was the savior of Europe and Western civilization from the destructive powers of the Jewish-Bolshevist clique in Moscow; the war against the Soviet Union was a struggle for life or death; in its magnitude this historic military conflict was unprecedented; and this war was *forced* upon the German nation now fighting for its very existence. Each of these claims was to remain an influential part of the postwar views of the war on the Eastern Front. In fact, the postwar "divided memory"<sup>13</sup> of this war in East and West Germany cannot be understood properly without considering the Nazis' efforts to stylize the invasion of June 1941 as the most important military campaign in German history. It is thus worthwhile quoting Hitler's proclamation on the outset of this campaign:

Soldiers on the Eastern Front! Burdened with grave worries, obliged to months-long silence, the hour has now come, at which I can speak candidly to you, my soldiers. ... Never has the German people harboured any hostile feelings against the peoples of Russia. Only since the last two decades has the Jewish-Bolshevist leadership in Moscow attempted to not only set Germany on fire but all of Europe. It was not Germany that brought its national socialist world view to Russia but the Jewish-Bolshevist leadership in Moscow which has tried incessantly to impose their regime on our and the other European peoples, and this not only in spirit but in terms of power. ... Now the time has come where any further looking on would not only be a sinful lapse but a crime against the German

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struggle of world history" in his speech of 3 October 1941 in Berlin's sport palace – remarkably his first speech since May 1941 – characterizing the "preventive war" now under way in order to crush world Jewry. See Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936-1945: Nemesis*, 431f.

<sup>12</sup> On the pre-1941 ambivalence Nazi-Propaganda about Bolshevism, see Gerd Koenen, *Der Russland-Komplex. Die Deutschen und der Osten (1900-1945)* (München: C.H. Beck, 2005), esp. 411-435.

<sup>13</sup> To borrow the apt phrase from the title of Jeffrey Herf's, *Divided Memory*.

people, yes against all of Europe. ... At this moment, soldiers on the Eastern Front, an invasion is under way which in its extent and scope is the greatest the world has ever seen. ... German soldiers! With this you enter a tough fight burdened with responsibility. Because: *The fate of Europe, the future of the German Reich, the existence of our people, now lay in your hand alone.* May God help us all in this struggle!<sup>14</sup>

As the Hitler biographer Ian Kershaw has shown, not only Wehrmacht troops could be motivated by such reasoning at the dawn of the Soviet Union's invasion. Active Nazis, most among the non-Nazi elite, and a majority of the population supported this "most destructive and barbaric war in history" after the initial shock among ordinary people was overcome.<sup>15</sup>

The central argument with which the regime justified the invasion of the Soviet Union was that of a preventive war.<sup>16</sup> While it has been argued that Hitler and his propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels (1897-1945) actually believed in the necessity to fight a preventive war against the USSR before it would overrun and destroy Western Europe,<sup>17</sup> official announcements following June 22, 1941 indicate that the Nazi leadership was aware of the fact, that the general population needed to be convinced of the argument of a preventive war. On June 23, one day after the invasion had started, Goebbels instructed the Reich's journalists in a secret meeting to "intensively deal with the criminal Bolshevik double game which has provoked the overwhelming mobilization

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<sup>14</sup> "Hitler's speech to the 'Soldiers on the Eastern Front'", June 22, 1941, quoted in Ibid. „*Unternehmen Barbarossa*“, 319-323 [emphasis in original]. This speech was distributed via 800,000 leaflets among German soldiers, and was identical with the official proclamation by the Führer to the German people read by propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels and broadcast on national radio on Sunday, June 22, 1941, 5:30 am. See Wolfram Wette, „Die propagandistische Begleitmusik,“ 50f.

<sup>15</sup> Ian Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936-1945: Nemesis*, 388f.

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed discussion and analysis of the preventive war lie see Pietrow-Ennker, ed., *Präventivkrieg?* A comprehensive overview of the debate surrounding the preventive war theory was provided by Gerd R. Ueberschär and Lev A. Bezymenski, eds., *Der deutsche Überfall auf die Sowjetunion. Die Kontroverse um die Präventivkriegsthese* (Darmstadt: Primus, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936-1945: Nemesis*, 399.

of the German million-men army from the North Cape to the Black Sea.” To Goebbels this was of immense importance since, as a consequence of the invasion’s secrecy, “the inner preparation of the German people for this turnaround [*Wende*]” could not have started earlier.<sup>18</sup> The master narrative of the war on the Eastern Front thus was basically a construction of untruths.

Its second central feature was a sense of (racial) superiority which compelled most in the Nazi elite to believe in, and many in the German population to hope for, a quick and complete victory over the Red Army. Falsification and arrogance were the two main sentiments sustaining the Wehrmacht attack against the Soviet Union in the name of the German people – both elements were not new to Nazi policies, but their propagandistic exhilaration in 1941 set the stage for the all-or-nothing struggle in the East: Germany would either win or perish.

Thus, the severity of the military setbacks on the Eastern Front over the course of the following four years was aggrandized by the initial optimism, arrogance, and sense of righteousness within many parts of the German elite, the military, and among ordinary people. Playing on a German saying brings this insight to the point: “the higher you rise, the further you fall (*Hochmut kommt vor dem Fall*).” Despite the fact that in June 1941 Germans were unenthusiastic about a new front in the East, there existed a firm if skeptical optimism that this war was justified, necessary, and ultimately winnable for Germany. This view was held not only by the Nazi elites, but also by the military and

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<sup>18</sup> Wette, „Die propagandistische Begleitmusik,“ 53.

German populace as a whole. From the first day of “Operation Barbarossa,” the Eastern Front became the decisive and most-watched front of the entire war within Germany.<sup>19</sup>

The extent to which the German nation believed in this invasion thus determined the extent of disappointment, disillusionment and despair once “final victory” seemed out of reach, especially after the disaster of Stalingrad in the winter of 1942/43. During the initial weeks, several Nazi leaders claimed internally as well as publicly that the defeat of the Soviet Union would happen in a matter of weeks, or months at most. To make sure that this optimism was conveyed properly to the public, Goebbels also told reporters during the secret June 22 meeting, that the war on the Eastern Front would be over within eight weeks.<sup>20</sup> Already a week after the attack, on June 29, 1941, Goebbels launched a “day of special announcements” on national radio. Twelve messages were read throughout that Sunday, reporting rapid progress and implying that victory was around the corner. Each special announcement was introduced by the “Russian Fanfare” based on Franz Liszt’s “Hungarian Rhapsody.”<sup>21</sup> Hitler himself told Goebbels during a meeting at Fuhrer Headquarters (FHQ) on July 8, 1941 that “the war in the East was in the main already won.”<sup>22</sup> Less than a week earlier, Army Chief of Staff Franz Halder, noted in his diary with the same certainty: “It is ... probably no overstatement to say that the Russian campaign has been won in the space of two weeks.” Only “the sheer geographical

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<sup>19</sup> Reading through the *Meldungen aus dem Reich* of the SS’ *Sicherheitsdienst* from June 1941 on, it can be discerned that what most Germans cared about in those war years were their loved ones fighting or missing on the Eastern Front, the allied bombings of German cities and towns, the resulting daily deprivations, and many were reported to have expressed a numbed longing for peace. See Heinz Boberach, ed., *Meldungen aus dem Reich. Auswahl aus den geheimen Lageberichten des Sicherheitsdienstes der SS, 1939-1944* (Neuwied, Berlin: Luchterhand, 1965), 155-525.

<sup>20</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936-1945: Nemesis*, 422.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 398.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

vastness of the country and the stubbornness of the resistance ... will claim our efforts for many more weeks to come.”<sup>23</sup>

When reviewing what the National Socialist movement had promised and proclaimed since the mid-1920s, it becomes clear that German public was not unreasonable to believe that the victory over the Soviet forces would be an easy undertaking. The Nazi program was one of openly propagated aggression and candid threats against its neighbors to the East in particular. The so-called “theory of living space” was based on the invasion and exploitation of these territories, which in Nazi jargon were to be “returned into the Reich” (*Heim ins Reich!*). Moreover, those supposedly threatening Germany’s very existence, the “Jewish-Bolshevist plutocrats” and “conspirators,” had to be annihilated if the German people was to survive and flourish again. The criminal intent of any action against Poland and the Soviet Union was thus obvious for everyone to see and hear during the years of the Nazis’ rise to power and after.<sup>24</sup> Resulting from these years of effective Nazi propaganda was a widespread “basic feeling of a sinister menace” threatening Germany.<sup>25</sup> This sense of being threatened, in the beginning, prevented most Germans from protesting Hitler’s politics of open aggression, and, in the end, contributed decisively to the mentality of perseverance until the total

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 399.

<sup>24</sup> See for example the classic Martin Broszat, *Hitler and the Collapse of Weimar Germany* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987). And Eberhard Jäckel, *Hitler’s worldview*. Most recently Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, vol. 4. And Rafael Seligmann, *Die Deutschen und ihr Führer* (München: Ullstein, 2004). One of the first to argue for the interrelatedness of Hitler’s military and racial goals was Lucy Dawidowicz, *The War against the Jews*. Two excellent case studies illustrate the dissemination of Nazi ideas in the Reich: Geoffrey Pridham, *Hitler’s Rise to Power: The Nazi Movement in Bavaria, 1923-1933* (London: Mac Gibbon, 1973). William Sheridan Allen, *The Nazi Seizure of Power: The Experience of a Single German Town, 1930-1935* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1965).

<sup>25</sup> Pätzold, “Antibolschewismus und Antikommunismus,” 135. (In Pätzold’s words a “*Grundgefühl einer unheimlichen Bedrohung*”).

defeat and destruction of the German Reich.<sup>26</sup> In the summer of 1941, to many “*Volksgenossen*” the time had come to “do away with Russia in one stroke,” as the SD reported on June 23, 1941: people were “proud that Hitler has discovered the real intentions of Russia and England.” “If Germany lets the weapons speak now, then this was a necessary conclusion in order to destroy the plans and machinations of the real enemies. Now the great war-machine ... stands ready, later it might have turned out more difficult to annihilate a stronger-growing enemy for good.”<sup>27</sup> Even if the SD reports to some extent also carried the official party line, the essence of these reports spoke to a prevailing popular sense of a righteous war in the East.

The first “winter-crisis” of 1941/42 which found the *Wehrmacht* stuck in the harsh Russian winter before Moscow, soon dampened this optimism of the Nazi leadership and confirmed the nonetheless skeptical, war-weary mood on the home front; it offered a glimpse of what was to come. With the push towards the Caucasian oilfields and the city with the emblematic name Stalingrad, the *Wehrmacht*’s renewed offensive in the summer of 1942 prepared the stage for an unprecedented propaganda campaign first exhilarating, and then bemoaning the heroic fight and sacrifice of hundreds of thousand German soldiers at Stalingrad.

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<sup>26</sup> On this sense of threat see Jeffrey Herf, “‘Der Krieg und die Juden.’ Nationalsozialistische Propaganda im Zweiten Weltkrieg,” in Jörg Echternkamp, ed., *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, vol. 9/2: „Die Deutsche Kriegsgesellschaft 1939-1945: Ausbeutung, Deutungen, Ausgrenzung“ (München: dva, 2005), 159-202.

<sup>27</sup> SD-Report no. 196, 23 June 1941, in Boberach, ed., *Meldungen aus dem Reich*, 156.

## THE SAGA OF STALINGRAD

Unlike prior to “Operation Barbarossa” in 1941, the Nazi regime prepared Germany propagandistically for the summer-offensive “Operation Blue” launched on June 28, 1942. One of the most important consequences of the preceding “winter crisis” was that Hitler fired his commander-in-chief, General Field Marshall Walther von Brauchitsch, and took over army command on December 19, 1941. Now, after the alleged failure of the army command, Hitler himself claimed to lead Germany towards final victory in the East. On March 15, 1942, Hitler had returned to Berlin from Fuhrer Headquarters (FHQ) to attend the Heroes’ Memorial Day ceremony. During his speech in which he once again blamed the “Jewish-capitalist world conspirators” for the war, the Fuhrer declared the approaching end of Bolshevist Russia: “The Bolshevik hordes, which were unable to defeat the German soldiers and their allies this winter, will be beaten by us into annihilation this coming summer.”<sup>28</sup> Again, this proclamation flatly denied that the German troops were the aggressors; rather, Hitler implied that the Wehrmacht had been attacked by “Bolshevik hordes,” remaining nonetheless invincible. The legend of the Wehrmacht defending itself on Soviet territory was put in place much earlier than its epic climax at Stalingrad occurred. The seeds for the saga of Stalingrad were sown well before the drive towards the Caucasus began. Simultaneously, with that speech and in other public announcements expectations were raised so high, that ordinary Germans once again became convinced that, this time, the offensive would bring an end to the campaign on the Eastern Front and with that final victory was in reach. Not surprisingly, once the

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<sup>28</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936-1945: Nemesis*, 506.

offensive was under way people hoped for larger military triumphs: “The events on the Eastern Front are followed with much interest and at many places in hopeful expectation of reports about imminent greater successes.”<sup>29</sup>

The regime, however, was wise enough to not only prepare its people for immanent victories thereby raising the public mood in the Reich, but to also challenge the *Volksgemeinschaft*’s perseverance and resolve in the war effort. Now, there was no talk of a fast-won offensive; rather, Nazi leaders appealed to Germany’s strength, resolution and hidden potentials in case another winter would have to be fought through. During a speech to the Reichstag on April 26, 1942 (a Sunday) – the last time it was called into session in the Third Reich – Hitler recalled the “triumph of the will” shown during the first war winter on the Eastern Front, indicating that people and army must be prepared to fight through another winter in the East.<sup>30</sup> Hitler again made clear that, ultimately, “we Germans only have to win everything in this struggle for being or not being [*Ringen um Sein oder Nichtsein*], because losing this war would be our end anyway.”<sup>31</sup>

By mid-1942, over one million soldiers were either dead, missing or injured on the Eastern Front – almost one third of the troops that had entered the Soviet Union just a year earlier; only about 50 percent could be replaced with substitute troops. When “Operation Blue” started in late June 1942, the Wehrmacht was already weakened

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<sup>29</sup> SD-Report no. 302, 23 July 1941, in Boberach, ed., *Meldungen aus dem Reich*, 270.

<sup>30</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936-1945: Nemesis*, 510. The speech is reproduced in Max Domarus, ed., *Hitler: Reden und Proklamationen, 1932-1945, vol. 2: Der Untergang* (Wiesbaden: Domarus, 1963), 1865-1876. At great length, Hitler thanked the “superhuman effectiveness and strength of will” of infantry soldiers and officer corps and connected the sacrifices of the 1941/42 winter crisis with the necessity for even more intensive preparedness for the upcoming winter on the Eastern Front: “The test that this [last] winter has put on the front and the homeland shall be also a lesson for all of us.” Ibid, 1872f.

<sup>31</sup> Domarus, ed., *Hitler: Reden und Proklamationen*, vol. 2, 1876.



significantly, and reports of high casualties started to reach and affect the home front. In addition, the air-war over German cities caused death and devastation; on May 30, 1942, Cologne had been bombed to ruins by Allied air-planes. It is before this background that the Caucasian offensive must be viewed. Stalingrad itself, an industrial city of one million inhabitants over 1,300 miles east of Berlin, did not make it into national news and radio broadcasts until August 1942. But once it became clear that Soviet and German forces would concentrate around that city, the symbolism of its name already bestowed this coming battle with a spell of destiny being decided there. Yet, having learned the lessons of the previous winter, Hitler and Goebbels gave explicit instructions to the propaganda apparatus and newspaper organizations to exercise restraint in the reporting about the battle for Stalingrad. This time, “no propaganda of illusion” was the order of the day.<sup>32</sup> Rather, reports “were to emphasize the bitterness of the fighting and the bravery of the German soldier. Stalingrad was to be referred to as a fortress which had to be stormed.”<sup>33</sup> Eventually, this “fortress” was heroically “defended” by German troops against the fiercely-fighting Russians who “are a type of swamp human and not European,” as Hitler raged during his Sports Palace speech on September 30, 1942 trying to explain why the Wehrmacht’s offensive has halted. Consequently, it was “more difficult for us,” he continued, “to advance in this muck than it is for those people born in the morass.”<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, the German war propaganda blamed the Soviet forces of being inhuman, even mad, in their fierce resistance. It claimed that the “Bolsheviks refused to

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<sup>32</sup> Such was the title of a Goebbels order (*Propagandaparole No. 32: Keine Illusionspropaganda*) to his staff dated 22 May 1942. Quoted in Baird, “The myth of Stalingrad,” 189.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in ibid, 190.

realize when a struggle was useless, and continued to fight to the last man.”<sup>35</sup> The Nazis turned their own ruthless, fanatical fighting spirit on the Red Army, thereby transferring and aggrandizing the sense of a real “barbarization of warfare”<sup>36</sup> which characterized the war on the Eastern Front like no other battle of the war. In this logic, “Stalingrad represented the quintessence of the Soviet contempt for the human race.”<sup>37</sup> Newspaper accounts in Germany indeed depicted the ferocious battle in the city as the most brutal test of the German soldier’s courage. On October 1, 1942, the popular *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* ran a large front-page photograph showing two Wehrmacht soldiers caught in street-to-street fight amidst the ruins of Stalingrad. The caption rhapsodized as follows:

In a struggle of unprecedented harshness, German infantry fights its way deeper and deeper into the heart of the city of Stalingrad. They move from crater to crater, take street by street. The enemy defends himself doggedly, numerous buildings are converted into bunkers, and shots churn from the ruins, from the factory roofs and water towers; smoke and fume darken the skies. A gigantic struggle.<sup>38</sup>

The *Völkische Beobachter* continuously portrayed the fights in and around Stalingrad as “heroic battle of our soldiers” against an enemy who is “fighting until his self-annihilation.”<sup>39</sup> In November, a sequel report informed readers of the *Völkische Beobachter* about the daily hardship of the “pioneers before Stalingrad.” The opening article addressed the readers directly in order to create a virtual community of suffering between front and homeland:

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 191.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Bartov, *The Eastern Front, 1941-1945*.

<sup>37</sup> Baird, „The myth of Stalingrad,“ 191.

<sup>38</sup> *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung*, October 1, 1942, 1. Quoted in Peter Jahn, ed., *Stalingrad erinnern. Stalingrad im deutschen und russischen Gedächtnis* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2003), 40.

<sup>39</sup> *Völkischer Beobachter*, Norddeutsche Ausgabe, September 18, 1942, 1.

Do you at home know what sleep is? Do you know the sleep which counts by minutes? Can you imagine that for weeks, for months now, we are sleeping with open eyes, because we don't have time to close our eyes?<sup>40</sup>

The instructions to emphasize and dramatize the fierceness of the fights, to portray German soldiers as the “defenders of Stalingrad” while Goebbels simultaneously gave orders to avoid purveying the impression of an impending victory, were well-calculated. The astute observer Victor Klemperer (1881-1960), a Jewish-born scholar of comparative literature who lived in the *Judenhaus* in Dresden since 1942, commented on this propaganda strategy in his diary with the following words: “Regarding the reports from the OKW, I ‘coined’ the word: In Stalingrad we took another two-bedroom-apartment with bathroom in tough hand-to-hand combat.”<sup>41</sup> Moreover, just as the Wehrmacht was struggling to take Stalingrad, the home front was to remain steadfast in light of intensified Allied air-raids over German cities: the fact that the war came closer to the German home front made Hitler believe that the bombings would help “wake up the population to the realities of war.” Such was his cynical private reaction to the nightly raids destroying parts of Munich, Bremen, Düsseldorf and Duisburg in the late summer of 1942.<sup>42</sup>

Publicly, however, the propaganda campaign changed dramatically by the beginning of December which in turn contributed greatly to the growing sense of uncertainty and anxiety in the Reich. From the tremolo of the heroic fight for Stalingrad news reports abruptly shifted focus to the African theatre, where the Allies had landed on November 9,

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<sup>40</sup> *Völkischer Beobachter*, Norddeutsche Ausgabe, November 26, 1942, 6.

<sup>41</sup> Victor Klemperer, *Ich will Zeugnis ablegen bis zum letzten. Tagebücher 1933-1945*, vol. 5: 1942 (Berlin: Aufbau, 1999), 255.

<sup>42</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936-1945: Nemesis*, 535.

1942. After taking up the front pages for months, leaving the reader in anticipation of an immanent showdown between the two armies, the news from the Eastern Front were relegated to a few lines on the last pages by early December.<sup>43</sup> This sudden official silence over an obviously dramatic and costly battle, whose end and outcome was still uncertain, was a crucial ingredient of the Stalingrad saga. The regime left the public with a clear sense that a catastrophe was about to happen – there was word of a “second Verdun” – and more and more people demanded information about the fate of the 300,000 men fighting in the Sixth Army.<sup>44</sup>

On Christmas Eve 1942 people were glued to the radio. In a faked link-up with the “front on the Volga” Germans were called on to join the soldiers in singing “Silent Night,” unaware that on that day alone 1,280 German soldiers had died. With the preceding shift well before Christmas Eve to silence and negligence about the events on the Eastern Front, another aspect entered the NS propaganda campaign: concealment of the facts, and outward lies about the state of the fights at Stalingrad. No one knew how many soldiers were actually fighting in the city. The fact that the Sixth Army was completely encircled by the Soviet troops since November 22, 1942 was hidden from the public for weeks. Only in January 1943, when rumors spread of growing casualties, starving and freezing men running out of supplies, another major shift was undertaken heralding the ultimate master narrative, or better: saga, which the National Socialists created around the Stalingrad disaster. On the tenth anniversary of Hitler’s assumption of

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<sup>43</sup> Baird, “The myth of Stalingrad,” 191.

<sup>44</sup> See for example SD-Report no. 328, October 22, 1942, in Boberach, ed., *Meldungen aus dem Reich*, 313. And again documented in SD-Report no. 344, December 17, 1942, in *ibid*, 326.

power, January 30, 1943, newspapers were full of dramatic accounts of the heroic battle German soldiers were fighting to the last man. In the Berliner *12 Uhr Blatt* the front page headline in red, bold letters read: "Fighting, working, triumphing, and never capitulating!" Under a drawing depicting German soldiers storming up a mound towards a Soviet tank, the message to the German people was clear: this fight was to be won, or the Sixth Army would face complete destruction.

Virulent resistance rises from the ruins of Stalingrad. Our will: victory at any price! War with a global reach and intention will never be won with half or even lukewarm measures. He who marshals against a superior enemy that has proclaimed to annihilate the people, is well-advised to armor his heart with a steely belt of faith and courage wherever he may be on duty. With a matchless, heroic willingness to sacrifice, the soldier at the front fights the onrush of the enemy. Far distant from the Reich's borders, he fulfils his duty as he has sworn to the Führer. When the colossal tanks storm against the trenches and grenades slash the soil to shreds, when the masses of the attacking infantry wallow over the ground and the bombs mash the fields, then the private leaps forward to challenge to powers of annihilation. Wherever a German soldier bears his weapon against the enemy, there Germany stands by his side. The home front works tirelessly to produce canons and grenades. An endless stream of weapons rolls relentlessly to the front. Front and homeland march hooked together. Struggle and work of the entire people are aimed at the same goal, which we will achieve because we have to achieve it: victory at any cost!<sup>45</sup>

Two days later, the Sixth Army capitulated to the Red Army, the remaining 110,000 soldiers went into Soviet captivity.<sup>46</sup> The above quoted newspaper report encapsulates the main themes of the saga of Stalingrad. The heroic fight, again, was none of aggression but defense in the eyes of an enemy who set out to "annihilate" the German people. Why and how the Wehrmacht got to Stalingrad, and why this city had to be defended against Soviet troops, was never a point of discussion. It is important to note that this view of a

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<sup>45</sup> *12 Uhr Blatt* of the *Neue Berliner Zeitung*, January 30, 1943, 1 [Emphasis in original], quoted in Jahn, ed., *Stalingrad erinnern*, 41.

<sup>46</sup> Roughly 195,000 German soldier were encircled by the Red Army, about 25,000 injured were flown out, 60,000 died in the city, the rest, 110,000, went into captivity. After the war about 5000 (2.5 percent of the encircled, or 4.5 percent of those taken captive returned home). See Overmans, *Soldaten hinter Stacheldraht*, 38. As a comparison, the victory at Stalingrad cost the Red Army 500,000 lives, 651,000 Soviet soldiers were injured. See Richard Overy, *Russia's War* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 227, fn. 60.

military tragedy happening for no obvious reason, somewhat “out there in the blue,” was one to stick in the collective memory of the Eastern Front in postwar Germany.

Particularly in West German memory, the battle of Stalingrad for decades would embody the senseless and bloody suffering of the brave German soldier during World War II.

A second theme, depicted in the above report, is that of the *Schicksalsgemeinschaft* – a community of fate – between homeland and front. Indeed, the German home-front was preoccupied with events in the East. Stalingrad became the “psychological turning-point” of the war.<sup>47</sup> After the second “winter crisis” 1942/43, confidence in the Fuhrer was severely eroded, the bond between the people and its Fuhrer began to dissolve, the Hitler-myth, while still intact, was severely battered. “The German people’s love affair with Hitler was at an end. Only the bitter process of divorce remained.”<sup>48</sup>

After weeks of “ominous silence”<sup>49</sup> about the real situation in Stalingrad following the counter-offensive of the Soviet side on November 19, 1942, the Nazi propaganda machine had to react swiftly once the total defeat of the Sixth Army could no longer be kept secret. Rumors about the catastrophic conditions of the encircled soldiers reached

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<sup>47</sup> Quote from Marlis Steinert, „Stalingrad und die deutsche Gesellschaft,” 182. For the public perception of Stalingrad as turning point during and after the war see Kroener, „’Nun Volk, steh auf...!’ and “Bernd Ulrich, “Stalingrad,” in Francois, Schulze, eds., *Deutsche Erinnerungsorte*, vol. 2, 332-348. Bernd Wegner, “Der Mythos ‘Stalingrad’ (19. November 1942 – 2. Februar 1943),“ in Gerd Krumeich and Susanne Brandt, eds., *Schlachtenmythen. Ereignis - Erzählung – Erinnerung* (Köln: Böhlau, 2004), 183-197. And Wolfram Wette, „Der Mythos einer Schlacht,” *Die Zeit*, 58 (2003), 12.

For a discussion of the real strategic impact of the defeat at Stalingrad on the course of the war see Gerd R. Ueberschär, „Stalingrad – Eine Schlacht des Zweiten Weltkrieges,” in Wette, Ueberschär, eds, *Stalingrad*, 18-42.

<sup>48</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936-1945: Nemesis*, 557. See also Ian Kershaw, *The “Hitler-Myth:” Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), therein esp. part two “The Breaking of the ‘Hitler Myth’, 1940-1945,” 149-225.

<sup>49</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936-1945: Nemesis*, 547.

Germany via front letters and word-of-mouth from soldiers on furlough.<sup>50</sup> On January 16, 1943, the Wehrmacht report for the first time used a wording from which one could infer that defeat was imminent. The men were fighting “a heroically courageous defensive struggle against the enemy attacking from all sides.”<sup>51</sup> After General Friedrich Paulus (1890-1957), commander of the Sixth Army, had rejected a Soviet offer to surrender, the Red Army started a new offensive on January 10, 1943. Unable to check the Soviet onslaught, Paulus wired to Hitler that the situation was hopeless. Hitler replied surrender was no option, fighting must continue to the last man. On January 31, Paulus surrendered part of his troops, the last battles continued until February 2, 1943, when the Sixth Army was fully defeated. During the last week of January the Wehrmacht reports finally admitted the encirclement, and utter defeat was instantaneously turned into victory: the German armies, the report concluded, had won eternal honor for their heroic and sacrificial struggle.<sup>52</sup>

The mythical embellishment of this costly military disaster – the extent of cynicism and disregard for human life reflected in the sources remains inconceivable – was not only the product of Goebbels’ propaganda apparatus but originated also in the high echelons of the *Wehrmacht*, as the above-mentioned January reports show. The master narrative of the battle of Stalingrad was to serve two functions. First, self-sacrifice for the Führer and fatherland promised eternal victory even if one was to die in a lost military

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<sup>50</sup> A collection of last letters from Stalingrad was published soon after the war: *Letzte Briefe aus Stalingrad* (Frankfurt/Main and Heidelberg, 1950). See also Thomas A. Kohut and Jürgen Reulecke, „’Sterben wie eine Ratte, die der Bauer ertappt.’ Letzte Briefe aus Stalingrad,“ in Förster, ed., *Stalingrad*, 456-471. And Rüdiger Overmans, „Das andere Gesicht des Krieges: Leben und Sterben der 6. Armee“, in *ibid*, 419-455.

<sup>51</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936-1945: Nemesis*, 548.

<sup>52</sup> Baird, „The myth of Stalingrad,“ 196.

conflict. The notion that soldiers had “died so that Germany may live” – such was the title of *Völkischer Beobachter* on February 4, 1943 – constituted the Nazified version of the old Christian narrative of ultimate redemption.<sup>53</sup> During his speech on January 30, 1943 (dubbed “*Leichenrede*” among the embattled Stalingrad soldiers), Commander-in-Chief of the Airforce Hermann Göring (1893-1946) had introduced the “metaphysical aspects” of the drama. Borrowing heavily from religious vocabulary, he referred to Hitler as a “man sent by God,” and proclaimed his “holy” and “indestructible belief in Germany’s victory,” in the “justice of the Almighty [*Allmacht*].”<sup>54</sup> The Nazis’ ambiguous approach towards Christianity, rejecting traditional religion while embracing an Aryan religiosity, manifested in the quasi-religious aesthetization of the sacrifices at Stalingrad: they symbolized the “mission here and now, for utopian ends on earth.” The Stalingrad saga became one of the “substitutes for the futility of earthly existence and the majesty of God” the Nazis created in order to replace traditional Christianity.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Kumpfmüller instead stresses the historical “myth-making” after Stalingrad with the Nazis placing the battle into one line with historical battles such as the Battle of the Thermopylae (ca. 480 B.C. with the Greek loosing against the Persian troops of Xerxes I.) and the mythical last battle of the Nibelungen in Etzel’s castle. Cf. Kumpfmüller, *Die Schlacht von Stalingrad*, 53-80. Similarly, Wette, “Das Massensterben als ‘Heldenepos,’” 43-60.

<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Wette, “Das Massensterben als ‘Heldenepos,’” 53.

<sup>55</sup> Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich. A New History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 197. See the work of Susannah Heschel for the creation of “Aryan Christianity” as part of the Nazi project to create an “Aryan Germany.” Susannah Heschel, “Nazifying Christian Theology: Walter Grundmann and the Institute for the Study and Eradication of Jewish Influence on German Church Life,” *Church History*, vol. 63, no. 4 (Dec. 1994), 587-605. On the religious use of politics and political use of religion, see Juan J. Linz, “Der religiöse Gebrauch der Politik und/oder der politische Gebrauch der Religion. Ersatz-Ideologie gegen Ersatz-Religion,” in Hans Maier, ed., *Totalitarismus und Politische Religionen. Konzepte des Diktaturvergleichs. Vol. 1* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1996), 130-154, as well as the essays addressing National Socialism as political religion in the second volume of *Totalitarismus und Politische Religionen*.



**Fig. 1. Defeat at Stalingrad: “They Died So That Germany May Live”**  
(*Völkischer Beobachter*, February 4, 1943, 1).

Since military sacrifices had thus a higher meaning in Nazi Germany, the meaning of war had transformed as well. The meaning of going to war was not the defeat of the enemy, but the fighting itself. The designers of the saga of Stalingrad put the momentary defeat into the perspective of an ultimately victorious German destiny. Alfred Rosenberg (1893-1946), the chief ideologue of the Nazi party, proclaimed this historical legacy in an obituary for the “heroes of the Sixth Army” published on the front page of the *Völkische Beobachter* on February 4, 1943:

The German Reich emerged from the struggles, defeats and victories of the Germanic peoples. Not as a result of a treaty, not as a result of a so-called ‘development,’ but as a result of powerful conflicts with the preceding ruling forces of history. The German Kaiser, generals and statesmen had to endure many a difficult hour before they were able to realize part of what they envisioned. Many of them stepped in their graves without fulfillment and could only pass on the flag. We all stand in the greatest fight of the German people for its legacy in this war. We know many symbols of greatest soldierly devotion [*Soldatentum*], brave, quiet devotion – of thousands we cannot know yet.

But the battle that was fought far, far to the East on the river Volga will enter history as the greatest symbol of all times. That is heroism of the entirety [*Gesamtheit*], of a whole army, which already today we can recall only in reverence, which future centuries will retell in a way an allegorical national struggle has never been spoken of before.<sup>56</sup>

This was the – utterly irrational – Nazi version of Stalingrad as a “Hegelian moment”.

The forces of history culminated in this historic sacrifice, overshadowing not only humanity’s past struggles, but foreshadowing the dawn of the Germanic empire.

The second function of the Nazi master narrative of Stalingrad was to prepare and inspire the German military and homeland for the upcoming fights in the war. Moreover, it served to underscore the urge for every German to become even more dedicated and determined in the fight for final victory. As Rosenberg’s history lesson indicated, Stalingrad was just one, albeit a very important, milestone on the path towards erecting the German Millennial Reich. Accordingly, propaganda minister Goebbels kicked off the campaign for “total war” right after the “heroic” doom of the Sixth Army at Stalingrad. In order to fully instrumentalize the magnitude of the defeat, and to exploit the shock and awe of the moment, the Nazi master narrative used the battle of Stalingrad as the initiating spark of the campaign towards total mobilization and ultimate radicalization of the war effort.

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<sup>56</sup> *Völkischer Beobachter*, February 4, 1943, 1, quoted in Jahn, ed., *Stalingrad erinnern*, 42.

## “TOTAL WAR” OR THE “IDEOLOGY OF SELF-DESTRUCTION”

Stalingrad can be defined as an indirect “collective trauma”<sup>57</sup> in more than a metaphorical sense. According to the sociological definition, “collective trauma” constitutes a “blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of community.”<sup>58</sup> The battle of Stalingrad was an indirect trauma because most Germans were either distant witnesses to the event, or more closely involved emotionally because of relatives fighting on the Eastern Front, or even in Stalingrad itself. The term “collective trauma” is useful because it encapsulates a shared life-altering experience entailing long-term psychological and

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<sup>57</sup> Though the French historian Marc Bloch has warned that it is unwise to borrow a term from psychology and extent it with the word „collective“ (cited Joanna Bourke, “Remembering War”, 473), I want to introduce this phrase in the context of Stalingrad. The use of the concept of “trauma” as historical category, for example in connection with Holocaust experiences, has been discussed widely in recent years. See Dominick LaCapra, *History in Transit. Experience, Identity, Critical Theory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), esp. his chapter on history and psychoanalysis. See also his “Trauma, Absence, Loss,” *Critical Inquiry* 25 (1999), 696-727, and his *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

<sup>58</sup> Kai T. Erickson, *A New Species of Trouble: The Human Experience of Modern Disasters* (New York: Norton, 1994), 233. It is important to note that this definition is not just the collective version of an individual trauma or traumatic stress. Academic trauma research has agreed on a number of criteria that characterize individual trauma respectively traumatic stress, and it is not my intention to appropriate this clinical definition on a collective social phenomenon. Individuals suffer of traumatic stress after having experienced (or witnessed) a life-threatening event that imposed on them a feeling of intense fear, helplessness and/or horror. Most people react to such an event in a way that incorporates this experience into their lives, they cope with it some way or the other. Some, however, develop symptoms of post-traumatic stress (PTSD): “Despite the human capacity to survive and adapt, traumatic experiences can alter people’s psychological, biological, and social equilibrium to such a degree that the memory of one particular event comes to taint all other experiences, spoiling appreciation of the present. This tyranny of the past interferes with the ability to pay attention to both new and familiar situations.” See Bessel A. van der Kolk, Alexander McFarlane and Lars Weisaeth, eds., *Traumatic Stress. The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society* (New York: Guilford Press, 1996), 4. It can thus only be in a metaphorical sense that I apply the term “trauma” to the Germans’ experience, or rather distant witnessing of the battle of Stalingrad. On some level, the Nazis have succeeded in making people believe that their very existence depended on the outcome of the war on the Eastern Front, yet this remained – despite the real threats to life during air raids or expulsions – more of a metaphorical threat to most Germans, and even after the Russians overran Eastern Germany, at least to the West German population. The “tyranny of the past” likewise might serve as an apt description of the collective psychological legacy of the battle of Stalingrad.

social consequences which hardly anyone could escape. Its impact was amplified by the way the Nazi regime exploited the disaster in the weeks and months to follow. But to dwell on the above-cited definition a little further, both fundamental consequences of the collective experience of disaster can be observed in the German “post-Stalingrad society.” First, the basic tissues of social life, namely the feeling of a bond between the members of the *Volksgemeinschaft*, dissolved after the “winter crisis” 1942/43, provided one grants the National Socialist project of a socio-racial community a certain success.<sup>59</sup> Seclusion, apathy and resignation were common attributes for the mood among the population during the last two and a half war years.<sup>60</sup> Wehler even dates the beginning of the “denazification” of ordinary Germans to the Stalingrad crisis. At that point, the “inner retreat” from the Third Reich began, and by the end of the war most people were disillusioned, many de-ideologized, preoccupied with the individual and familial survival.<sup>61</sup> Secondly, the battle of Stalingrad can be viewed as a passive “collective trauma” because its catastrophic outcome – paradoxically – not only “impaired” the

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<sup>59</sup> Norbert Frei has maintained that there was indeed something like a “communal identity,” at least between the years 1938 and 1943: “Gewiss bedurfte die Idee der Volksgemeinschaft fortwährend der Aktualisierung. Aber sie war deshalb keine Schimäre. In der reduzierten politischen und gesellschaftlichen Bandbreite, die nach Ausschaltung von Juden und Linken aus dem öffentlichen Leben und ihrer teilweisen Emigration verblieben war, hatte sich bis 1938 so etwas wie eine neue volksgemeinschaftliche Identität entwickelt und verfestigt. Davon und vom Nimbus des ‚Führers‘ zehrte das Regime bis weit in die zweite Hälfte des Krieges hinein.“ Frei, „Der totale Krieg und die Deutschen,“ 290f. Similarly, Wehler has recently described Nazism in terms of a consensual dictatorship in which the Führer could rely on a broad consensus basis among the people. see Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, vol. 4., 675f. One reason for this broad consensual basis was the newly won social security in the wake of Hitler’s socio-economic policies; this sense of security was a crucial ingredient of the utopia *Volksgemeinschaft*, and the domestic agenda attached to these policies had eminent “suggestive powers.” Ibid, 681. Finally, Kershaw showed that the Führer-myth could not have existed without a perceived “national community” for Hitler was believed to be its personification; he embodied the nation and the *Volksgemeinschaft*’s unity. Kershaw, *The Hitler-Myth*, 253.

<sup>60</sup> Marlis Steinert, *Hitler’s War and the Germans. Public Mood and Attitude during the Second World War* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1977), chapter 3 “Total War,” 325-392. And Steinert, “Stalingrad und die deutsche Gesellschaft,” 182.

<sup>61</sup> Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, vol. 4., 930.

German *Volksgemeinschaft*'s "sense of community" but it also endowed German society with a new sense of belonging together. Only now, Germans were bonded together by a common destiny into a community of fate, a *Schicksalsgemeinschaft*. Thus, the *Volksgemeinschaft* lived on, was even reinforced by the collective experience of disaster. In the postwar period, this sense of a shared suffering was indeed closely tied to the name Stalingrad.

Concerned about the magnitude of the impact the news about the loss of an entire army would have on the general public, Goebbels designed a response that was to help Germans to cope with the trauma. On February 3, 1943, the propaganda minister gave full written instructions to the press outlining the regime's script for the national coping process.

The heroic battle of Stalingrad will become the greatest of all the heroic epics in German history. The German press has one of its greatest tasks before it. In the spirit of the special OKW communiqué to be issued later today, the press must report this stirring event, outshining every feat of heroism known to history, in such a manner that this sublime example of heroism, this ultimate, self-sacrificing dedication to Germany's final victory, will blaze forth like a sacred flame. The German nation, inspired by the deathless heroism of the men of Stalingrad, will draw even more powerfully than before on those spiritual and material forces which assure the nation of the victory it is now more fanatically than ever resolved to win.<sup>62</sup>

In a similar tone, the OKW's communiqué of the same day praised the sacrifice as existential to the entire campaign on the Eastern Front. The men of Stalingrad had "died so that Germany might live."<sup>63</sup> Because the soldiers had died *for* Germany, the German nation was now bound to this sacrifice for the eternal future.

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<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Baird, „The myth of Stalingrad,“ 198.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 199.

This was the atmosphere in which Goebbels launched the “Total War” campaign.<sup>64</sup> We know that the idea of “total war”-mobilization was born during the final months of the First World War, and that it had long been breeding in Goebbels’ head, but the defeat at Stalingrad was its actual “birth hour.”<sup>65</sup> The fact, that historiography retrospectively has proven this campaign an institutional and organizational failure,<sup>66</sup> is not of direct relevance to my argument. Rather, the “total war”-campaign, kicked off immediately after the Stalingrad disaster and inaugurating the fiercely anti-Jewish wartime propaganda claiming ever more boldly that a world-wide Jewish conspiracy was responsible for the war, is examined here for its impact on the emerging political memory.<sup>67</sup> It is crucial to notice that while the Goebbels speech of February 18, 1943 in the Sports Palace sought to instill the homeland with a strengthened, fanatical dedication to the war, the theme of “Stalingrad” disappeared completely from the public sphere on personal order from the Fuhrer. In the course of his long speech, Goebbels referred only once to the “stroke of fate” at Stalingrad:

I express me deep conviction that the German people was deep inside thoroughly refined by the stroke of fate at Stalingrad. It has looked into the war’s hard and merciless face, it now knows the brutal truth and is determined to go with the Fuhrer through thick and thin. [Bravo calls, strong applause].<sup>68</sup>

According to Hitler’s chief military historian, colonel Walter Scherff, the Fuhrer decided in early February 1943 that “there was no reason to refer publicly to the winter

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<sup>64</sup> On the propagandistic and practical measures for total mobilization see generally Eleanor Hancock, *The National Socialist Leadership and Total War, 1941-1945* (New York, St. Martin’s, 1991). Lothar Gruchmann, *Totaler Krieg: vom Blitzkrieg bis zur bedingungslosen Kapitulation* (München: DTV, 1991).

<sup>65</sup> Kroener, „Nun Volk, steh auf...!“, 159.

<sup>66</sup> See for example *ibid.*, 150-171. And Frei, „Der totale Krieg und die Deutschen.“

<sup>67</sup> Herf, “Der Krieg und die Juden.”

<sup>68</sup> Printed in Helmut Heiber, *Goebbels Reden, 1932-1945*, vol. 2 (Bindlach: Gondrom, 1991), 172-208. [My translation].

campaign 1942-43 ... especially regarding Stalingrad.”<sup>69</sup> This time, Hitler had been commander-in-chief and he feared that his prestige as a military leader would be severely damaged.

The “Total War” campaign was a substitute for the drama that had unfolded on the Eastern Front between September 1942 and February 1943. By that time, Bernd Wegner has recently argued, Hitler’s “ideology of self-destruction” was about to fully materialize and Stalingrad played a central part in the choreography of total defeat. Challenging conventional historiography, Wegner argues that Hitler had as early as November 1941 “realized that final victory was out of reach” and had turned to a self-destructive strategy, namely a “defense without strategy.”<sup>70</sup> He was determined to radicalize “his” war to the point of “almost complete destruction” for three reasons. First, war was the indispensable cover under which the extermination of the European Jews could be carried out. Second, by the end of 1941 the destruction caused by the war was already so immense that a diplomatic solution seemed impossible; thus, ending the war was a matter of life and death. Finally, Germans knew – in Göring’s words – “what threatened us all were we to weaken in this war ... On the Jewish question we are so committed that there is no escape for us at all.”<sup>71</sup> Knowledge or even just suspicion of mass crimes made the *Volksgemeinschaft* guilty by affiliation. Further, Wegner reminds us how crucial the ending of the First World War was in Hitler’s thinking, and that for

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<sup>69</sup> Quoted in Baird, „The myth of Stalingrad,” 200f.

<sup>70</sup> Bernd Wegner, „The ideology of self-destruction. Hitler and the choreography of defeat,” *Bulletin of the German Historical Institute London* 26, no. 2 (2004), 18-33, quote on 26. This is a controversial argument which diverges from the mainstream World War II historiography. It could be argued against Wegner, that in November 1941, before Pearl Harbor and the American entry into the war, military victory could still have been possible – given that much could go wrong for the allies.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 27.

him, if military victory was impossible, “moral victory” had to be achieved at all cost. The *idée fixe* that 1918 could happen again inspired Hitler’s determination to fight to the last breath. In this sense, “Stalingrad became a practice run for greater things to come.” Transforming the dead of Stalingrad into heroes, sorrow into pride, defeat into victory, the Stalingrad disaster became “the model for the later collective destruction of Germany.”<sup>72</sup> The Nazi leadership was well aware of the fact that the scorched-earth-tactics inflicted on Soviet territories would, in case of a military defeat, be turned back on Germany – unless the German *Volk* would destroy their country themselves as the infamous “Nero Orders” of March 1945 demanded.<sup>73</sup> As demonstrated in the analysis of the Nazi master narrative about Stalingrad, the war on the Eastern Front was fought according to a “choreography of collective self-annihilation,” if the annihilation of the enemy could not be achieved. In Hitler’s thinking, if life and victory was impossible, death and destruction were the “second-best solution.”<sup>74</sup>

Yet, once it became clear how deeply frustrated the German population was after the lost battle of Stalingrad, its central role was relativized. The “epic” was banned from the public sphere because in its immediate aftermath the spell of failure was too damaging to the Führer’s image. Only on a very limited level, memorialization of Stalingrad was nonetheless desired in the Third Reich. In the shadow of official silence, a sculpture resembling a memorial was created by Ernst Paul Hinckeldey and displayed in

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>73</sup> Printed in Martin Moll, ed., *‘Führer-Erlasse’ 1939-1945: Edition sämtlicher überlieferter, nicht im Reichsgesetzblatt abgedruckter, von Hitler während des Zweiten Weltkrieges schriftlich erteilter Direktiven aus den Bereichen Staat, Partei, Wirtschaft, Besatzungspolitik und Militärverwaltung* (Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 1997), 486f.

<sup>74</sup> Wegner, “The ideology of self-destruction,” 32.



the *Zeughaus* in Berlin during an exhibition dedicated to the “Fight in Central Russia” (opened by Hitler on “Heroes Memorial Day” in March 1943). The sculpture depicts a soldier holding the *Reichsflagge* in his left arm while struggling to remain standing. The stone on which he stands bears the word “STALINGRAD.” The same year also saw the coinage of a memorial medal “The heroic saga of Stalingrad” depicting two fighting soldiers and an injured and/or sleeping soldier to their feet.<sup>75</sup>

One year later, however, on the first anniversary of the battle, the propaganda ministry gave strict orders to avoid any discussion of the debacle. Throughout the remainder of the war authorities were instructed to intercept and destroy front letters and POW correspondence referring to Stalingrad.<sup>76</sup> The entire correspondence of German prisoners in Soviet POW camps was not transported to and from their relatives in Germany. The letters were first read, analyzed and then destroyed. Nonetheless, bureaucratic sloppiness allowed a few letters to reach their destination. These had a tremendous effect on the community of people who had missing or captured men on the Eastern Front. In 1943 and 1944, a letter by a POW named Heitz to his wife in Vienna stirred rumors and raised the hopes of thousands to receive notice from missing loved ones. The Heitz letter was copied and circulated as chain letter for months in the entire Reich, undermining the Nazis’ propaganda strategy. More importantly, this example implies the potential extent to which peoples’ hearts and minds were still glued to the events of the Stalingrad winter and the fate of the recently celebrated “fallen heroes.”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> For illustrations see Jahn, ed., *Stalingrad erinnern*, 50.

<sup>76</sup> Baird, „The myth of Stalingrad,“ 201.

<sup>77</sup> See Wette, „Das Massensterben als ‚Heldenepos,‘“ 59f.

The sudden shift from mythical aesthetization of the catastrophe – endowing the sacrifice at Stalingrad with the potential to inspire the mobilization for total war – to official silence was utterly absurd and might have added more than anything else to the longevity and emotional power of the memory of Stalingrad. Worse than stylizing a collective trauma into a national saga may only be the complete disregard of its existence.

## II. The “Other” Narratives of War

It may be difficult to assess the potential reach of alternative narratives of the war on the Eastern Front inside the Third Reich. Nevertheless, they existed. Some of their proponents, like the members of “White Rose,” paid with their lives; others, like the exiled communists around Paul Merker (1884-1969) in Mexico or the writer Thomas Mann (1875-1955) in the United States, used the freedom of speech guaranteed in their “new” homes to voice dissenting interpretations of the war against the Soviet Union and to denounce the crimes committed on the Eastern Front. Again others, such as the Moscow émigrés Walter Ulbricht and Wilhelm Pieck, sided with the Soviet Union’s anti-Hitler fight to the extent of complete submission, propagating the overthrow of the Nazi regime in order to pave the way for the planting of Stalinist socialism in Germany. Lastly, statesmen such as British Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill and U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt supported by American and British radio broadcasts and front leaflets offered a different story of Hitler’s war in the East – especially since their public denouncement of the killings of the European Jews in late 1942 – to illegal listeners of enemy radio stations in Germany and Wehrmacht soldiers on the front.

In the following paragraphs I will recapture these “other” narratives of war in order to demonstrate that alternative interpretations were *available* to Germans even before the

end of the war, albeit in a very limited form. This will allow us to trace the diverging post-war memories of the war on the Eastern Front to their roots and to ask why certain aspects of this invasion were remembered (the suffering of the German soldiers) while others were suppressed (the massive killing of civilians, especially Jews). If the memory of the war on the Eastern Front which so dramatically contains the main themes and contradictions of modern German memory – guilt and suffering, being perpetrator and becoming victim – can be traced and connected to its multiple roots it will also be possible to substantiate recent attempts to reassess the nature of German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*: For indeed, German memory was never characterized *only* by “silence”, “amnesia”, “denial”, “shame” or “trauma.”<sup>78</sup> Rather, as Confino and Fritzsche have recently argued, “polyphony seems to be the sound that characterizes German memory.” Collective memory, and in a narrower sense political memory too, can be best understood as conglomeration of “noises of the past,” a phrase that “takes the full measure of the evasions, silences, and tendentious emphases of memory work.”<sup>79</sup> The purpose of the following paragraphs is to point out that such evasions, silences and tendentious emphases were not merely the result of post-war political and ideological conflicts but that they were rooted in wartime propaganda and counterpropaganda interpretations of the events on the Eastern Front. It is this background before which the question how Germans “mastered their past,” in this case how they came to learn about

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<sup>78</sup> Alon Confino, Peter Fritzsche, eds., *The Work of Memory: New Directions for the Study of German Society and Culture*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 11. On *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in postwar Germany see also the critical overview by Robert G. Mueller, “What Has ‘Coming to Terms with the Past’ Meant in Post-World War II Germany? From History to Memory to the ‘History of Memory,’” *Central European History*, vol. 35, no. 2 (2002), 223-256.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

and realize the nature and dimension of the war against the Soviet Union, can be best examined. After all, mastering this past is not a “process that leads to reconciliation with Nazi crimes” but it is the “process of learning how to live with the realization that Nazi crimes are part of [one’s] history and identity.”<sup>80</sup>

#### INSIDE GERMANY: ANTI-NAZI PROPAGANDA AND THE WAR ON THE EASTERN FRONT

In a dictatorship, resistance is a matter of life and death. Consequently, dissenting voices are rarely to be heard. In the case of Nazi Germany, resistance to the regime was limited to all but a few hundred individuals originating in various sections of society: democrats, communists, clerics, military persons or ordinary people.<sup>81</sup> The overwhelming majority of Germans either actively collaborated or passively complied with the regime and indifferently watched the Nazis’ criminal blueprint unfold; resistance was offered by only a tiny minority. As Ian Kershaw has aptly phrased it, “the road to Auschwitz was built by hate, but paved with indifference.”<sup>82</sup>

The war on the Eastern Front was a war against “Jewish Bolshevism” aimed at the physical annihilation of both, the Jews of Europe and the Soviet Bolshevik state: this was

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>81</sup> For an overview of resistance to the NS-regime see Michael Balfour, *Withstanding Hitler in Germany, 1933-1945* (London, New York: Routledge, 1988). Hermann Graml, *Widerstand im Dritten Reich. Probleme, Ereignisse, Gestalten* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1994). David Clay Large, ed., *Contending with Hitler. Varieties of German resistance in the Third Reich* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Hans Mommsen, *Alternatives to Hitler: German Resistance to the Nazi order* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2003). And Peter Steinbach, Johannes Tuchel, eds., *Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, 1994).

<sup>82</sup> Ian Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich: Bavaria, 1933-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 277. See also Friedlander, *Nazi Germany and the Jews. Vol. I.*

Hitler's "essential war" [*"eigentlicher Krieg"*].<sup>83</sup> Military operations to conquer Soviet territory went hand in hand with police measures to exterminate "Jewish Bolshevism." Both, military operations and police measures formed a strategic unity and constituted Hitler's "double core principle" for the war against the Soviet Union.<sup>84</sup> For most Germans, however, the Eastern Front represented the most horrible facets of the war, and especially after Stalingrad it came to encapsulate the brutal and costly character of the Nazis' projects "living space" and "new order." The fact, that the Wehrmacht and SS-*Einsatzgruppen* committed unprecedented crimes on and behind the Eastern Front lines was mostly discussed in anti-Nazi campaigns outside Germany. As early as July 1941, Wehrmacht military leaders themselves were informed of the extent to which war crimes were committed by their own troops and the SS.<sup>85</sup> Inside the country, however, such "hard" information could only be obtained by, for example, listening to enemy radio stations or via propaganda leaflets dropped over German towns by Allied air planes. If resistance was offered with regards to the Eastern Front it was linked to the senseless mass-killing of German soldiers during the battle of Stalingrad, i.e. to German sufferings and not to German crimes.

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<sup>83</sup> Jürgen Förster, "Wehrmacht, Krieg und Holocaust," in Müller, Volkmann, eds., *Die Wehrmacht*, 948-963, quote on 953.

<sup>84</sup> Eberhard Jäckel, "Hitlers doppeltes Kernstück," Roland G. Förster, ed., *„Unternehmen Barbarossa.“ Zum historischen Ort der deutsch-sowjetischen Beziehungen von 1933-1941* (München: Oldenbourg, 1993), 13-22.

<sup>85</sup> Already in the summer of 1941, that the staff of *Heeresgruppe Mitte* had detailed knowledge of the SS activities behind the frontlines. Cf. Johannes Hürter, „Auf dem Weg zur Militäropposition. Tresckow, Gersdorff, der Vernichtungskrieg und der Judenmord,“ *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, no. 3 (2004), 527-562. More detailed and with similar conclusions see also Christian Gerlach, *Kalkulierte Morde. Die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Vernichtungspolitik in Weißrußland 1941-1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1999). The degree of involvement of the *Wehrmacht* in war crimes on the Eastern Front is documented in Heer, Naumann, ed., *Vernichtungskrieg*.

The group of young students around the siblings Hans (1918-1943) and Sophie Scholl (1921-1943), and Christoph Probst (1919-1943) at Munich University was inspired by personal experience to link the call for resistance against the Hitler regime with the war on the Eastern Front. Their leaflets written between June 1942 and February 1943 are powerful documents of dissent and it can be inferred from the way the regime reacted to the activities that the message was thought to have spread well beyond the walls of the Munich university building. After their capture, the “People’s Court” refused to pardon the “White Rose” activists from the death penalty by pointing to the threat their campaigns had posed to the Reich: “This matter at hand might well be the severest case of high-treasonous leaflet propaganda which has occurred during the war in the old Reich.”<sup>86</sup> Written mostly by Hans Scholl and the medical student Alexander Schmorell (1917-1943), a part of the leaflets were mailed to members of the old bourgeois elites in Munich, Stuttgart, Frankfurt/Main, Augsburg, Linz and Salzburg – to teachers, professors, doctors, lawyers, writers and booksellers, as well as to owners of beer bars and restaurants in Munich, who, it was hoped, would debate and spread the message among their guests.<sup>87</sup> The rest was thrown out of incoming trains near Munich station during nightly tours or even stuck on car windows in Munich’s city center.<sup>88</sup> The group produced between 2000 and 9000 copies of each leaflet, and every message ended with

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<sup>86</sup> Those were the words used by state attorney [*Oberreichsanwalt*] Lautz during the second “White Rose” trial against Alexander Schmorell, Kurt Huber and Willi Graf in a May 1943 letter to the Reich Justice Ministry. Like Hans and Sophie Scholl and Christoph Probst in February, all three were sentenced to death and executed for “preparation of high treason”, “*Feindbegünstigung*” (preferential treatment of the enemy) and “*Wehrkraftzersetzung*” (undermining of own military strength). Quoted in Christiane Moll, “Die Weiße Rose,” in Steinbach, Tuchel, eds., *Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus*, 443-467, quote on 443.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 445-447.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 453.

the call to multiply the leaflet for further distribution. The potential reach of the “White Rose” campaign was fairly large and therefore indeed threatening to the regime. Yet, Gestapo records show that quite a few recipients of the mailed leaflets were still willing to cooperate with the authorities: out of 100 leaflets mailed in the summer of 1942, 35 addressees delivered the letters to the Gestapo!<sup>89</sup>

Overall, the group produced and delivered six leaflets, three of which dealt explicitly with the events on the Eastern Front, the General Government and Stalingrad. The general message of the leaflets was a religiously inspired and powerfully worded appeal to the moral [*sittliche*] consciousness of Germany’s citizens: “We will not be silent. We are your bad conscience. The White Rose will not leave you in peace!”<sup>90</sup> The texts confronted Germans with the fact that by knowing about the crimes of the NS regime – and the Munich students were in no doubt that people knew by the summer of 1942 – not only compassion (*Mitgefühl*) for the victims was in order but every day without (at least passive) resistance was a day that aggrandized their *Mitschuld* – a collective share of responsibility for those crimes. The leaflets referred to the murder of the Jews in occupied Poland and to the sacrifices of German soldiers in the East for the “criminals” who had erected a “dictatorship of evil” over Germany:<sup>91</sup>

We do not want to discuss here the question of the Jews, nor do we want in this leaflet to compose a defense or apology. No, only by way of example do we want to cite the fact that since the conquest of Poland three hundred thousand Jews have been murdered in this country in the most bestial way. Here we see the most frightful crime against human dignity, a crime that is unparalleled in the whole of history. For Jews, too, are human beings ...

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 449.

<sup>90</sup> From leaflet no. 4, July 1942, printed in Inge Scholl, *Students against Tyranny: The resistance of the White Rose, Munich 1942-1943* (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 1970), 88.

<sup>91</sup> From leaflet no. 3, July 1942, printed in Scholl, *Students against Tyranny*, 81-84.

Why do the German people behave so apathetically in the face of all these abominable crimes, crimes so unworthy of the human race? Hardly anyone thinks about that. It is accepted as a fact and put out of mind. The German people slumber on in their dull, stupid sleep and encourage these fascist criminals; they give them the opportunity to carry on their depredations; and of course they do so.<sup>92</sup>

Denouncing Hitler's war on Europe, the leaflets dealt explicitly with the hate campaign against Bolshevism. It is documented that the group had passionate internal discussions about passages that unmasked the Nazi lie of a preventive war against the Soviet Union. The positions of the activists were mainly shaped by their own world views and personal experience. Professor of philosophy Kurt Huber (1893-1943), a nationalist liberal, had strong resentments against Soviet Bolshevism and supported the Wehrmacht's war against the Soviet Union despite its devastating consequences. He was the author of the draft for the sixth leaflet and encountered resistance from his student conspirators for a passage that was later erased from the final draft: "There can be no other goal for us all but the annihilation of Russian Bolshevism in every form. Continue to stand united in ranks of our glorious Wehrmacht," read a sentence in the erased paragraph. Particularly, Russian-born Alexander Schmorell, Hans Scholl and Willi Graf (1918-1943) opposed the adoration and exoneration of the German armies: the three of them had spent a "combat internship" on the Eastern Front in the summer and fall of 1942 where they had witnessed the devastation with their own eyes.<sup>93</sup> Hans Scholl elaborately explained the lessons he drew from this experience during the interrogation by the Gestapo after his capture on February 18, 1942:

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<sup>92</sup> From leaflet no. 2, June 1942, printed in Scholl, *Students against Tyranny*, 78. [Emphasis in original].

<sup>93</sup> Graf had fought on the Eastern Front since October 1941 and had witnessed the crimes of the Security Police and SD behind the front lines. As students him, Hans Scholl and Schmorell were obliged to attend a "combat internship" on the Eastern Front during school break.



After I had come to believe that after the defeat on the Eastern Front [Stalingrad] and as a result of the astounding growth of England's and America's military power a victorious end to this war on our part had become impossible, I reached through many painful considerations the conclusion that there was only one option left to save the European idea, namely the shortening of the war. On the other hand, our treatment of the occupied territories and peoples was a horror to me. I could not imagine that after these ruling methods a peaceful reconstruction in Europe was possible.<sup>94</sup>

From his "Russian diary" and letters from the front we know about Hans Scholl's deep distress about the crimes on the Eastern Front and the sincere affection he held for the Russian people at the same time.<sup>95</sup> The central role of the battle of Stalingrad in this thinking is reflected in the text of the last leaflet, distributed on February 18, 1943 in the main building of Munich university. That same evening Goebbels would give his "Total War" speech in the Sports Palace of Berlin, the announcement of the Sixth Army's defeat was just two weeks old. In their last leaflet, the "White Rose" activists addressed fellow-students and the text reads like a mockery of the Nazi jargon celebrating the men of Stalingrad as fallen heroes. At the same time, the leaflet sought to wake up the population from the belief that Germany would find its salvation in Hitler. Instead, people, especially the youth, were urged to finally open their eyes to the "mass-murderer's" ruthless sacrifice of German blood (this time, Soviet casualties remained unmentioned):

Fellow Fighters in the Resistance!  
Shaken and broken, our people behold the loss of the men of Stalingrad. Three hundred and thirty thousand German men have been senselessly and irresponsibly driven to death and destruction by the inspired strategy of World War I Private First Class. Führer, we thank you!  
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<sup>94</sup> Quoted in Moll, "Die Weiße Rose," 463.

<sup>95</sup> Inge Jens, ed., *At the Heart of the White Rose: Letters and Diaries of Hans and Sophie Scholl* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984). For example, in a letter to his professor, Kurt Huber, Hans expressed how overwhelmed he was by the beauty, suffering and the seeming invincibility of the country: "It is impossible to give even a vague picture of what has assailed me in Russia since the day we crossed the frontier. I don't know where to begin. Russia is so vast, so boundless in every respect, and its inhabitants' love of their native land is boundless too. War sweeps across the countryside like a rainstorm, but after the rain the sun shines once more. Suffering takes total possession of people, purifies them – but then they laugh once more." Quoted in *ibid.*, 216.

Hitler and his coadjutors ... have sufficiently demonstrated in the ten years [since 1933] by the destruction of all material and intellectual freedom, of all moral substance among the German people, what they understand by freedom and honor. The frightful bloodbath has opened the eyes of even the stupidest German – it is a slaughter which they arranged in the name of “freedom and honor of the German nation” throughout Europe, and which they daily start anew. The name of Germany is dishonored for all time if the German youth does not finally rise, take revenge, and atone, smash its tormentors, and set up a new Europe of the spirit. Students! The German people look to us. As in 1813, when the nation expected us to shake off the Napoleonic yoke, so in 1943 they look to us to break the National Socialist terror through the power of the spirit. Beresina and Stalingrad are burning in the East. The dead of Stalingrad implore us to take action!<sup>96</sup>

In this context as well, Stalingrad emerged as a tragedy of mythical size. Yet, unlike in Nazi propaganda, it signified the beginning of the end. This interpretation must have resonated with the wide-spread popular mood which perceived the battle as a turning-point in the war. Moreover, the sheer unimaginable – in fact, largely unknown – toll numbers seemed to have inspired the idealization of this drama on many fronts. The dead were thought to haunt Germany eternally. As we will see, a similar tone was struck in leaflets printed and distributed by the National Committee “Free Germany” over the troops on the Eastern Front.

Among the few discordant voices inside Germany were also those of Arvid Harnack (1901-1942), Harro (1909-1942) and Libertas Schulze-Boysen (1913-1942) and the roughly 150 members of the resistance group that came to be known under the name invented by the Gestapo: “Red Orchestra.”<sup>97</sup> Focusing less on the suffering of German soldiers on the Eastern Front and at Stalingrad, the “Red Orchestra” organized poster

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<sup>96</sup> From leaflet no. 6, February 1942, printed in United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Fifty years ago, revolt amid the darkness: 1993 Days of Remembrance, Sunday, April 18 through Sunday, April 25* (Washington, DC: U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1993), 234.

<sup>97</sup> The name implied what the Gestapo erroneously believed the group to be: an espionage network run and financed by the Soviet Secret Service NKVD, the „greatest Soviet espionage organisation of World War II.“ A detailed and balanced discussion of this „legend“ that turned out to stick with the group until long after the war provides Jürgen Danyel, „Zwischen Nation und Sozialismus: Genese, Selbstverständnis und ordnungspolitische Vorstellungen der Widerstandsgruppe um Arvid Harnack und Harro Schulze-Boysen,“ in Steinbach, Tuchel, eds., *Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus*, 469ff.

campaigns in Berlin publicizing and denouncing war crimes committed in the occupied Eastern territories, and especially in the Soviet Union. The politically very heterogeneous group around *Oberregierungsrat* of the Reich Ministry of Economics, Harnack, and the Air Force Lieutenant Schulze-Boysen was one of the most important resistance groups in the Third Reich. Its members adhered to a variety of political and religious world views. Their motivations sprang from Christian ethics, communist or social-democratic convictions, the alternative youth culture of the Weimar Republic, the liberalism of the educated bourgeoisie or even the nationalistic, anti-bolshevist sentiments.<sup>98</sup> The group mainly organized the production and distribution of illegal texts and leaflets as well as the duplication and distribution of sermons critical of the regime. At the height of its activity (1940-1942), the “Red Orchestra” organized a campaign to denounce the crimes committed by Wehrmacht and SS units on the Eastern Front, the most famous evidence of which are the periodical pamphlets “Open Letters to the Eastern Front.” Since February 1942, following a mailed leaflet campaign whose main document bore the title “The Concern for Germany’s Future Troubles the Nation,” the Gestapo observed and recorded the group’s activities.<sup>99</sup> In May 1942, Harro and his wife Libertas Schulze-Boysen initiated a poster campaign to counter the National Socialist propaganda

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 468-487.

<sup>99</sup> All surviving documents are deposited in the Collection of the German Resistance Memorial Center (*Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand*) in Berlin. Partly they are also available online: <http://www.gdw-berlin.de> or [www.gegen-diktatur.de](http://www.gegen-diktatur.de) [April 2005]. See also Hans Coppi, Jürgen Danyel, Johannes Tuchel, eds., *Die Rote Kapelle im Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus*, (Berlin: Hentrich, 1994).

exhibition “The Soviet Paradise” in Berlin, again distributing texts on gummed labels that detailed the atrocities committed by German army and SS forces on the Eastern Front.<sup>100</sup>

The texts document detailed knowledge of the situation on the Eastern Front. Libertas Schulze-Boysen, for example, began to record stories and witness accounts she gathered from conversations with soldiers on leave from the Eastern Front. Harnack’s wife Mildred (1902-1942), an American-born professor of Anglo-American literature at Berlin University until 1933, had close connections to the US embassy. She received and duplicated Roosevelt’s speeches and provided the group with all kinds of information from the Allies. The well-informed and well-written texts of the “Red Orchestra” are unique documents of political resistance against the barbarity of the regime because they transported facts – *knowledge* about crimes. In this context, two leaflets are of special interest. The first one was written in January 1942 and distributed under the title “The Concern for Germany’s Future Troubles the Nation.” The six-page-long text discussed the consequences of Hitler’s rule for Europe and the German people, and, similar to the leaflets of the “White Rose,” called for the realization of this self-inflicted catastrophe and passive resistance against its main culprits – the Nazi leadership, but also party “fat cats” (*Bonzen*), industrialists and “war-profiteers.” In view of the unspeakable crimes committed under Nazi rule, the group appealed to “true patriotism” as source and motivation for immediate action:

The conscience of all true patriots rebels against the character of the current German rule over Europe. All those who have preserved a sense for true values shiver how the German name is discredited more and more under the sign of the swastika. In all countries today, hundreds, often thousands of people per day are being executed under martial law and shot arbitrarily, or strangled ...

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<sup>100</sup> Danyel, „Zwischen Nation und Sozialismus,“ 480.

In the name of the Reich the most atrocious tortures and cruelties are being committed against civilians and prisoners. Never before in history was a man hated as much as Adolf Hitler. The hatred of tormented humankind is burdened upon the German people.<sup>101</sup>

A most powerful appeal to the morality and individual responsibility of those fighting “in the name of the Reich” on the Eastern Front is a second document, one of the above-mentioned “Open Letters to the Eastern Front.” Letter No. 8, produced in the spring of 1942, addressed “one police captain” and confronted him with the details of mass executions and torture of civilians in the occupied Eastern territories. In this case, the authors of the text had received their information from soldiers on leave and visits to military hospital where they interviewed soldiers recuperating from “nervous breakdowns.” The five-page “letter” sought to engage the addressee in a conversation about guilt, responsibility and choice of action. It read as follows:

To one police captain:

You have become captain in the East, as I heard. Have you indeed excelled with your police battalion who is fighting the partisans? I can't believe it! You really don't belong to those brutal-robust police beatles for whom, without any consideration and humanity, all questions of politics and morality dissolve simply into rumbling and torture. ... Or would I else write to you, if I would not assume that you haven't lost the ability and the courage to follow the power of the conscience where it comes into conflict with a too obviously bestial duty such as the treacherous killing [*Meuchelmord*] of the Soviet population? ...

I have recently visited some comrades from the police in a state hospital where they were brought to from the East after nervous breakdowns, all of them. ... Whispering, eyes wide open, hoping to get a word of redemptive justification from me, they talked about mass executions of civilians in Russia, about distinct cruelties, about blood and tears without measure, about the ultimate character of the brutish SS-orders, the unfathomable stoicism of the helpless victims ... [One of them told me] he had shot 50 people morning by morning over months and as a daily quote, so to speak. ... The horrible thing is ... that Hitler has managed to make uncounted numbers of normally upright people into blood-besmeared accomplices of his crimes.<sup>102</sup>

The group's campaign to publicize the crimes on the Eastern Front was one of their last.

In the summer of 1942, the Gestapo arrested over 100 persons connected to the

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<sup>101</sup> „Die Sorge um Deutschlands Zukunft zieht durch das Volk“ (January 1942), 1. Online available: [http://www.gegen-diktatur.de/beispiel.php?beisp\\_id=448&tafel\\_id=9&thema=0](http://www.gegen-diktatur.de/beispiel.php?beisp_id=448&tafel_id=9&thema=0) [April 2005].

<sup>102</sup> „Open Letters to the Eastern Front, 8th Series“ (Spring 1942), 1-2. Online available: [http://www.gegen-diktatur.de/beispiel.php?beisp\\_id=448&tafel\\_id=9&thema=0](http://www.gegen-diktatur.de/beispiel.php?beisp_id=448&tafel_id=9&thema=0) [April 2005].

Harnack/Schulze-Boysen group, the following investigation was led by a special commission “Red Orchestra” in the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt*. In a number of trials over 50 members of the Berliner “Red Orchestra” members were sentenced and executed in Berlin-Plötzensee.<sup>103</sup>

As the two examples “White Rose” and “Red Orchestra” demonstrate, the Eastern Front was thus not only the place where most German soldiers fought and perished but also a motivation and theme of internal resistance against the Nazi regime. Naturally, battling the Nazi propaganda colossus might have been not much more than a “drop in the ocean.” Yet, people accidentally or as a result of open eyes and ears *could* know alternative narratives of the war on the Eastern Front – narratives that implied an inevitable share of responsibility for the Nazi war in Europe and the crimes committed in its course. Although it is impossible to determine how effective resistance initiatives were with spreading their views, it can be inferred from the evidence that there was some probability of overhearing rumors, reading gummed leaflets on the tram or encountering the words “FREEDOM” and “HITLER MASS MURDERER” written in bold, black paint by the “White Rose” students on the outside walls of the main Munich university building.<sup>104</sup> And for those who were able and daring enough to listen to enemy radio stations, Thomas Mann honored the legacy of the White Rose and multiplied their message via the German program of the BBC:

In this summer, the world was deeply moved by the events at Munich University ... We know of Hans Scholl, the survivor of Stalingrad, and his sister, and of Christoph Probst, of Professor Huber and all the others, ... of their martyrdom, of the leaflets, which they distributed und in which there

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<sup>103</sup> Danyel, „Zwischen Nation und Sozialismus,“ 486.

<sup>104</sup> Moll, “Die Weiße Rose,” in Steinbach, Tuchel, eds., *Widerstand gegen den Nationalsozialismus*, 456.

are words that make up for quite a lot of what was done in German universities during those certain unblessed years to the spirit of German freedom. Yes, it was sorrowful, this susceptibility of German youth ... for the national socialist revolution of lies. Now their eyes are open, and they lay their young head on the block for their knowledge [Erkenntnis] and for Germany's honor – lay it there after having told the president of the Nazi-court right in his face: 'Soon it will be you standing here where I stand now;' after they proclaimed in view of death: 'a new conviction in freedom and honor is dawning.' Brave, splendid young fellows! You shall not have died in vain.<sup>105</sup>

It is noteworthy how powerful and just different such words must have sounded to

German ears in the fourth war summer in 1943 if they indeed reached their audience.

Later that year, thousands of copies of the "White Rose's" sixth leaflet were dropped

over Germany by the Royal Air Force.<sup>106</sup> Last but not least, even the Nazi press reported

occasionally about resistance activities, respective investigations, trials and executions.<sup>107</sup>

Thus, that the German population had, to say the least, a collective hunch, a vague notion of what German troops, SS and SD forces were up to in the occupied territories is not least proven by the collective fear, or vague anticipation of what was to come once Germany's enemies succeeded.<sup>108</sup> In January 1943, SD report no. 354 noted that the

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<sup>105</sup> Speech was written on 26/27 June 1943 and broadcast on long wave from the BBC in London on 12 August 1943. Printed in Thomas Mann, *Deutsche Hörer! Radiosendungen nach Deutschland aus den Jahren 1940-1945* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 2001), 103f.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 182.

<sup>107</sup> In the case of the „White Rose,“ the Gestapo ran an ad in the *Münchener Neuesten Nachrichten* (5 February 1943, p. 5) seeking hints from the general public to identify those you had distributed leaflets en masse from moving trains in and near Munich on January 28-29, 1943; a 1000 RM award was announced. See *ibid*, 457. The sentencing and execution of Hans and Sophie Scholl and Christoph Probst were reported as well: "Death sentences for the preparation of high treason [...] The convicted had as characteristic mavericks violated defensive power and spirit of resistance of the German people in a shameless manner by besmearing buildings with subversive words [*Parolen*] and by distributing high-treacherous leaflets. In view of the heroic struggle of the German people such depraved subjects deserve nothing else but immediate and dishonorable death." Quoted in Inge Scholl, *Die Weiße Rose*, 197.

<sup>108</sup> How much was known to the general population about the Holocaust and other crimes in the occupied territories is still being debated in historiography. Laurence Stokes argued in 1973 using SD-reports, memoirs and diaries that, much, although not all, of the terror and destruction inflicted upon the Jews of Europe by the Nazis was generally known among the German people. See his article "The German People and the Destruction of the European Jews," *Contemporary European History*, vol. 6 (1973), 167-191. Marlis Steinert qualified these findings by pointing out that, in fact, only a few people knew about the monstrous scope of the crimes, see her *Hitler's War and the Germans*. Both, Stokes and Steinert did not use local sources. In 1984, Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm offered evidence for how widely known the NS crimes

“overwhelming majority” of people were convinced that “loosing the war would equal doom [*Untergang*].”<sup>109</sup> A year later, a report concluded that since Stalingrad the image of Soviet Russia had changed in the population, it was now viewed as a “somehow sinister and fateful” menace, as a country and nation with an “irrational and instinctual element, threatening to throw itself over Europe with primordial ferocity and vitality.”<sup>110</sup> In short, this was a “nerve-wracking waiting for revenge.”<sup>111</sup> The regime’s propaganda clearly had had an effect on the population. The “conclusion” people drew from this – even as late as in the spring of 1944 – was that Russia “must be totally destroyed.”<sup>112</sup>

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were among the population in his article “The Holocaust in National Socialist Rhetoric and Writing: Some Evidence against the Thesis that before 1945 Nothing Was Known about the ‘Final Solution,’” *Yad Vashem Studies*, vol. 16 (1984), 95-127. Based on extensive local research in Bavaria, Ian Kershaw provided the first fully locally researched, thus differentiated works on German popular opinion and reactions to crimes committed in the name of the *Volksgemeinschaft*. See his *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich*. And Ian Kershaw, *The Hitler Myth*. Most notable is his conclusion: “The Road to Auschwitz was built by hate, but paved with indifference,” *ibid.*, 277. David Bankier put it much stronger in concluding that many Germans “deliberately escape[d] into privacy and ignorance”, showing a “lack of committed opposition to the persecution of the Jews.” See his book *The Germans and the Final Solution. Public Opinion under Nazism* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992), 156. The connection between domestic terror by the Gestapo and lack of resistance against Nazi crimes was discussed controversially by Robert Gellately, *The Gestapo and German Society: Enforcing Racial Policy, 1933-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) and Eric A. Johnson, *Nazi Terror: The Gestapo, Jews and Ordinary Germans* (New York: Basic Books, 1999). Most recently, Götz Aly has added an important book on the entanglement of ordinary Germans into war profits and the exploitation of the occupied territories, concluding that by corrupting the population with goods of all kinds (Aly calls it a „dictatorship of accommodation“ [*Gefälligkeitsdiktatur*]) and by financing most of the war effort with material and human resources from the occupied territories, the Nazi formed a *Volksgemeinschaft* which was ready to accept numerous crimes in exchange for accommodation. Thus, the Holocaust was not only a mass murder, but “the most consequent mass holdup murder in modern history.” See the splendid review by Hans Mommsen, “Die sozialpolitisch bestochenen Volksgenossen,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 10 March 2005, 15. Götz Aly, *Hitlers Volksstaat. Raub, Rassenkrieg und nationaler Sozialismus* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 2005).

<sup>109</sup> SD-Report no. 354, Januar 28, 1943, in Boberach, ed., *Meldungen aus dem Reich*, 343.

<sup>110</sup> SD-Report February 7, 1944 (red series), in Boberach, ed., *Meldungen aus dem Reich*, 484.

<sup>111</sup> SD-Report April 20, 1944 (green series), in Boberach, ed., *Meldungen aus dem Reich*, 502f.

<sup>112</sup> SD-Report February 7, 1944 (red series), in Boberach, ed., *Meldungen aus dem Reich*, 484.



COMMUNISTS FOR THE TRUTH: THE MOVEMENT FOR A “FREE GERMANY”  
IN MEXICO CITY AND MOSCOW

Those who risked their lives since 1933 in underground activities against the Nazis had left Germany mostly by 1939 if they could. Many of the most active opponents of the Nazis sought refuge in countries of the Western hemisphere such as France, Great Britain, the United States or Latin America. The two centers of communist anti-Nazi propaganda, Mexico City and Moscow, will be the focus of this section because these men and women eventually took over power in the Soviet occupation zone once the war was over. By the end of the war, and unlike the Mexico exiles around the KPD veteran Paul Merker, the writer Anna Seghers (1900-1983), the publicist and writer Bruno Frei (1897-1988) and KPD activist Alexander Abusch (1902-1982), the Soviet-based movement for a “Free Germany” had achieved domination among German communist émigrés – both in terms of the monopoly of interpretation of history and in terms of actual political power. The organization “National Committee Free Germany” (NKFD) founded in July 1943 in a Soviet POW camp by German communists around later GDR president Wilhelm Pieck (1876-1969)<sup>113</sup>, the later SED ZK’s general secretary Walter Ulbricht (1893-1973)<sup>114</sup> and the writer Erich Weinert (1890-1953) was to some extent a

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<sup>113</sup> Born a worker’s son and a learned woodworker; 1895 SPD, 1919 USPD, 1919 member of the KPD’s ZK, in the revolutionary upheaval of January 1919 arrested together with Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, but able to escape under unclear circumstances, 1933 exile in Paris, after Thälmann’s arrest elected head of the illegal KPD, together with Ulbricht leader of underground activities and advocat of the *Volksfront* course within the Communist International, 1939 Moscow, founding member of NKFD, lecturer in POW camps and Antifa-schools; 1945 return to Germany, with Grotwohl SED head (1946-1954), 1949 president of the GDR.

<sup>114</sup> Born a tailor’s son and a learned woodworker, 1912 SPD, 1915-1918 soldier in World War I (Macedonia, Serbia, Belgium), 1917 USPD, 1919 co-founder of the KPD in Leipzig, 1929 ZK’s Politburo

puppet resistance group inspired and led by Moscow. Yet, many a member of the NKFD's military-oriented arm, the Association of German Officers (BDO) founded in September 1943, acted as a result of an genuine feeling of responsibility, even remorse.<sup>115</sup> Recent scholarship describes both organizations as "serious attempts to participate out of imprisonment in the fight and resistance against Hitler and his regime."<sup>116</sup> From the perspective of post-war East German history it is important to note that the nucleus of the political elite of the GDR originated in these alliances between civilian antifascists around Pieck and Ulbricht and transformed military leaders such as Wilhelm Adam or Vincenz Müller who in the socialist state founded by the SED in 1949 attained leading positions in the NDPD and other organisations. Moreover, NKFD and BDO were not only run by the founding fathers of the later German Democratic Republic, but also embodied the beginning of a collective, antifascist renunciation movement in which every willing socialist citizen could later join in. Accordingly, the narratives of the war against the Soviet Union developed by these two antifascist organizations also became the ideological foundation and source of legitimacy for the future leaders of the GDR, a

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member, 1926-1929 KPD deputy in the Saxonian parliament, since 1928 member of the CPSU and frequent visitor in Moscow, 1933 exile in Paris, 1938 Moscow, 1943-1945 NKFD, head of its operative division. April 1945 return to Germany as leader of the KPD's "initiative group" for Berlin, since 1946 deputy head of the SED and 1953-1971 first resp. general secretary of the SED's ZK.

<sup>115</sup> Such is the conclusion of recent scholarly research, after the Cold War years saw a heated and partisan debate in East and West Germany about the role and importance of NKFD and BDO within the German resistance. See Peter Steinbach and Gerd R. Ueberschär, "Die Geschichtsschreibung zum NKFD und BDO in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und in den westlichen Länder," in Gerd R. Ueberschär, ed., *Das Nationalkomitee „Freies Deutschland“ und der Bunde Deutscher Offiziere* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1995), 141-160. And Paul Heider, „Das NKFD und der BDO in der Historiographie der DDR und die ‚Arbeitsgemeinschaft ehemaliger Offiziere,‘“ *ibid.*, 161-181. A summary of the inner-German political debates during the Cold War and after Germany's reunification provides Peter Steinbach, „Zwischen Verrat und Widerstand. Der Streit um NKFD und BDO bei der Präsentation der Ausstellung der Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand als geschichtspolitisches Symptom,“ *ibid.*, 15-28.

<sup>116</sup> Gerd R. Ueberschär, "Das NKFD und der BDO im Kampf gegen Hitler 1943-1945," *ibid.*, 44.

political system installed and maintained in East Germany after the war largely against the will of the population.

Despite the fact, that the Mexico-based communists eventually would lose all influence in the later GDR as a consequence of the SED's stalinization and the resultant "anti-cosmopolitan" purges during the early 1950s, their wartime analyses of the war on the Eastern Front prefigured the future rifts and disagreements among the KPD/SED elite during the first years after the war. The most important difference concerned the "Jewish question" and the Holocaust. While the Mexico group, among them KPD member Paul Merker, put great emphasis on the Jewish catastrophe and pleaded for solidarity with the main victims of Hitler's racial policy,<sup>117</sup> the NKFD announcements reported indiscriminately about "crimes against Soviet citizens," largely neglecting the genocidal dimension of the war on the Eastern Front. Relative agreement existed over the role of the "fascist Wehrmacht" in this war, although the complicit involvement of the "worker-soldier" in Nazi war crimes remained ambivalent during and after the war: he was both, victim of Hitler's blinding ideology, sacrificed in a crusade launched by the "Hitler clique" and the lobbyists of "monopoly capital," and perpetrator of unspeakable crimes in the name of Hitler's Germany.

The German communists, artists, and writers who gathered in Mexico City in 1942 all saw themselves as representatives of the "other Germany." Their primary

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<sup>117</sup> See Jeffrey Herf's study of one of the main activists, Paul Merker, who was later purged from the SED: Jeffrey Herf, „East German Communists and the Jewish Question: The Case of Paul Merker,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 29, no. 4 (October 1994), 627-661. For a placement of this debate into the context of post-war memory of the Holocaust in divided Germany see Herf, *Divided Memory*. On the movement "Free Germany" in Mexico see in general Wolfgang Kießling, *Alemania Libre in Mexico*, 2 Vols. (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1974).

publication, the monthly magazine *Free Germany* (“Alemania Libre”), first appeared in November 1941 and continued until the summer of 1946. About 3,300 copies were printed of each issue and distributed all over the world via illegal mail and hand-to-hand propaganda in the underground.<sup>118</sup> A number of (later) famous exiled writers and intellectuals contributed – without pay – articles to the paper from all parts of the world (for example, philosopher Ernst Bloch (1885-1977), the Austrian writer Leo Katz (1892-1954), Thomas (1875-1955) and Heinrich Mann (1871-1950), the writer Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), the economic historian and later president of the Association for German-Soviet Friendship (DSF) Jürgen Kuczynski (1904-1997), and the writer Willi Breidel(1901-1964)). In Mexico City, the editorial and writing staff also included well-known literary persons such as Egon Erwin Kisch (1885-1948), Anna Seghers, André Simone (1895-1952), as well as German communists such as Paul Merker and Alexander Abusch.

The first issue appeared while Wehrmacht troops were stuck before Moscow in November 1941 and the first “winter crisis” of “Operation Barbarossa” was about to befall the German armies in the East. Echoing pope Pius XI.’s encyclical of March 1937, the first editorial of *Free Germany* expressed the great worries of the German exile community. The “burning concern” for the “city of Moscow which must defend itself in the blood of its sons against the onrush of the German tank troops” was at the center of this first issue, reflecting the paper’s enormous sympathy, even bias, towards the Soviet

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<sup>118</sup> Alexander Abusch, „Vorwort,“ in *Freies Deutschland Mexiko 1941-1946. Bibliographie einer Zeitschrift*, ed. Akademie der Künste der DDR (Berlin: Aufbau, 1975), 17f. See also Paul Merker, *Deutschland – Sein oder Nichtsein*, vol. 2: „Das Dritte Reich und sein Ende“ (Mexiko: Editorial „El Libro Libre,“ 1945), 495.

Union and the Red Army. While supporting the cause of all nations fighting in the anti-Hitler-coalition, *Free Germany's* main theme was the struggle of the Soviet peoples against fascism – a struggle, it was often, and rightly, pointed out, they had to face alone for long three years until the Western allies opened a second front in 1944.<sup>119</sup> Accordingly, the struggle for Moscow, and the war on the Eastern Front in general, was viewed as an all-decisive battle for the survival of the civilized, the “progressive” world of socialism:

Today it is being decided, whether something will survive of the values that emerged from bloody wars and revolutions and from the peaceful intellectual and artistic acts of creation in the last two-hundred years ... or whether everything will sink in the bloody, fetid swamps of fascist barbarism.<sup>120</sup>

The article appealed to exiled Germans all over the world to renew the “popular front” movement and to unite in the fight against Nazi Germany. In bold letters, one of Thomas Mann’s “Speeches to the German Listeners” was printed next to the opening editorial. Written in late June 1941, Mann had called the invasion of the Soviet Union an “obscene farce” that finally obscured the “despiteful pact of Munich.” The 1939 German-Soviet Non-Aggression-Pact had led to “Russia’s estrangement from the West” and the “political rapprochement” between the two nations had caused the first popular front to dissolve in “confusion and without any sense of direction.” Now, that Hitler had attacked the Soviet Union under breach of contract a “clearing of the external fronts was finally reached” and therefore there is “hope that this new constellation which was created by [Hitler’s] boundless infamy revives the idea of a popular front, a peoples’ front for peace and justice.”<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Abusch, “Vorwort,” in *Freies Deutschland Mexiko*, 9.

<sup>120</sup> Bruno Frei, „Von brennender Sorge erfüllt...“, *Freies Deutschland*, vol. 1, no. 1 (November 1941), 5.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

Several articles discussed the motives, nature and scale of German war crimes. Above all, the murder of the Jewish people was put upfront, historical analyses by scholars such as the later renowned Leo Katz discussed the role of anti-Semitism in German history, pointing to the new quality of violent anti-Semitism in the Third Reich: waging war and killing the Jews were symbiotic events, the one unthinkable without the other. As Katz put it, “like never before in history, anti-Semitism has become the banner of an army designed to conquer.” The National Socialist demagogues used anti-Semitism for a new purpose, namely as the “political banner for German imperialism.”<sup>122</sup> Likewise, *Free Germany* discussed the crimes committed in the Nazi war of aggression against Europe at great length and detail, and what is more important, linked them to the German people and their sense of responsibility. In March 1942, a special issue of *Free Germany* appeared under the headline: “TO ABIDE MEANS: TO BE COMPLICIT!” (*Dulden heisst: Mitschuldig sein!*) In a “Call to the German People,” the editorial decried the crimes committed in the occupied territories, listing Poland, Yugoslavia, France, Czechoslovakia, Belgium, Holland, Norway and Greece. Yet, “all these atrocities which cover Germany’s name with disgrace and which precipitate the approaching day of terrible revenge fade to insignificance in light of the systematic cruelties committed by the fascist hangmen in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union.”<sup>123</sup> And while unparalleled crimes were being committed against the “Russian workers and farmers,”

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<sup>122</sup> Leo Katz, „Antisemitismus als Barometer,“ *Freies Deutschland*, vol. 1, no. 3 (January 1942), 13f.

<sup>123</sup> „Dulden heisst: mitschuldig sein! Aufruf an das Deutsche Volk!,“ *Freies Deutschland*, vol. 1, Extra-Ausgabe, March 1, 1942, 1.

the German nation remained “silent.” Urging Germany’s population to wake up and revolt in view of these *known* facts, the “Call to the German People” continued:

Still, German men and women, you do not realize the excessive crimes committed on the Eastern Front, and you do not recognize how much guilt befalls your men, your brothers, and sons for their participation. ...

To close the eyes before this, to slur over these facts in silence, means to justify these crimes. We too are convinced that many German soldiers did not sink so deep to participate in such bestialities. But millions of Germans at the front and in the homeland, who do not have the courage to rise against this shame and to make an end to it, therefore will become accomplices in those crimes.<sup>124</sup>

The leading communist and former deputy of the Prussian parliament, Paul Merker, wrote another centerpiece of the paper’s wake-up-campaign to enlighten the German people about their share of responsibility. Merker was member of the KPD’s central committee. After the war he initially attained an influential position in the social administration of the Soviet occupation zone. Yet, he was purged from the SED in 1950.<sup>125</sup> Back in 1942, he and other German émigrés in Latin America gathered for a “Congress Against the Terror of Nazi-Fascism.” One result of the congress was the publication of the “Black-Book of Nazi-Terror in Europe,” published in 1943.<sup>126</sup> Among the speakers at the congress was Merker who expressed “deadly hate” for the Nazis and “deepest shame about the uncounted crimes and cruelties committed by the Hitler-*Soldateska* in the occupied countries, and in the Soviet Union.”<sup>127</sup> He, too, focused on the suffering of the Soviet people, claiming that the country “had never been Germany’s enemy.” Yet, still

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> For further details on Merker’s biography and purge trial see Herf, „East German communists and the Jewish question,” 629ff.

<sup>126</sup> *El Libro Negro del Terror Nazi en Europe*, ed. Antonio Castro Leal, André Simone, Bodo Uhse, Juan Rejano, Anna Seghers, Ludwig Renn, Egon Erwin Kisch (Mexico: Editorial “El Libro Libre,” 1943).

<sup>127</sup> Paul Merker, „Die Verantwortung der Deutschen und die Nazigreuel in der Sowjetunion,” *Freies Deutschland*, vol. 2, no. 1 (November/December 1942), 8.

Hitler sent his tank-divisions against Leningrad, Moscow and Stalingrad, devastated the land, murdered millions of peaceful inhabitants, forced men, women and children, Russians, Byelorussians, Ukrainians, Jews, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, Karelians, and Don Cossacks through his Gestapo hordes to compulsory labor against their own bleeding fatherland, starved and slimmed to skeletons.<sup>128</sup>

Remarkable is Merker's indictment of the German workers, who instead of unmasking Hitler's propaganda and preventing his rise to power, had left the fight against Nazism to a "heroic minority." Instead of realizing the all-too obvious war plans of the regime, they had lent their hands to the military machinery unleashed on Europe in 1939, and on the Soviet Union in 1941. Merker's bitter conclusion was that the efforts of German émigrés to mobilize the German people against their own regime were eventually futile, and that with the failure to topple the dictator themselves, Germans would be excluded from the international community for years to come. Pointing to the necessity for compensation of all victims of fascism, including and above all the Jews, Merker reminded his distant audience that with "every day of the war, the future of the German people will be further darkened, and its unity further endangered."<sup>129</sup> He closed with yet another call:

German workers, soldiers, women! Realize: In order to disassociate yourselves from the responsibility for the outrageous crimes of Hitler-fascism and in order to be free yourselves, great sacrifices are necessary. Yet, these sacrifices are miniscule compared to those inflicted by Hitler's war of exploitation on the Soviet Union and on the German masses alike.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid. Merker later published a two-volume work entitled *Germany – To Be or Not To Be* (Mexico: Editorial "El Libro Libre", 1944/45). The book was an impressively comprehensive account of the end of the Weimar Republic and the Nazi dictatorship in Germany. The war against the Soviet Union is interpreted as "holy war against Bolshevism." (257ff.) The work was praised by Thomas Mann, among other. Mann wrote to Merker in a letter of 20 July 1944: "I was engrossed in the work for days. It is a shattering document, the first deeply argued and historically exact representation of the most frightful and shameful episode in German history. [...] There is no doubt that the book will find many curious readers. I only hope that it reaches Germany soon and will teach the people there who've been hit on the head, how it happened to them." (Quoted in Herf, "East German communists and the Jewish Question," 654, *fn.* 39.) The fact that the book became far less prominent than, let's say, Franz Neumann's *Behemoth*, might well have to do with the fact that Merker's story reflected a strong bias for the Soviet Union and uncritically listed "Marshall Stalin's" grand strategic talents without



The NKFD activists who joined together in 1943 in the Soviet Union to launch a well-organized anti-Nazi propaganda campaign among the German troops on the Eastern Front were much closer to the actual theater of war.<sup>131</sup> Their leaflet propaganda was directed by and coordinated with the political head office of the Red Army operating in the background. Externally, the campaign was to reflect German concerns. The Kremlin assured, that themes and announcements of the National Committee appeared separate from those of the Red Army. The NKFD's campaign appealed to "national German interests" and aimed at the overthrow of Hitler in order to "prevent the catastrophe" of total breakdown and "to save what still can be saved."<sup>132</sup> Accordingly, the texts were designed to address primarily soldiers in battle, not German exiled intellectuals or the home front. Thanks to the material support of the CPSU's central committee in Moscow, over 100 million leaflets were printed and distributed between 1943 and 1945.<sup>133</sup>

The central document of the NKFD, the "Manifest to the Wehrmacht and the German People" of July 1943, announced the founding of the committee and urged soldiers and citizens to change sides in order fight and defeat Hitler, and to free Germany. The call for high treason was justified with the higher calling of the nation which stood above Hitler's orders:

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showing any regard for the dictatorial nature of the Soviet system and its inhuman consequence. See for example Merker, *Deutschland*, 413f.

<sup>131</sup> See Nikolaj N. Bernikov, „Die propagandistische Tätigkeit des NKFD und des BDO sowie deren Zusammenarbeit mit den Politorganen der Roten Armee während des Krieges 1943-1945,“ in Ueberschär, *Das Nationalkomitee'Freies Deutschland*, ' 112-120.

<sup>132</sup> Such was the Red Army's directive for the foundation of the NKFD, printed in Bernikov, "Die propagandistische Tätigkeit des NKFD," 113.

<sup>133</sup> Heinz Starkulla jr., „Zur Überlieferung der Flugblätter des NKFD,“ in Ueberschär, *Das Nationalkomitee'Freies Deutschland*, ' 219-224.

The fight for a free Germany requires courage, energy and resolve. Above all, courage. Time is running out. ... Whoever sticks with Hitler out of fear, faint-heartedness, or blind obedience acts cowardly and helps to drive Germany into the abyss. Whoever puts the need of the nation above the orders of the 'Führer' and pleads his life and honor for his people, acts courageous and helps to save the fatherland from its deepest disgrace.

For nation and fatherland! Against Hitler and his war!

For immediate peace!

For the salvation of the German people!

For a free, independent Germany!<sup>134</sup>

This call for the self-liberation of Germany was connected with the for German troops gloomy news from the Eastern Front lines. One of the first out of about 100 leaflets was designed as a message from the dead to the living: above the heads of a group of exhausted soldiers, the shadow of a dead German soldier wanders in the dark skies, beseeching his comrades:

Comrades!

Where ever you are by day and night – we will leave you no peace, we stand before you,  
*we, the shadows of Stalingrad!*

We were over 240,000, 240,000 German soldiers like you. Now, our bones molder restless in foreign soil. Senseless was our death. Give it a last meaning. Hear our warning and learn from it!<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Printed in Ueberschär, *Das Nationalkomitee "Freies Deutschland,"* 265-268, quote on 268. [Emphasis in original]. See the collection of NKFD leaflets and papers edited by Klaus Kirchner, ed., *Flugblätter aus der UdSSR, Nationalkomitee Freies Deutschland: 1943-1945. Bibliographie, Katalog* (= vol. 15 of *Flugblatt-Propaganda im Zweiten Weltkrieg*) (Erlangen: Verlag D & C, 1996).

<sup>135</sup> Leaflet "The Death to the Living," May/June 1943, printed in *Flugblätter des Nationalkomitees Freies Deutschland (Ausstellungskatalog)*, ed. Staatsbibliothek Preußischer Kulturbesitz Berlin (Berlin, 1989), 187. [Emphasis in original].



Fig. 2. “The Shadows of Stalingrad.” NKFD leaflet, May/June 1943

The battle of Stalingrad which had kicked off the efforts to found a German military resistance group against Hitler, played a most prominent role in many NKFD leaflets. As opposed to how it was interpreted by “Free Germany” in Mexico, NKFD believed Stalingrad was not just another piece of evidence proving the Red Army’s inevitable final victory. The NKFD focused on the suffering of the *German* soldiers. They hardly mentioned the casualties of the Soviet side.<sup>136</sup> Stalingrad was stylized as the haunting

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<sup>136</sup> Alexander Abusch, editor-in-chief of “Free Germany” in Mexico, identified the “men of Stalingrad” as Red Army soldiers, who heroically defended their country to the last stone against the invaders. See for

example of the horror inflicted on Germany and its troops by an adventurous criminal leader. Many leaflets recounted the story of Stalingrad and pointed to Hitler's irresponsible and unnecessary stubbornness in view of a forlorn military quagmire.<sup>137</sup> Stalingrad was invoked as a warning of what was to come and a reminder of Hitler's unconditional commitment to the all-or-nothing strategy: "In the way Hitler has abandoned the Sixth Army at Stalingrad, he will now sacrifice the whole German army, only to remain in power for a few more months."<sup>138</sup> Only if the troops – in whose hands lay the "fate of Germany" – turned collectively against its military leadership, the German nation might be saved.

While the leaflets of the NKFD addressed mostly the question of deserting the National Socialist cause, the weekly "central organ" of the NKFD, also labeled *Free Germany* and distributed among German POWs, provided more space for detailed descriptions of the Nazi menace. Full issues were devoted to the crimes committed by the Gestapo and SS against Germans at home, but also to crimes against people in the occupied territories committed by SS and SD forces behind the front lines. In October 1944, for example, a lengthy eye-witness report detailed the "industrial mass killing in the name of the German people," of millions of Jews and other civilians from all over

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example Alexander Abusch, "Die Männer von Stalingrad," *Freies Deutschland*, vol. 1, no. 12 (October 1942), 12-14. According to Abusch, "Stalingrad was not Verdun;" just like the new industrial city was built by determined workers and committed Soviet citizens, its defense showed the strength of the communist bastion on the Volga. "The unparalleled resistance of Stalingrad demonstrated how to fight Hitler according to Stalin's way [*auf Stalin'sche Art*]." Ibid., 12, 14.

<sup>137</sup> For example, leaflet „Four years of war – what now?“, August 1943, printed in *Flugblätter des Nationalkomitees*, 213. And leaflet "Hitler's Schuld an Stalingrad," November 1943, printed in *Flugblätter des Nationalkomitees*, 263.

<sup>138</sup> Leaflet „Anweisungen Nr. 1 an die Truppen an der Ostfront,“ September 1943, printed in *Flugblätter des Nationalkomitees*, 221f.

Europe in the extermination camp Maidanek Lublin.<sup>139</sup> Another article gave an inventory of the various crimes committed by the Nazis in and outside Germany. Under the headline “Hitler’s Rule – Hangman’s Rule,” a report listed the crimes in various concentration and extermination camps, for example in Dachau, Mauthausen, Flossenburg and Tarnopol in the Ukraine.<sup>140</sup> The report also detailed torture, shootings, forced labor, strangulation, medical experiments and euthanasia and attributed these crimes to SS henchmen. It depicted the brutal treatment of Soviet prisoners of war, too, yet made no mention of the Wehrmacht’s involvement in these crimes. To the contrary, the running text below the headline identified Wehrmacht soldiers as mere witnesses of these crimes in “Hitler’s mass slaughter houses,” and of the “orgies of extermination committed by Himmler’s servants (*Himmlerknechte*) in the occupied territories.” Still, these cruelties were not the result of spontaneous “bloody excesses of a few camp commanders, as some might hope; no, they are committed according to a plan everywhere just as systematically as the extermination of millions of Poles, Ukrainians, Russians, Jews ... This plan belongs to Hitler’s government program.”<sup>141</sup>

Despite the intensive and efficient spread of word against the Hitler regime among the troops of the Eastern Front, the NKFD was unsuccessful. The repeated calls for a collective surrender of the Wehrmacht and the appeals to turn the weapons against the

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<sup>139</sup> Luitpold Steidle „Im Namen des deutschen Volkes: Die Massenvernichtungsfabrik ‚Maidanek‘ bei Lublin,“ in *Freies Deutschland. Organ des Nationalkomitees „Freies Deutschland,“* vol. 2, no. 42, October 15, 1944, 3.

<sup>140</sup> „Hitlerherrschaft – Henkerherrschaft,“ in *Freies Deutschland. Organ des Nationalkomitees „Freies Deutschland,“* vol. 2, no. 41, October 8, 1944, 3.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

Nazi leadership yielded little echo and remained without practical results.<sup>142</sup> There were no massive acts of desertion or surrender to the Red Army, no voluntary retreat to the old Reich borders, no military revolts against the Wehrmacht's command structure and no national uprising to topple Hitler on the home front. The reasons for the continuing fighting will among German soldiers on the Eastern Front were manifold: fear of Soviet imprisonment and revenge, efficient Nazi indoctrination, a persisting detestation of the "Bolshevik hordes" and a lasting ambition to "change the face of the world."<sup>143</sup> The failure of the German troops at the fronts and the German people at home to liberate themselves from the "fascist yoke" would have a lasting impact on how communist exiles in Moscow viewed the post-war reconstruction of Germany. During the first few years, the KPD/SED leaders would use this collective failure to justify the erection of a "proletarian dictatorship." Yet, soon after the war's end they generously extended the narrative of antifascist resistance on the entire population of East Germany once they saw the need to legitimate and substantiate the second dictatorship on German soil.

#### VOICES FROM ABROAD: THE ALLIED PERSPECTIVE: CHURCHILL AND ROOSEVELT

The Soviet-sponsored activities of the NKFD were watched closely in the Western capitals, not only because of the suspected potential to stir actually viable resistance among enemy forces, but also because the collaboration between Moscow and German

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<sup>142</sup> Ueberschär, „Das NKFD und der BDO,“ 35.

<sup>143</sup> Omer Bartov, „Soldiers, Nazis and War in the Third Reich“, *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 63, no. 1 (1991), 44-60. Idem, *The Eastern Front 1941-1945*. Idem, *Hitler's Army*. And Stephen G. Fritz, "“We were trying ... to change the face of the world’—Ideology and Motivation in the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front: The View from Below,” *Journal of Military History*, vol. 60, no. 4 (1996), 683-710. And Messerschmidt, *Die Wehrmacht im NS-Staat*.

communists, officers and soldiers signaled the possible direction of Soviet post-war foreign policy towards a defeated Germany. Charles E. Bohlen (1904-1974), expert on Soviet affairs in the U.S. state department, reckoned in August 1943 that the foundation of the NKFD in Moscow “could be one of the most far reaching steps that the Soviet government has taken so far with consequences for the future relations with the United Nations.”<sup>144</sup> Despite efforts in London and Washington to create a similar committee in the Western hemisphere, plans for such an organization never materialized.<sup>145</sup>

Nonetheless, the Western allies raised their voices loud and often in order to inform and rally the anti-Hitler forces inside and outside Germany. Above all, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill (1874-1965) became famous for his powerful war-time speeches against Hitler;<sup>146</sup> his and other important speeches were broadcast by the BBC. The British radio station ran a German speaking channel aimed at undermining the efficient Goebbels propaganda apparatus inside Germany. Less prominent but equally relevant were the speeches of Thomas Mann broadcast by the BBC to “German Listeners” (“*Deutsche Hörer!*”) in which the exiled writer fervently formulated his vision of the “other Germany.”<sup>147</sup>

Hence, if people inside Germany had access to the “Allied perspective” at all, so mostly by way of underground papers or illegal radio. Since the beginning of the war,

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<sup>144</sup> Quoted in Heike Bungert, „’Den deutschen Widerstandswillen brechen:’ Anglo-amerikanische Pläne zur Gründung eines deutschen Komitees als Antwort auf das NKFD,“ in Ueberschär, *Das Nationalkomitee „Freies Deutschland*,“ 52.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 52-63.

<sup>146</sup> Robert Rhodes James, ed., *Churchill Speaks: Winston S. Churchill in Peace and War: Collected Speeches, 1897-1963* (New York: Chelsea House, 1980). Winston S. Churchill, *Great War Speeches* (London: Transworld Publ., 1957).

<sup>147</sup> Thomas Mann, *Deutsche Hörer! Radiosendungen nach Deutschland aus den Jahren 1940-1945* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 2001).

listening to enemy radio could potentially be punished with the death penalty.<sup>148</sup> With the war dragging on, people increasingly turned to other available sources of information in order to get a realistic as possible picture of events at the front. Since the end of 1942, the BBC and the Soviet information service broadcast accurate reports, partly in German, on the extent and methods of the mass murders in the occupied territories.<sup>149</sup> The Goebbels ministry made no efforts to counteract these information because that would have required mentioning them to the German public. Rather, they simply ignored them or denounced unspecific Allied “lies.”

Still, Goebbels remained alert as to the potential impact of allied propaganda. His ministry relied heavily on denunciation by neighbors in order to prevent people from listening to foreign radio broadcasts. Following the “Exceptional Radio Measures” of September 1, 1939, it issued several appeals to the population asking that “anyone who became aware that someone else had listened in should report the matter immediately” to the local Gestapo office.<sup>150</sup> The minister took these measures very seriously. Even government officials applied for permission to listen in – “strictly in the line of duty” – and frequently were turned down.<sup>151</sup>

This certainly happened with good reason. According to the British Foreign Office, the goal of British clandestine broadcast efforts was nothing less but to “divide German

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<sup>148</sup> The respective Goebbels decree is documented as „Außerordentliche Rundfunkmaßnahmen 1939-1942,“ in *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, vol. 4 (1963), 418-435.

<sup>149</sup> For a detailed account of the development of British clandestine broadcasting in German see Nicholas Pronay and Philip M. Taylor, „An Improper Use of Broadcasting...’ The British Government and Clandestine Radio Propaganda Operations against Germany during the Munich Crisis and after,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 19, no. 3 (1984), 357-384.

<sup>150</sup> Robert Gellately, „The Gestapo and German Society: Political Denunciation in the Gestapo Case Files,“ *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 60, no. 4 (1988), 654-694, quote on 681.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 682.



popular opinion from Hitler.”<sup>152</sup> The Foreign Office in London also received encouraging reports from Berlin on the impact of the broadcasts in Germany. One German journalist reported already in March 1939, that “for some time now the British wireless has been causing a stir.”<sup>153</sup> Nevertheless, the success was very limited, clandestine broadcasting did not lead to a division between popular opinion and Hitler in Germany. Yet, what is important for our purposes is that such radio broadcasts had quite a reach, thus people had access to the alternative narratives of the war in general, and events on the Eastern Front in particular. Even Victor Klemperer living in a Dresdener *Judenhaus*, had indirect access to such radio broadcasts: as he noted in his now famous diary on October 9, 1942, “Thomas Mann is said to have pleaded vigorously for the German Jews on American radio.”<sup>154</sup>

This chapter, thus, shall close with a brief look at the references to the Eastern Front in the speeches of the leaders of the anti-Hitler-coalition, Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin. Aside from the severe differences regarding politics and ideology, the anti-Hitler coalition stood firmly together, militarily, and rhetorically, during the years following the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941. Nuance was brought in occasionally with regards to the dictatorial nature of the Hitler tyranny, and at least Western democrats felt prompted to compare it with Stalin’s rule.<sup>155</sup> Nonetheless, it was agreed that the attack

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<sup>152</sup> Pronay/Taylor, „An Improper Use of Broadcasting...,” 378.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 377.

<sup>154</sup> Klemperer, *Ich will Zeugnis ablegen*, vol. 5 (1942), 255.

<sup>155</sup> A good example of such “choosing the lesser evil”-considerations is acting secretary of state Sumner Welles’ „Statement on the German Reich’s Attack on the Soviet Union“ of June 23, 1941 (printed in the *New York Times*, June 24, 1941): Hitler’s reach for „world domination“ could no longer be doubted after his „treacherous attack upon Soviet Russia,” the statement began. And it went on to clarify that the US president and government „maintain the freedom to worship God as their consciences dictate” and that such

against the Soviet Union was a monstrous crime signaling not only Hitler's boundless hubris but also his inevitable doom.

On the very Sunday on which the Wehrmacht entered Soviet territory, June 22, 1941, Churchill qualified this attack as historic event of unparalleled magnitude: "The past with its crimes, its follies, and its tragedies flashes away" in view of what was to befall the Russian lands.<sup>156</sup> In a radio broadcast the same day, Churchill put the Soviet-German war into a wider perspective and warned that this was only the "prelude to an attempted invasion of the British Isles,"<sup>157</sup> just as Hitler and Goebbels had threatened multiple times.<sup>158</sup> Churchill portrayed Hitler as a

monster of wickedness, insatiable in his lust for blood and plunder. ... And even the carnage and ruin which his victory, should he gain it – though he's not gained it yet – will bring upon the Russian people, will itself be only a stepping stone to the attempt to plunge four or five hundred millions who live in China and the 350,000,000 who live in India into that bottomless pit of human degradation over which the diabolic emblem of the swastika flaunts itself. It is not too much to say here this pleasant summer evening that the lives and happiness of a thousand million additional human beings are now menaced with brutal Nazi violence. That is enough to make us hold our breath.

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was the "right of all peoples." This right has been denied to their peoples by both the Nazi and the Soviet Governments. To the people of the United States this and other principles and doctrines of communistic dictatorship are as intolerable and as alien to their own beliefs as are the principles and doctrines of Nazi dictatorship. Neither kind of imposed overlordship can have, or will have, any support or any sway in the mode of life, or in the system of government, of the American people." In the current situation, however, Nazism is worse than communism and must thus be fought with all means and in collaboration with otherwise opposed Soviet Russia: For "the immediate issue that presents itself to the people of the United States is whether the plan for universal conquest, for the cruel and brutal enslavement of all peoples and for the ultimate destruction of the remaining free democracies which Hitler is now desperately trying to carry out, is to be successfully halted and defeated." A "realistic America" chose to support "any defense against Hitlerism," including the Red Army's fight. [Emphasis added].

<sup>156</sup> From his „Limited War Speech“, June 22, 1941, printed in in Trumbull Higgins, ed., *Winston Churchill and the Second Front 1940-1943* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1957), 59f.

<sup>157</sup> „Minister Winston Churchill's Broadcast on the Soviet-German War,“ London, June 22, 1941. Available online: <http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/policy/1941/index.html>, [April 2005], passim.

<sup>158</sup> For example, the first issue of the *Völkische Beobachter* following the attack ran a front-page-article explaining the reasons for the war: "The fierce fighting which now has broken out on the Eastern Front and which must not be judged by conventional measures in terms of the width of the operational field and the strength of the employed forces, is not just the beginning of a new war, but also another phase in the fight directed against England." See *Völkische Beobachter, Norddeutsche Ausgabe*, June 23, 1941, 1.

At this point, also Churchill paused to say a word about the nature of the two modern tyrannies: communism and Nazism:

The Nazi regime is indistinguishable from the worst features of Communism. It is devoid of all theme and principle except appetite and racial domination. It excels in all forms of human wickedness, in the efficiency of its cruelty and ferocious aggression. No one has been a more consistent opponent of Communism than I have for the last twenty-five years. I will unsay no words that I've spoken about it. But all this fades away before the spectacle which is now unfolding.

The Prime Minister expressed compassion and sympathy for the struggle of ordinary Russians, “poor as are the Russian peasants, workmen and soldiers,” and determined to fight until Hitler’s total defeat: “We have but one aim and one single irrevocable purpose: We are resolved to destroy Hitler and every vestige of the Nazi regime. ... We shall fight him by land, we shall fight him by sea, we shall fight him in the air, until, with God’s help, we have rid the earth of his shadow and liberated its people from his yoke.” Churchill’s main message that day was that “the Russian danger” was “our danger,” just as the “cause of any Russian fighting for his heart and home” was the cause of all free men in every corner of the world. He left no doubt that the invasion of the Soviet Union constituted a crime of historic dimensions and that the Russian people were about to become the victims of unparalleled crimes in the wake of this attack.

Nine weeks later, Churchill again spoke on radio about a “symbolic meeting” with U.S. president Roosevelt on the battleship *Princes of Wales* in the Atlantic Ocean demonstrating the unity of the English-speaking world. In the course of this speech he said that his worst fears had been confirmed, and he denounced the mass crimes committed on the Eastern Front. The Prime Minister also noted that “the aggressor is

surprised, startled, staggered,” for by the late summer of 1941, mass murder seemed to become “unprofitable.”<sup>159</sup> Thus, Hitler

retaliates by the most frightful cruelties. As his armies advance, whole districts are being exterminated. Scores of thousands, literally scores of thousands of executions in cold blood are being perpetrated by the German police troops upon the Russian patriots who defend their native soil. Since the Mongol invasions in the sixteenth century there has never been methodical, merciless butchery on such a scale or approaching such a scale.<sup>160</sup>

In a “Joint Message of Assistance,” Roosevelt and Churchill declared their support to Stalin on August 15, 1941, and suggested to meet in person in order to discuss the most effective way to resist the “Nazi attack.”<sup>161</sup> With the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 8, 1941, initially much of the attention was taken away from the Eastern Front and public announcements made fewer references to the events on Soviet territory. Yet, on December 17, 1942, eleven allied governments and exile regimes published a “Joint Allied Declaration” stating that the Hitler regime was now carrying out the often-declared physical destruction of the European Jews in Eastern Europe, and that the German government would be held accountable for these crimes.<sup>162</sup> This was the first official Allied declaration denouncing Nazi crimes against the Jews. It was now known to the world, that the Eastern Front was the site at which the most monstrous crimes in human history were under way.

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<sup>159</sup> „Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s Broadcast to the World about the Meeting with President Roosevelt,” August 24, 1941. Available online: <http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/policy/1941/index.html>, [1 April 2005].

<sup>160</sup> Ibid. The Mongol invasions actually began in the thirteenth century.

<sup>161</sup> “Joint Message of Assistance to the Soviet Union from President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill,” August 15, 1941. Available online: <http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/policy/1941/index.html>, [last visited 1 April 2005].

<sup>162</sup> See Jeffrey Herf, “The Nazi Extermination Camps and the Ally to the East: Could the Red Army and Air Force Have Stopped or Slowed the Final Solution?,” in *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, vol. 4, no. 4 (Fall 2003), 915. And Richard Breitmann, *Official Secrets: What the Nazis Planned, What the British and Americans Knew* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 153f.

As German troops entered the second winter of fighting on Soviet soil in 1942, the first Big-Three Meeting in Casablanca (January 1943) was prepared to discuss the most urging issues with regards to the war effort. Following the public denouncement of Nazi crimes against the Jews in December of 1942, the meeting in Casablanca now concluded with the call for Germany's "unconditional surrender." Stalin, however, could not attend the conference, as the battle of Stalingrad was still not over. In a statement to the press on January 24, 1943, Roosevelt and Churchill assured the Soviet leader of their determination to defeat Hitler with allied forces.<sup>163</sup> In the Soviet Union, Stalingrad became one of the most famous battles of World War II symbolizing both the heroic victory of the Red Army troops and the defeat of fascism by communism.<sup>164</sup> The fighting at Stalingrad itself was watched but little commented on by Roosevelt and Churchill. They both praised "Mr. Stalin's very wonderful detailed plan" leading up to the successful counter-offensive launched in December of 1942.<sup>165</sup> Back in October, in one of his presidential address delivered by radio from the White House (the so-called Fireside Chats), Roosevelt had discussed the waning success of the German effort and the Nazis' resulting propagandistic dilemma:

My dear fellow Americans:

... [Hitler's] 'war of nerves' against the United Nations is now turning into a boomerang. For the first time, the Nazi propaganda machine is on the defensive. They begin to apologize to their own people for the repulse of their vast forces at Stalingrad, and for the enormous casualties they are suffering. They are compelled to beg their overworked people to rally their weakened production.

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<sup>163</sup> The transcript is printed in Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), *The Conferences at Washington, 1941-1942, and Casablanca, 1943* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1968), 726-731.

<sup>164</sup> Sabine Arnold, *Stalingrad im sowjetischen Gedächtnis: Kriegserinnerung und Geschichtsbild im totalitären Staat* (Bochum: Projekt-Verlag, 1998).

<sup>165</sup> FRUS, *The Conferences at Washington, 1941-1942, and Casablanca, 1943*, 762 (Roosevelt's words).

They even publicly admit, for the first time, that Germany can be fed only at the cost of stealing food from the rest of Europe.<sup>166</sup>

Roosevelt informed his own population; it was not the purpose of his message to reach Germany. Still, if these words reached German ears then the message was certainly clear enough.

Thomas Mann, also speaking from American soil, confronted “German listeners” with the catastrophe unfolding before their very eyes. Mann’s relentless wake-up-calls to his fellow-citizens were characterized by three main themes: the famous writer forced upon his listeners a European, a global perspective, urging them to look beyond the edge of the plate. Secondly, he predicted Hitler’s ultimate doom, and warned the German people that only their self-liberation would assure the nation’s return into the world community. Thirdly, Mann encouraged every man and woman to defend themselves, to revolt against the “monster” and “organizer of the second world war.” When the Nazi press finally admitted the disaster at Stalingrad in February 1942, Mann seized the opportunity to once again demonstrate how the regime violated their own people, sacrificed “ten thousands of its sons” and how they “mocked any real mourning” over the dead soldiers of Stalingrad.<sup>167</sup> At the same time, Mann unmasked the purpose of the Nazi-propagated “saga of Stalingrad,” namely to appeal to the last bit of “patriotism” in order to mobilize the “last energies” of German people:

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<sup>166</sup> 23<sup>rd</sup> Fireside Chat “Report on the Home Front,” October 12, 1942, 10 pm. Available online: <http://www.mhric.org/fdr/fdr.html>, [1 April 2005]. During the Teheran Conference (November 1943) Stalin gave Roosevelt the “Stalingrad Sword,” a gift intended to both stress the Red Army’s determination to victory and to manifest the new-found unity in the war against Nazi Germany. The “Big Three” declared their commitment opening a second front against Hitler as soon as possible.

<sup>167</sup> Mann, *Deutsche Hörer!*, 92.

The wholehearted frankness with which they informed the German people of the Stalingrad disaster which indeed belongs to the most devastating failures in military history, was monumental and overwhelming. Nothing was embellished of the horrible end of the siege at Stalingrad – aside from the fact that it was not mentioned that Hitler alone and in person is responsible for this catastrophe. ... The disgusting aftertaste of this truthfulness results from its purpose. Its purpose was, first, to abuse the elementary patriotism of the people for the salvage of the regime and to achieve the mobilization of the last energies – while the organizers did not so much care for the dubious results of this last reserve as for the distracting emotions connected to it. Secondly, however, and above all, the victories of the Russians and the Nazi defeat were admitted so openly and honestly, and maybe even aggrandized in order to arouse fears in the Anglo-Saxon world of the ‘Red Threat,’ of the flooding of the European continent by Bolshevism.<sup>168</sup>

This was a piercing description of Goebbels’ “Total War-” strategy. Mobilization and fear were the two central elements of this campaign, both ultimately leading towards total defeat and self-destruction. But, of course, Mann was unable to effectively erode anti-Bolshevist sentiments and irrational fears of the “Asian hordes” in Germany with this kind of reasoning.<sup>169</sup> With surprising naivety, the writer portrayed Stalin as one of the true liberators of the world defending “the right of every nation to independence and inviolability of its territory ... and also its right to choose a social order and to elect its form of government which it deems wise and necessary.” To underline this point, Mann repeated Stalin’s famous dictum, “one Hitler comes and goes, but the German people and the German state persevere.”<sup>170</sup>

Yet, such was indeed the basic line in official Soviet statements following the June 1941 attack. The first high-ranking official to raise his voice in the Soviet Union was foreign minister Vyacheslav M. Molotov in a radio broadcast on June 22, 1941. From the very beginning, Soviet announcements distinguished between the German

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> In 1944, he wrote an essay on anti-Bolshevism as the „main folly of our epoch;“ the text was later published in the SED’s theoretical organ *Einheit*. Cf. Thomas Mann, “Der Antibolschewismus – die Grundtorheit unserer Epoche,” *Einheit*, no. 2 (July 1946), 105-107.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 93.

people and its “German Fascist rulers,” on the latter of which fell “fully and completely” the “entire responsibility for this predatory attack upon the Soviet Union.”<sup>171</sup> Already in the first statement of the Soviet communist leadership a precautionary exculpation of the German working class was granted. It was along those exact lines, that German communists around Pieck and Ulbricht could later build their master narrative of the war against the Soviet Union, its causes and perpetrators:

This war has been forced upon us, not by the German people, not by German workers, peasants and intellectuals, whose sufferings we well understand, but by the clique of bloodthirsty Fascist rulers of Germany who have enslaved Frenchmen, Czechs, Poles, Serbians, Norway, Belgium, Denmark, Holland, Greece and other nations.<sup>172</sup>

With an astounding two-week delay, Stalin himself made an announcement on radio. On July 3, 1941, he spoke about the “perfidious attack on our Fatherland, begun on 22 June by Hitler Germany” and the “grave dangers” hanging over the country.<sup>173</sup> After explaining at length why this attack had come as a complete surprise to an unprepared Red Army, Stalin presented his country as a “peace-loving” nation that respects the “territorial integrity” of other nations, of course without mentioned the conquest of Eastern Poland in 1939, the annexation of the Baltic States or the war with Finland in 1940. Now this was a life-or-death struggle the result of which would decide whether the world would be free or enslaved. This was a “patriotic war” against “the fascist enslavers,” not against the people of Germany:

This war with fascist Germany cannot be considered an ordinary war. It is not only a war between two armies. It is also a great war of the entire Soviet people against the German fascist forces.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Announcement of Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov on the „Outbreak of the War with Germany,“ printed in *New York Times*, June 23, 1941.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Stalin’s Broadcast Message to the People of the Soviet Union, July 3, 1941, printed in Ueberschär, Wette, eds., *‘Unternehmen Barbarossa,’* 326-329.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 328.



This 1941 narrative falls in line with the NKFD's anti-Hitler propaganda aimed two years later at separating the German people from its Fuhrer. In view of the catastrophic quagmire the Wehrmacht found itself in on the Eastern Front, overthrowing the regime seemed a reasonable thing to do. Yet, reality proved the futility of this argument: it was, after all, not just a "clique" who invaded Russia, but a million men army among which more than just a few were "workers", and more than just a few clung to Nazi ideas.

The difficulty of settling the question of collective and individual responsibility was thus intricately embedded in the multiple memories and narratives of Stalingrad and the war on the Eastern Front ever since the actual fighting had ceased. The emotional, political and ideological battles following this unparalleled blood bath can only be understood thoroughly by including the origins of such memories and narratives. The full complexity of this memory emerges from the multitude of perspectives, the polyphony of the "noises of the past" and from the intricate relationship between personal experience, collective perceptions and political memory. The following concluding remarks summarize the pieces gathered in this chapter in a first step towards a full-textured comprehension of the roots of the memory of Stalingrad and the Eastern Front.

### **III. "Barbarossa" – The Unpopular War?**

In order to fully understand the genesis, complexity and changeability of the memory of the war against the Soviet Union and the battle of Stalingrad we have to return to the

beginning of this “most destructive and barbaric war in history.”<sup>175</sup> While many historians have claimed that “Barbarossa” was a war forced upon the German people by the Nazi regime, the evidence presented in this chapter demonstrates that this was anything but an unpopular war. Passing such a verdict always requires weighing the evidence carefully; in this case this is even more consequential, for the interpretation of the postwar dealing with this legacy depends on this very fundamental assessment.

Kershaw has shown that the general population reacted with anxiety and dismay to the news of “Operation Barbarossa,” this was “Hitler’s war,” not the Germans’ war. Yet, he also admits that after an initial shock, most people supported this invasion as a necessary “crusade” against Bolshevism and they believed the Nazi propaganda of a preventive war in order to save Western civilization.<sup>176</sup> Mommsen and others have noted the lack of enthusiasm for a new war in June 1941;<sup>177</sup> Frei even identified the German people as a whole to having been the “target of the racial-biological, socio-biological program” of the Nazis and put the war into this context.<sup>178</sup> Yet, these claims must be qualified by evidence reflecting a continuing support for the basic direction of German foreign policy, namely for its aggressive reality in the guise of a hollow peace rhetoric since 1933 (after all, Hitler’s “*Mein Kampf*” had been a bestseller in the 1920s and

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<sup>175</sup> Kershaw, *Hitler, 1939-1945: Nemesis*, 388. Bartov, *Hitler’s Army*, 179ff., likewise stresses anxiety and fear in the German population; he also points to the peculiar widespread dual psychological-ideological attitude that in 1941, in the event of a German victory in the East, the “prospects of power and wealth were greater than ever before, but so were the risks.” Ibid., 181.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 389.

<sup>177</sup> Mommsen, „Barbarossa in der deutschen Gesellschaft.“ Wette, „Die propagandistische Begleitmusik zum deutschen Überfall.“

<sup>178</sup> Frei, „Der totale Krieg und die Deutschen,“ 290.

1930s).<sup>179</sup> Latent, increasingly violent, anti-Semitism and anti-Bolshevism along with a “traditionally approving view of war”<sup>180</sup> in wide parts of German society were the main reasons why there was no significant popular rebellion against Hitler’s declaration of war in 1939. And, as long as the war was victorious people rallied behind Hitler.

The war against the Soviet Union put an end to the series of victorious invasions between September 1939 and spring 1941. Without grasping the gravity of this risky undertaking – the Red Army was hopelessly underestimated – people still cheered on the evening of June 22, 1941, for example in Dresden. According to the recollection of Victor Klemperer there was

[g]eneral popular delight [*Allgemeine Volksvergnügtheit*]. Mood: ‘We want to beat France victoriously, Russia and the whole world.’ [In a bar, a traveler:] ‘Now we have clear fronts, now we will be done faster – this time we are prepared, it is not like in the Kaiser Reich anymore.’ [In a dance bar, later that evening:] People danced, joyful faces everywhere. A new jamboree [*Gaudi*], a new prospect for a new sensation, the Russian war is a new pride for people, their clamoring of yesterday is forgotten just as their talk of a ‘peaceful walkover.’<sup>181</sup>

Götz Aly has recently pointed to the degree of appeal and popular support for the Nazi war for “living space” in the East among millions of Germans – and the extent of their potential and actual personal gains. This “concrete utopia for everyone” promised “space, resources, and opportunities for personal advancement.”<sup>182</sup> Aly lists the manifold material gains for ordinary Germans who engaged in a kind of robbery tourism all over Europe –

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<sup>179</sup> Werner Mosse, „Commentary on Manfred Messerschmidt,“ in Frei, Kling, eds., *Der nationalsozialistische Krieg*, 92-95.

<sup>180</sup> Messerschmidt, „Das nationalsozialistische Deutschland,“ in *ibid.*, 76.

<sup>181</sup> Klemperer, *Ich will Zeugnis ablegen. Vol. 4: 1940-1941*, 97. A day later, Klemperer was imprisoned for failure to dim the windows. He served eight days in prison.

<sup>182</sup> Aly, *Hitler’s Volksstaat*, 29f.

the regime's policies of "public greed" and "National Socialist enrichment" bought the nation's consent, or at least kept it silent.<sup>183</sup>

As the war dragged on and the news from the Eastern Front became ever gloomier, popular mood was increasingly marked by apathy, despair and self-pity. Allied bombers air-raided German cities almost nightly by the summer of 1942. The Nazis' "national community" transformed into a "community of the exhausted, the desperate."<sup>184</sup> Fear of total defeat, of revenge and a commitment to "sticking it out" prevented any popular rebellion against a regime that relied increasingly on terror and intimidation as the faith in the Fuhrer crumbled. Yet, with every summer, people regained hope for a "new offensive." They asked "when is the next offensive?,"<sup>185</sup> this time, the last one which will bring "final victory;"<sup>186</sup> or people wondered why no more actions were undertaken in the East in order to defeat the enemy once and for all. Gradually, a concrete fear of Soviet revenge, even understanding for "the Russian soul" seeking ultimate revenge, was being reported by the SD whilst the first rumors spread about the violent expulsion of Germans from the Eastern Reich.<sup>187</sup>

Even if the evidence presented here points to the marginal role the antifascist counter-narratives played in the perceptions of ordinary Germans, these multiple dissenting voices did not dissolve in nothingness. The criminal nature and conduct of the

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 360. See also Aly's recent *Volkes Stimme. Skepsis und Führervertrauen im Nationalsozialismus* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 2006), which further explores these issues.

<sup>184</sup> Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, vol. 4, 929.

<sup>185</sup> SD-Report no. 385, May 24, 1943, in Boberach, ed., *Meldungen aus dem Reich*, 397.

<sup>186</sup> See for example SD-Report no. 373, April 24, 1943, in Boberach, ed., *Meldungen aus dem Reich*, 378-382.

<sup>187</sup> SD-Report February 7, 1944 (green series), in Boberach, ed., *Meldungen aus dem Reich*, 484. The Russians were pitied for the yearlong „enslavement of their souls“ by the Bolsheviks.

war on the Eastern Front was by no means a secret to the German population, and it is this awareness – however faint – that burdened the memory of this war from the very beginning. No other event in the history of the Second World War encapsulates the greatest dilemma of German post-war *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*: coming to terms with the suffering inflicted on “others” and mourning the “own” victims. The official discourses to be traced in the following circulated around this conflicting legacy, a legacy Michael Geyer has called the “stigma of violence.”<sup>188</sup> Stalingrad was only the most brutal amassing of aggression and failure. It was perceived and aestheticized as a national tragedy not only by the National Socialists themselves but also by Hitler’s opponents – by the Allies, exiled communists and in the domestic resistance against the regime. Both, the actual occurrence of the Stalingrad catastrophe and its immediate aesthetization contributed to the emergence of what I have called an (indirect) collective trauma. This battle unlike any other in German war-time and post-war memory became an emblem and a metaphor for senseless war and as such it allowed for the disguise of the most essential issues at hand: what happened and why it happened.

Thus, Stalingrad had the potential of being loaded with all kinds of emotional, political and ideological meanings, and these potentials were fully explored in the postwar years. Yet, it was one purpose of this chapter to illustrate that these multiple memories and narratives did not emerge in May 1945 and after, but that they have their roots in the very events they describe. The total defeat of Nazi Germany was not a sudden defeat; there was no zero hour at which things suddenly turned upside down, from war to

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<sup>188</sup> Geyer, „The place of the Second World War,“ 10f.

peace.<sup>189</sup> It was a long process that can be said to have started with the halting of the incursion into the Soviet Union in late 1941, a military undertaking launched for ideological and material reasons and executed for the purpose of ridding the world off “Jewish Bolshevism,” i.e. mass murder. That Germany transformed from the aggressor and oppressor to the defeated and occupied is the central aspect shaping the first postwar years of political and moral reconstruction. The occupation of Germany by Allied troops determined its future destiny, and in terms of dealing with the legacy of the war on the Eastern Front, this occupation also entailed a fundamental and lasting division of its memory.

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<sup>189</sup> Cf. for example, Martin Broszat, Klaus Dietmar Henke, Hans Woller, eds., *Von Stalingrad zur Währungsreform. Zur Sozialgeschichte des Umbruchs in Deutschland* (Oldenbourg: Wissenschaftsverlag, 1990).

### **Chapter 3**

## **Memory under Occupation: Historical Truth and the Competing Memories of the Eastern Front, 1945-1949**

“Each generation writes its history anew. Though the pasts remain what they are.  
They lay like deceased in the what-has-been,  
but the dead can come back and become the haunting present.”

Theodor Heuss (1946)

## I. Shifting Alliances, Changing Enemies

This chapter traces the origins of the postwar memories of the Eastern Front war in East and West Germany during the years of allied occupation. Despite the military occupation initially imposed on a defeated Germany, Germans themselves, and more specifically the emerging political elites, shaped these narratives. The successful integration of a multitude of wartime experiences, namely the sufferings and losses, and not so much German crimes and the “other” victims, was a crucial, necessary and problematic step in the political-spiritual reconstruction process. It promised and preconditioned the emergence of new coherent collective identities and a sense of loyalty to a new political system.

The antifascist founding narrative established by the East German leaders in the Soviet zone in order to legitimize the erection of a “proletarian dictatorship,” rested primarily on the predominance of the Eastern Front war in the communists’ World War II memory. This calculated *presence* of the war against the Soviet Union as the “greatest crime of German imperialism” in the political memory of the SED reduced the war to the antifascist struggle in the East. It marginalized the Holocaust along with the Western Front, and the war-time alliance between the Soviet Union, the United States, and Great Britain. In the Western zones, however, the Eastern Front war was largely *absent* from the emerging political memory of the leading parties. There was a wide-spread refusal to face historical reality in light of postwar Soviet expansionism in Eastern Europe. The much-debated crimes of the Red Army in occupied Germany gave little reason for empathy and memory of German crimes committed on the Eastern Front.



Yet, these diverging political memories in the Eastern and Western zones were not only heavily influenced by the emerging Cold War divide, but they were also shaped by the individual experiences of their protagonists. The political socialization during the Weimar years, the Nazi period, and the war, had a major impact on the way the first generation of political leaders in postwar Germany interpreted the Eastern Front war.

#### PAST AND PRESENT IN POSTWAR GERMANY

“Since midnight the weapons are silent on all fronts. On the command of the Grand Admiral [Dönitz], the Wehrmacht has stopped the fight which had become hopeless. Therefore the almost six-year-long, honorable struggle is over.”<sup>1</sup> With these words the last entry in the *Kriegstagebuch* of the Wehrmacht High Command (OKW) reported the final capitulation of the German army on all fronts. The fierce fighting on the Eastern Front had continued until the very last hours of World War II in Europe. Berlin (May 2) and Breslau (May 9) were the two last cities to fall. Even in their final statement, the Wehrmacht leadership insisted on the honor of the German soldier and the righteousness of the Nazi war unleashed against Europe and the world. The “unforgotten achievements of the German soldiers” were hailed as unique acts of honorable bravery which would find ultimate appreciation only in the “later verdict of history.” The OKW report closed with the prophecy that even the enemy would not get around acknowledging respectfully the “achievements and sacrifices” of the German soldiers. Therefore, “every soldier can lay down the weapons in an upright and proud manner and begin to work bravely and

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<sup>1</sup> Last entry in the OKW’s War Diary, May 9, 1945. Quoted in Rolf-Dieter Müller, Gerd R. Ueberschär, *Kriegsende 1945. Die Zerstörung des Deutschen Reiches* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1994), 181 (document no. 21).

optimistically for the eternal existence of our people in this darkest hour of our history.”<sup>2</sup>

This curious mixture of admitting defeat and professing confidence in the present and future on the last day of the war anticipated two central sentiments of the postwar years in occupied Germany: defeat, humiliation, and suffering on the one hand, and reconstruction, restoration, and national revival on the other. This process entailed addressing the question of crimes and their punishment, and the way it played out between 1945 and 1949 illustrates the roots of the emerging “divided memory” of the war on the Eastern Front and the Holocaust in the two German states. The trauma of defeat and destruction which had started with the saga of Stalingrad was to dominate the postwar narratives of the Eastern Front more than any other theme, and in fact, regardless of the political system to be installed.

This chapter will examine the multiple memories emerging from the historical legacy of the war against the Soviet Union and its symbolic culmination point, the battle of Stalingrad. To gain intellectual power over the past promised actual power over the present and future of the nation. The “public use of history” (Habermas) is always political and it is the correlation between power and memory which underlies the following considerations. While the focus here is on the developments in Soviet occupied Germany, I will also discuss the political and intellectual discourses over the past in the Western zones. Occupied Germany was divided militarily, yet people still perceived of themselves as part of the whole, particularly – as the sources reflect – in the political and cultural spheres.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

In East Germany where the communists under Walter Ulbricht and Wilhelm Pieck sought to realize their vision of the “other Germany”, antifascism became the overriding theme under which a socialist reconstruction was to take place. The memory, interpretation and instrumentalization of the war against the Soviet Union played a central role in the “founding myth” of antifascism in the GDR.<sup>3</sup> The fact, that the war between Germany and the Soviet Union was essential for the formation of the GDR’s self-image has long been neglected in historiography on East Germany. The other central and concurrent pillar of the KPD/SED’s drive towards a socialist Germany was the German-Soviet alliance and friendship. In the limited research done on the Society for the Study of Soviet Culture and its successor, the Association for German-Soviet Friendship, their crucial function as ideological and political mass organizations linking the fascist past with the communist future remained largely underestimated,<sup>4</sup> even unnoticed.<sup>5</sup>

While the German communists sought to integrate the memory of the Eastern Front into their vision of practiced antifascism in East Germany, the war against the Soviet Union soon vanished from the political and historical discourses in the Western zones. The reluctance to face the historical reality certainly resulted in part from the misery the Soviet Army had brought over many Germans, and it was also a consequence of rising

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<sup>3</sup> Münkler, “Antifaschismus und antifaschistischer Widerstand. See also Jürgen Danyel, „Die Opfer- und Verfolgtenperspektive als Gründungskonsens?“ Meuschel, *Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft*, 29-122. Grunenberg, *Antifaschismus*.

<sup>4</sup> David Pike, *The Politics of Culture in Soviet-Occupied Germany, 1945-1949* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 315-319, 460-472. Norman Naimark, *Russians in Germany. A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945-1949* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 408-419.

<sup>5</sup> Jan C. Behrends, “Sowjetische ‘Freunde’ und fremde ‘Russen’. Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft zwischen Ideologie und Alltag (1949-1990)“ in Jan C. Behrends, Thomas Lindenberger, Patrice G. Poutrous, eds., *Fremde und Fremdsein in der DDR. Zu historischen Ursachen der Fremdenfeindlichkeit in Ostdeutschland*. (Berlin: Metropol, 2003), 74-98.

Cold War tensions. The legacy of the invasion was subtly codified in the legend of the “tragedy of Stalingrad” and in the myth of a “clean Wehrmacht” heralding an army which, if at all, was guilty of following the scrupulous adventurer Hitler into a world war but not of committing crimes in its wake. Nonetheless, the war on the Eastern Front remained as important in German collective conscience as it was during the war even though its immediate reception and interpretation after the war differed fundamentally. While in both emerging Germanys the integration of this memory into a new (semi-) national identity was a central concern of the political elites, the results of these attempts could not have been more dissimilar. In East Germany it was the calculated public *presence* of the war against the Soviet Union, in West Germany its selective public *absence*, which endowed the legacy of “Barbarossa” with such potential for later contestation. In turn, the Western Front, namely the fight of the Soviet Union’s anti-Hitler coalition partners United States and Great Britain, were widely absent from the official memory of GDR until the 1980s, and rather prominently remembered in the Federal Republic of Germany. The divided memory of the Eastern Front in East and West Germany was the result of a politically and ideologically driven myth-making on both sides – indeed part of a European trend<sup>6</sup> – referring to the same historical event while arriving at completely different constructions of respectively “usable pasts.”

The initiative and creative energy that went into these efforts at reconstructing the past came primarily from Germans themselves, and not, as often assumed, from their occupiers. Thus, the intentionally ambiguous chapter title “memory under occupation”

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<sup>6</sup> Judt, „The Past is Another Country.”

refers rather to the socio-political context and external circumstances than to the degree of interpretative influence that the Allied occupation forces actually had on matters of history and memory.

#### THE MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF “1945” – MEMORY VS. MYTH, DEFEAT VS. LIBERATION

Before getting into the detailed discussion, two observations of general importance for the study of German postwar memory need to be discussed. The first pertains to the place of German postwar memory in the wider European perspective. The second takes issue with the perception of 1945 as “zero hour.” It points to the role of memory for the political and intellectual reconstruction of German postwar society in particular, and for political culture in democratic and dictatorial societies in postwar Europe in general.

After the end of the Cold War, it has been argued that the memory of World War II was molded largely during the years of 1945 and 1948 and that these memories had more in common with myth than with history.<sup>7</sup> Historians have further pointed out that World War II was both a global war and a series of civil wars erupting all over the European continent.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the tendency to exploit history for its potential to forge new national identities after the war was a European phenomenon which lasted throughout the Cold War until 1989. The emergence of the memory of World War II in East and West Germany must therefore be viewed in the context of a larger international trend towards historical myth-making – aimed at forging suitable historical narratives – in the aftermath of the war. The basis for the material and intellectual reconstruction was less an open and

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<sup>7</sup> Judt, „The Past is Another Country,” 86.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. for example Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent. Europe's Twentieth Century* (New York: Knopf, 1998).

honest inventory of past events than a mixture of their repression, selective memory and instrumentalization as ingredients for suitable founding myths stabilizing the emerging postwar societies. Even if we understand such political myths in this context as narratives which endow a community with an emotional sense of belonging and identity,<sup>9</sup> it seems useful to consider the memories of the war on the Eastern Front more in terms of their historical than their mythical elements.

The two central “mythical” elements pertaining to the Eastern Front have already been studied extensively, namely the “myth of the clean Wehrmacht” in West Germany, and the “antifascist founding myth” in the East Germany. In the earlier case, the term “myth” is used in his historical meaning as “lie” or “untruth;” the latter case refers to the analytical concept of a “political myth” which has been studied and debated extensively among historians and political scientists. I prefer to speak of antifascism and the German-Soviet friendship project based on the war’s “lessons” as complementary “founding narratives.” It is a primary task of this dissertation to dissect these narratives in context of the memory of the war against the Soviet Union and to assess their impact on postwar German political culture. Thus, the political memory of the Eastern Front is

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<sup>9</sup> For my purposes, the notion of “political myth” seems analytically not very fruitful for I am neither concerned with the ritualized, pseudo-religious, transcendental representations, meanings and appropriations of the past nor with “symbolic politics” only, but with recollections and public communications of historical knowledge in the political sphere. On political myths in general see Yves Bizeul, ed., *Politische Mythen und Rituale in Deutschland, Frankreich und Polen* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2000). Andreas Dörner, *Politischer Mythos und symbolische Politik Sinnstiftung durch symbolische Formen am Beispiel des Hermannmythos* (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1995). On the creation and instrumentalization of political myths in the GDR see Herfried Münkler, “Politische Mythen der DDR,” *Jahrbuch der Berlin-Brandenburgischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, 1996 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1996), 123-156. Alan Nothnagle, *Building the East German Myth. Historical Mythology and Youth Propaganda in the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1989* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999). Raina Zimmering, *Mythen in der Politik der DDR. Ein Beitrag zur Erforschung politischer Mythen* (Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 2000).

treated here not as a conglomeration of historical myths – which it was neither in the East nor in the West – but as amalgamation of publicly communicated stories about the past. The focus is not on political “myth-making” but on the intersection of historical memory and current-day politics in view of the (un-) willingness and (in-) ability of political elites to face historical reality in response to shifting political and ideological necessities.

A truthful reckoning with the past was in the immediate postwar years not on the political agendas in Western and Eastern Europe for various reasons: the Western democracies saw themselves threatened by internal social upheaval, which a candid unraveling of the tangled web left by resistance and complicity during the Nazi occupation would inevitably entail, and by external domination of Soviet communism on the march in East-Central Europe. In the Eastern European countries, the bitter reality of Soviet occupation scotched every effort at finding nationally individual paths towards a sincere *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* from the very beginning. The Soviet narrative of the historical victory of communism over fascism was imposed on Eastern Europe in variations but with one central aspiration: to manifest the alleged superiority of Soviet communism. The antifascist war of liberation led by the Red Army and jointly fought by local communists became the founding legend of the new Eastern European “people’s democracies;” and in East Germany this legend was established in its “purest form.”<sup>10</sup> While it is true that “collective identities are always a complex composition of myth, memory and political convenience,”<sup>11</sup> the politics of the past in dictatorial societies have neglected one fundamental feature of modern civil societies: the necessity to confront and

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<sup>10</sup> Judt, “The Past is Another Country,” 92.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 112.

debate the past in open discourse so that individual experiences and collective memory can be truly reconciled over time. The long-term suppression of individual and collective conversations about the past has had a lasting impact on these societies. In the East German case under consideration here, this fact becomes even more crucial considering that German reunification in 1990 has renewed the search for a national identity that appropriately integrates the Third Reich and its legacy. In the long run, the divided memory of the Eastern Front war became a historic burden which still remains to be overcome these days.

Returning to the very beginnings of this division, the initial commonality of external circumstances has to be noted. Germany was occupied by forces of the anti-Hitler-coalition, but soon the wartime alliance turned into mutual opposition and open hostility. The impact of these shifting alliances in the wake of the Cold War on the Eastern Front memory cannot be overstated. The former arch-enemy of Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union (or “Jewish Bolshevism”) attained new roles depending on the perspective. For the Western democracies, and the Western zones of occupation, the USSR became the chief adversary, the “other” totalitarian threat. This meant for parts of Germany a practical continuation of the Nazi view of the Soviet Union as a threat to Western (now democratic) civilization. For the Eastern part of Germany, however, the former arch-enemy became the prime international protégé and ally. This radical transformation of a former enemy into the “greatest friend of the German people” created one of *the* major ideological problems for KPD/SED and Soviet authorities during the years of occupation. The sudden turn-around in allegiance engendered a lasting dilemma for the ruling communists throughout the existence of their state.



The emerging, diametrically opposed postwar attitudes towards the Soviet Union were accompanied by respectively opportunistic political memories of the Nazi war against the Soviet Union. In both cases, the war was used to exert fear – fear of another totalitarian, anti-democratic threat in the West, and fear of another imperialist, neo-fascist crusade against the Soviet Union in the East. The “Never Again” rhetoric employed on both sides of the Iron Curtain in this context referred primarily to the war on the Eastern Front – namely, depending on the perspective, to the suffering of German soldiers and over time also to the systematic extermination of the European Jews in the West, and to the imperialist war of exploitation and extermination against the USSR in the East. The peculiar interpretation and memory of “Operation Barbarossa” contributed crucially to the atmosphere of fear in the first two decades after the end of World War II. The rising Cold War tensions, it must not be forgotten, hung like a shadow over these memories, and it is this juxtaposition of past and present, of historical memory and political reality, which makes the Eastern Front a superb starting point for the study of the interrelatedness of war, memory and politics in postwar Germany.

The way political and cultural elites interpreted the war on the Eastern Front was first and foremost shaped by the way they viewed the caesura of May 8, 1945. From today’s perspective, the day on which the German armed forces surrendered marked the transition from war to peace. Yet, to contemporary Germans it was but one date in a series of existentially important events in the long process of the Third Reich’s dissolution. Depending on the personal circumstances, May 1945 had multiple meanings. For some it was a day of liberation from incarceration, for many it was a day signaling

military and personal defeat, for others again it was a time of suffering from expulsion and persecution.<sup>12</sup>

Very early on, the contours of the official views of the end of the war became visible. A look at the first announcements of political parties in 1945 shows that while communists perceived VE Day as a day of liberation, thus as a generally *positive* event, all other political parties and the churches focused on the experience of defeat and national destruction, therefore endowing the war's end with a generally *negative* connotation. The KPD's "Call to the German People for the Reconstruction of an Antifascist-Democratic Germany," issued on June 11, 1945, described the end of the war as the apocalyptic conclusion of the nation's erroneous path (*Irrweg*). The "conscienceless adventurer and criminals" around Hitler had thrown the blinded and all-to-willing masses into their own doom; his "total war was the most unjust, wildest and most criminal war of conquest [*Raubkrieg*] of all times."<sup>13</sup> Ultimately however, the "cause of justice, of freedom and of progress" had prevailed thanks to Soviet, British and

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<sup>12</sup> Several recent studies examine the ambiguous memory of VE Day in Germany. Volker Ackermann, „Zweierlei Gedenken. Der 8. Mai 1945 in der Erinnerung der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und der DDR,“ in Holger Afflerbach, Christoph Cornelißen, ed., *Sieger und Besiegte. Materielle und ideelle Neuorientierungen nach 1945* (Tübingen: Francke, 1997), 315-334. Norbert Frei, *1945 und Wir. Das Dritte Reich im Bewusstsein der Deutschen* (München: Beck, 2005). Peter Hurrelbrink, *Der 8. Mai. Befreiung durch Erinnerung. Ein Gedenktag und seine Bedeutung für das politisch-kulturelle Selbstverständnis der Deutschen* (Bonn: Dietz, 2005). See Konrad Jarausch, "Zwischen Niederlage und Befreiung: Das Jahr 1945 und die Kontinuitäten der deutschen Geschichte," *Gewerkschaftliche Monatshefte* 5 (1995), 272-282. Jan-Holger Kirsch, „Wir haben aus der Geschichte gelernt. Der 8. Mai als politischer Gedenktag in Deutschland (Köln: Böhlau, 1999).

For a critical assessment of „1945“ as the beginning of a second dictatorship in Germany see Hubertus Knabe, *Tag der Befreiung. Das Kriegsende in Ostdeutschland* (Berlin: Propyläen, 2005). For a good summary of the debate about the meaning of May 1945 as day of defeat, liberation or victory see Gerd Wiegel, „Niederlage, Befreiung oder Sieg. Der 8. Mai im Spiegel seiner Jubiläen,“ *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* 5 (2005), 564-570.

<sup>13</sup> „Aufruf des Zentralkomitees der Kommunistischen Partei Deutschlands an das deutsche Volk zum Aufbau eines antifaschistisch-demokratischen Deutschlands“ (11 June 1945), printed in Ministerium für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten der DDR, ed., *Um ein antifaschistisch-demokratisches Deutschland. Dokumente aus den Jahren 1945-1949* (Berlin (Ost): Staatsverlag, 1968), 56-63, quote on 56.

American forces who had led the united nations' fight against Nazi Germany. The Red Army's and Allied sacrifices had saved "humanity from Hitlerbarbarism." Not least the German people themselves had been unshackled, the Allies had brought them "peace and liberation from the chains of Hitler-slavery."<sup>14</sup> May 8, 1945 was thus a victorious date – a day of liberation, freedom and reprieve. Though the anti-Hitler-coalition was still expressively mentioned here, the statement also clarified who had been the prime victim of Nazism: "Hitler's greatest and most fateful war crime was the perfidious and treacherous attack against the Soviet Union."<sup>15</sup>

Still in those early postwar months, the KPD could point to such prominent intellectuals as Thomas Mann to support this position. The second issue of the SED's theoretical organ *Einheit* carried "some considerations" written by Mann before the war's end under the title „Anti-Bolshevism – the Main Folly of Our Epoch."<sup>16</sup> The editors of *Einheit* reasoned that "even though we don't agree with every single statement, we print them because every German should know how the greatest German bourgeois poet judges the anticommunist campaign launched by the enemy of the people."<sup>17</sup> They pointed in particular to the way Mann connected "fascism with monopoly capitalism." The poet was thus quoted with the following critical lines:

Certainly, I wouldn't pass the Marxist exam, but although I know that fascism has its intellectual side, and that one must view it as a reactionary movement against the rationalist humanism of the nineteenth century, I cannot but view it also as a political-economic-reactionary movement, ... as the attempt of all those orientated socially and economically backwards to keep down the peoples and their claims to happiness and to hinder any social progress by tagging it with the ghastly name "Bolshevism." In the

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 57f.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Mann, "Der Antibolschewismus – die Grundtorheit unserer Epoche," *Einheit*, no. 2 (July 1946), 105-107.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 105.

eyes of Western conservative capitalism, fascism was the bulwark per se against Bolshevism and against everything one wanted to target with that name.<sup>18</sup>

Mann's remarks must be viewed in context of the wartime alliance which united "differing world views" in Russia and the West against "fascisms." In Mann's view, "this war was in part also about overcoming this difference, about balancing socialism and democracy, on which all hope in the world rests. They are united in the fight against human degradation which the fascist conquest of the world would entail." For the SED, these statements originating in the context of the wartime alliance – an alliance the SED would increasingly marginalize – offered nonetheless welcome support to their postwar critique of the West for allegedly carrying on Hitler's anticommunism. Even more welcome was Mann's quintessential declaration that "the scare of the bourgeois world of the word Communism," the scare from which fascism has profited so long, had "something superstitious, something childish." To Mann, who believed himself immune against the "suspicion to be a fore-fighter for communism," this scare was the "main folly of our epoch."<sup>19</sup> Stripping these remarks off their context, the Marxist-Leninist SED even enlisted Germany's "greatest bourgeois poet" in the propaganda battle over the right lessons of World War II and fascism's "greatest crime," the war against the Soviet Union.

Quite dissimilar was the tone in announcements of the other political parties. The two largest parties to emerge in the Western zone, the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) and the Christian-Democratic Union (CDU), emphasized the disastrous

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 107. Mann is further quoted praising the communist idea ("a vision much older than Marxism") because to him a future without "communist features" was unthinkable: "without the basic idea of common property rights to the goods of the earth, without a progressing reduction of the class differences, without the right to work and the duty to work for all," the "world coming after us was unconceivable."

situation in which the German people were at the end of the war. The SPD, while still supportive of the KPD's call for a unified denazification and demilitarization campaign towards an antifascist Germany, nonetheless resonated a sense of victimization and despair among the German population. VE Day appeared as ultimate rock bottom of Germany's existence. It had left "people in deepest spiritual torment, in unimaginable misery ... As a result of Hitler's guilt, our pitiable and tortured nation has to endure unspeakable suffering and pass through a deep valley of sorrow."<sup>20</sup> The message for the future was that despite all this misery, the German nation had to learn from this "brazen lesson of history" and had to "work relentlessly for the respect of all peaceful, freedom-loving countries."<sup>21</sup>

The Christian-conservative CDU expressed similar views in its first two political statements – the so-called "Theses of Cologne" and its founding declaration.<sup>22</sup> Here as well, the German people first and foremost emerged as Hitler's prime victim: "National Socialism has lured Germany into disaster, which is without example in its long history," noting however that this could not have happened if "wide circles of the nation would not have let themselves be guided by a greedy materialism."<sup>23</sup> In the end was war, and with it

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<sup>20</sup> „Aufruf des Zentralkomitees der Sozialdemokratischen Partei Deutschlands zum Aufbau eines antifaschistisch-demokratischen Deutschlands“ (June, 15 1945), printed in Ministerium für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten der DDR, ed., *Um ein antifaschistisch-demokratisches Deutschland. Dokumente*, 67-71, quote on 67, 71. An abbreviated version is printed in Christoph Kleßmann, *Die doppelte Staatsgründung. Deutsche Geschichte 1945-1955* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, 1986), 415-417.

<sup>21</sup> Ministerium für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten der DDR, ed., *Um ein antifaschistisch-demokratisches Deutschland. Dokumente*, 68.

<sup>22</sup> „Kölner Leitsätze der CDU. Ein Ruf zur Sammlung des deutschen Volkes“ (June 1945), printed in Christoph Kleßmann, *Die doppelte Staatsgründung*, 423f. And „Gründungsauftrag der Christlich-Demokratischen Union Deutschlands“ (June, 26 1945), printed in Ministerium für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten der DDR, ed., *Um ein antifaschistisch-demokratisches Deutschland. Dokumente*, 78-81.

<sup>23</sup> „Kölner Leitsätze der CDU. Ein Ruf zur Sammlung des deutschen Volkes“ (June 1945), printed in Christoph Kleßmann, *Die doppelte Staatsgründung*, 423.

“ruin for us all.”<sup>24</sup> Only a reorientation on the moral and spiritual powers of the Christian heritage could overcome the “chaos of guilt and shame” in which the “deification (*Vergottung*) of one criminal adventurer has plunged us.”<sup>25</sup> The day of the end of the Nazi regime marks the beginning of a “path of atonement, a path towards rebirth.” This reconciliatory tone was accompanied by a compassionate reference to the “other victims” of Nazism, namely the “countless Jewish fellow-citizens”<sup>26</sup> who had fallen victim to the terror regime – the *only* reference to the Jewish catastrophe in all initial party statements examined here. Nonetheless, to the newly found CDU, VE Day marked the hour of the “gravest catastrophe which ever came over *any* country.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, Germany’s ultimate destruction and defeat was the greatest calamity brought on by Hitler. Quite atypically for his party at that time, its leader in Cologne, later chancellor Konrad Adenauer, noted already in October 1945 that the conduct of “Russia” in Eastern Europe and East Germany made the “division of Eastern Europe, the Russian territory, and Western Europe a fact,” and he anticipated the necessity to ally the West German territories to the democratic West.<sup>28</sup>

A similar religiously inspired discourse about guilt and atonement can be found in the German protestant church’s “Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt” (*Stuttgarter Schuldbekennntnis*) presented to international representatives at the Ecumenical Council of

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> „Gründungsaufruf der Christlich-Demokratischen Union Deutschlands“ (June, 26 1945), printed in Ministerium für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten der DDR, ed., *Um ein antifaschistisch-demokratisches Deutschland. Dokumente*, 78.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 78f.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 78 [Emphasis added].

<sup>28</sup> Konrad Adenauer to the mayor of Duisburg, October 31, 1945, printed in Christoph Kleßmann, *Die doppelte Staatsgründung*, 425.

the Churches in October of 1945. The Evangelical Church of Germany declared in this document that it saw itself united with the German people not only by shared suffering but also by a “solidarity of guilt.”<sup>29</sup> It viewed the end of the war first and foremost as a time for admission and the realization of guilt. “With great pain we say: because of us, endless misery has been brought over many peoples and countries.” The religious leaders who signed the declaration, among them Bishop Otto Dibelius (1880-1976) (its *spiritus rector*) and Pastor Martin Niemöller (1892-1984) who had both been active antifascists during the Nazi years, confessed the churches’ share of responsibility for the crimes committed in and by Nazi Germany. May 8, 1945 to them represented the ultimate failure of the “spirit of violence and revenge”<sup>30</sup> which had inflicted such deep despair on Germany and other nations. Here again, VE Day was perceived with a negative connotation, namely as the present end point of human history.

It was between these two poles – VE Day as positively connoted date symbolizing liberation, and as negatively connoted date symbolizing defeat – that the memory of the war on the Eastern Front oscillated. In the East it was designed to embody the limitless suffering of German and Soviet soldiers in an ultimately worthy and victorious battle against fascism. In the West, the reality of “Barbarossa” was reduced to the seemingly senseless suffering of the German soldier and the German prisoner of war as the relentless Soviet counter-invasion of Eastern Europe caused new hardship and injustice.

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<sup>29</sup> The text is printed in Armin Boyens, „Das Stuttgarter Schuldbekenntnis vom 19. Oktober 1945 – Entstehung und Bedeutung,“ *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 19 (1971), 374-397, quote on 374.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 375.

In this sense, the reading of contemporary sources in order to trace the genesis of the Eastern Front memory is the attempt to put ourselves into the hearts and minds of contemporary Germans in the immediate postwar period. Thomas Nipperdey has reminded us that the “past is more than prehistory” and that writing history means unearthing and examining contingencies, not just outcomes.<sup>31</sup> He emphasized the importance of the category of continuity for the study of times of radical historical change: “continuity is a category of historical conscience under which we select and organize the handed down historical material.”<sup>32</sup> For this reason, I have examined alternative voices discussing events on the Eastern Front during the Nazi period; and for the same reason the multiple interpretations of the war on the Eastern Front in postwar Germany will be examined here – even if many of these interpretations did not make it into the mainstream or official narratives of this war.

Postwar views of the past were not imposed on Germans by Allied occupation authorities. As Jeffrey Herf has demonstrated, political parties resumed political and intellectual traditions of the pre-1933 era in order to explain issues of the past and present. Their representatives therefore initiated “multiple restorations of the non- and anti-Nazi political traditions of pre-1933 Germany – communism, social democracy, liberalism, and moderate conservatism – that came to dominate the post-1945 political culture of both Germanys.”<sup>33</sup> Interpretations of the past were formulated within these

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas Nipperdey, „1933 und die Kontinuitäten der deutschen Geschichte,“ *Historische Zeitschrift*, 227 (1978), 86-111, quote on 110.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 101f.

<sup>33</sup> Jeffrey Herf, “Multiple Restorations: German Political Traditions and the Interpretation of Nazism, 1945-1946,” *Central European History*, 26, 1 (1993), 21-55.



resumed political worldviews and were shaped by both, experiences of the Nazi-past and the Weimar years, as well as by the socio-political situation in postwar Germany. History was thus not written by the Allies in occupied Germany, but it was the interpretative framework of the pre-Nazi period which primarily shaped German perceptions of the past. Even in the Soviet zone of occupation where former exile communists around Walter Ulbricht increasingly functioned as Stalin's prolonged arm, the communists drew their own lessons from the failure of the divided "working class" to prevent Nazism's rise. They further willingly adopted the Soviet interpretation of the war against Nazi-Germany as communism's victorious battle against fascist imperialism with the Soviet Union as Nazism's prime victim and liberator thereof. In this scenario the historical examination of character and reality of the war on the Eastern Front attained particular and peculiar attention within the SED and its mass organizations such as the Society for the Study of Soviet Culture (since 1949 Association for German-Soviet Friendship, DSF). The genesis of the memory of the Eastern Front war in East and West Germany can best be understood in light of the political traditions within which it was formulated and publicly communicated following the end of World War II.

## **II. Old Enemies, New Friends – New Enemies, Old Friends**

### **POPULAR ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE "RUSSIANS" AFTER THE WAR**

In November 1945, Victor Klemperer who was now a free man again and still kept a lengthy diary, observed the changing political climate and the persisting popular mood in the Soviet zone. The ubiquitous official festivities commemorating the anniversary of the October Revolution prompted him to note the following comment on the state of German-Soviet relations just a few months after the end of the war:

The revolutionary celebrations of the Russians, October 7, 1917, filled the Berlin radio station. The Germans crawl up deep into the Russians a. [ass], at times (speech of the Christian Democrats!) in a funny meandering way. Much, maybe most of the good which is being said about the Russians may well be true: the humanism, the law, the success of the Bolshevik basic principles. But here the misery, the bureaucratic chaos, daily insults, arbitrary acts of individual commanders, officially-sanctioned plunderings demonstrate us constantly that things are factually much different than on the radio. From this results great bitterness and danger for the future. ... Gruesome, this identity between LTI and LQI, of the Soviet and the Nazi, the new-democratic and the Hitlerite song! This obtrudes on and pervades everything from morning until midnight! In every word, every sentence, every thought...unconcealed imperialism of the Russians.<sup>34</sup>

Klemperer not only observed the intensity of the Soviet propagandistic and physical presence in East Germany, he also alluded to and foresaw the troubling similarities between the language of the Nazis (he was writing on a book about the *Lingua Tertii Imperii*) and the Soviet regime in Germany (*Lingua Quartii Imperii*). The “great bitterness” he noticed among the German population caused him to question the prospects of the Soviet presence from the very beginning. And as the following paragraphs demonstrate, his observations reflected the mainstream popular mood during the early postwar years.

Among the records of the American occupation forces in Germany one finds a collection of letters to RIAS (Radio in the American Sector) written by Berliners and Germans from the Soviet zone of occupation during the summer of 1948.<sup>35</sup> This unique source reflecting contemporary views on the internal conditions in East Germany documents a remarkable continuation of National Socialist sentiments, particularly of

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<sup>34</sup> Victor Klemperer, *So sitze ich denn zwischen allen Stühlen. Tagebücher I: 1945-1949* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1999), 138f.

<sup>35</sup> Box 25 „Letters to RIAS,” 260.7.5 Records of the Office of Military Government, Berlin Sector, Record Group 260, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD. The letters were translated into English by RIAS personnel and then transmitted to OMGUS authorities. I thank my colleague Nicholas Schlosser for bringing these sources to my attention.

anti-Russian feelings, and a strong sense of the Russians as unwelcome “strangers.”<sup>36</sup> Read before the background of the SED’s attempts at reconciling Germans and Russians, these letters allude to the magnitude of the undertaking the SED was up to in East Germany. Naturally, most correspondents were supportive of the Western Allies and squarely rejected the Soviet occupation of Germany. Thus, the letters constitute an important primary source for the anti-Soviet mood in the Eastern zone after three years of Soviet occupation. Even though the RIAS staff pre-selected the letters before forwarding them to the Office of the Military Government of the United States in Germany (OMGUS), they nonetheless represent distinct evidence for the severity of resistance and opposition in the hearts and minds of many East Germans.

One striking though not unexpected feature of these texts was the omnipresence of the past, in general. The war, and along with it the former hostility with the “Russians,” was a recurrent theme in the letters, overshadowing many observations regarding the present and future situation in Germany. Yet, as historical reality the war against the Soviet Union was completely absent. Not a single letter reflected on the crimes committed by Germans on Soviet territory before 1945. Rather, the “crimes” of Bolshevik terror committed in Germany *after* 1945 were at the forefront. Though not a complete surprise, one could have expected some sense of historical burden and an effort to balance, considering the fact that the public prosecution of Nazi war crimes on the

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<sup>36</sup> On the perception of Russians as „strangers“ or “foreigners” see Simone Barck, „Die fremden Freunde. Historische Wahrnehmungsweisen deutsch-sowjetischer Kulturbeziehungen in der SBZ in den Jahren 1948/49“, in Konrad Jarausch, Hannes Siegrist, eds., *Amerikanisierung und Sowjetisierung in Deutschland 1945-1970* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 1997), 335-360. And Evamarie Badstübner-Peter, “Über ‘die Russen’ und über uns. Das Eigene und das Fremde in der ostdeutschen Kulturgeschichte,” *Mitteilungen aus der kulturwissenschaftlichen Forschung*, vol. 35 (Juni 1995), 266-278.

Eastern Front was just a few months away in 1948. Especially in East German newspapers and radio, the Nuremberg Military Tribunal and the successor trials had been covered extensively; the cases at hand had been described vividly in detail and commented accordingly.<sup>37</sup>

Yet, the present ruled the past. In June 1948 the currency reform and the Soviet blockade of Western Berlin deepened the rift between the former allies and inaugurated the first hot phase of the Cold War. A general sense of inevitable division not only between the Soviet Union and the Western allies took hold of people, along with a concrete fear of Germany's permanent division, even of new war. This was clearly reflected in the letters to RIAS. The American-run radio station was seen by many as a last bulwark of truth, freedom and democracy amidst Soviet domination and terrorist rule. One anonymous writer in Oranienburg, a town north of Berlin, pleaded with the Americans not to leave Berlin and Germany: "We in the Eastern zone implore you: don't forsake us!" He also reported that people were being taken to "concentration camps" for suspected opposition, and called for help: "Deliver us from the Russians and their communist friends! Plead for all of us, dear RIAS!"<sup>38</sup> A worker from the Eastern zone expressed admiration for the air-lift established by the Western powers, "hoping that we too will once get help from them. Deliver us from the 'liberators' of the East!"<sup>39</sup> The ironic use of the word "liberator" for the Soviets exemplifies the distrustful, often hateful

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<sup>37</sup> See Chapter 4.

<sup>38</sup> Letter 1569/7 Anonymus Eastern zone, July 22, 1948, Box 25 „Letters to RIAS.“ 260.7.5 Records of the Office of Military Government, Berlin Sector, Record Group 260, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD [thereafter Box 25, OMGUS, Berlin Sector, RG 260, NARA College Park, MD].

<sup>39</sup> Letter 917/7 Anonymous Eastern zone, July 12, 1948. Box 25, OMGUS, Berlin Sector, RG 260, NARA College Park, MD

tone of all letters. Most writers had no illusions about the illegitimate and authoritarian aspirations of the Soviet and East German communists in the Eastern zone.

The correspondents portrayed the East German population as helpless victims at mercy of an enemy both, cruel and inferior. Their letters expressed a mix of continuing anti-Russian sentiments and fear of danger in the present. A woman complained that “we women of East Berlin are like David fighting against Goliath.” Hinting at the problem of rape by Red Army soldiers and the sordid food situation which burdened particularly women and children, the writer asserted defiance not without a peculiar sense of superiority: “Rather death than still greater disgrace by being at the mercy of a vulgar power.”<sup>40</sup> Another letter asked provocatively, “must an oppressed nation become extinct by these unworthy people?”<sup>41</sup> Still others referred to the Soviets as “hodgepodge of Asiatic peoples”, “Slavs,” or “Bolshevist terrorists” clearly resonating a deeply-rooted aversion against Russians. This racist odium was accompanied by a sense of powerlessness and disgrace resulting from the defeat and destruction of Germany. For some, the fighting could continue unremittingly if only the means were available. A man from south-east Berlin expressed this desire with exceptional fervor:

To RIAS for profitable use!

We Germans are indignant at the mean actions of the hodgepodge of Asiatic hordes such as Tartars, Mongols ect. without our being able to offer resistance. And with shame we see that the three ‘Great Powers’ fear the Russian dictator and don’t check him. ...

There is yet time to stop the Russians’ proceedings, to send them back to their blessed country for here they can’t expect anything but hatred. Therefore the three Great Powers should come to an agreement

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<sup>40</sup> Letter 926/7 Anonymous East Berlin, July 14, 1948. Box 25, OMGUS, Berlin Sector, RG 260, NARA College Park, MD.

<sup>41</sup> Letter 526, Frederike Kummer, Berlin, July 9, 1948. Box 25, OMGUS, Berlin Sector, RG 260, NARA College Park, MD.

to expel the Russians out of Germany. ... If we Germans would possess or receive weapons we should know how to help ourselves; no Russian would be in Germany or would disturb the world.<sup>42</sup>

In spite of the recent experience of war, the open call for – nuclear – war was not singular. A female Berliner expressed a similar determination to stand up against the Russians:

We Berliners are resolved to persevere – whatever may happen. In order to get Germany's and Europe's freedom back we are ready to die by atomic bombs – rather atomic bombs than Russian oppression! [later GDR President Wilhelm] Pieck, [later GDR Prime Minister Otto] Grotewohl and followers have to be exterminated [*sic*] for they are the worst murderers of the people.<sup>43</sup>

In this context, also Stalingrad came up as reference point. The same woman used it to compare the potential fate of Berlin to that of the city on the Volga River. She wrote: “We could be just as well off without these extortionists who want to make a Stalingrad out of Berlin as they did it with Königsberg.”<sup>44</sup> The writer acknowledged the Germans' destructive plans for Stalingrad in 1942/43, while at the same time denouncing that the Soviets reprisal rendered similar destruction in Königsberg and Berlin. Without many qualms, she compared the total military destruction of Stalingrad by the invading German troops with the Soviet siege of Königsberg in April 1945 and the occupation of Berlin after 1945.

This falls in line with the general tone of these letters: Germany was seen primarily as victim of defeat and occupation; an atmosphere of self-pity and non-realization or

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<sup>42</sup> Letter 1134/7, Gerhard Hochmeister, Berlin, July 15, 1948. Box 25, OMGUS, Berlin Sector, RG 260, NARA College Park, MD.

<sup>43</sup> Letter 1808/7, Fr. Koblitz, Berlin, July 25, 1948, p. 1-2 Box 25, OMGUS, Berlin Sector, RG 260, NARA College Park, MD.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 2. Königsberg is a city in the former German territory of northern East-Prussia, in 1945 it came under Soviet authority and was soon populated with thousands of Soviet citizens. 1947 it was renamed Kaliningrad. The German population decreased quickly due to deportation and expulsion. The reference to Stalingrad in this connection was supposed to denounce the “take over” of the city by Soviet troops following the defeat of Nazi Germany, implying that the Russians did just the same in Königsberg what the Germans had done in Stalingrad.

refusal to accept the historical legacy of the Nazi war against Europe had taken hold of many Germans three years after the war. Probably, this was the case in East Germany more than anywhere else in the country. Looking back on the past three years one Heinz Flieger writing from the Eastern zone realized the heavy burden put on the Eastern part of Germany and expressed a sense of being left alone:

Nobody intercedes for us. We are being left in the lurch. Have we alone lost the war? We are more suffering from hunger; we have been more looted by the troops than the other Germans. ... Therefore one inhabitant of the Eastern zone asks you today on behalf of many others: Remember the people in the Eastern zone having lived for three years like slaves without being able to defend themselves. Encourage them in your broadcasts that they loose the feeling of abandonment and keep up hope for the future, for we too want to live in freedom.<sup>45</sup>

The overshadowing power of present conditions in the Eastern zone was noted already by Norman Naimark who pointed in particular to the rape of German women by Soviet soldiers during the years of occupation. Naimark estimated that up to two million women were raped by Russian soldiers between 1945 and 1949 in the Eastern zone, and he stressed that the experience of this massive crime was unique to the Eastern zone. It laid a heavy, inexorable burden on all attempts to imbue East Germans with friendship for the Soviet Union after the war. It was a “severe handicap” for the SED, because the “social psychology of women and men in the Soviet zone of occupation was marked by the crime of rape” from the first days of the Russian occupation until the very end of the GDR.<sup>46</sup> It had a “lasting impact” on this relationship in the sense that people largely turned their backs on the Soviets as long as they were present in the Eastern zone. And as

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<sup>45</sup> Letter 928/7, Heinz Flieger, Eastern zone, July 14, 1948. Box 25, OMGUS, Berlin Sector, RG 260, NARA College Park, MD.

<sup>46</sup> Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, 133.

long as this was the case, the SED was in search of legitimacy – without ever fully achieving it until 1989.<sup>47</sup>

The impact of these experiences on the genesis of the memory of the war on the Eastern Front cannot be overestimated. Social conditions – above all – shape perceptions of the past and the interpretation thereof in light of present events. This is particularly urgent when the political system disassociates official from individual memory as thoroughly as dictatorships do. It is thus only prudent to investigate the first official narratives of the war against the Soviet Union in East Germany in view of the social reality in which they were formulated. Not accidentally, Naimark refers explicitly to “Barbarossa” in his discussion of the causes and consequences of the Soviet soldiers’ behavior in their zone of occupation. Rape became the outlet for feelings of “retaliation and revenge” among Soviet soldiers, having chased the fiercely fighting Wehrmacht troops all the way from the war-torn Soviet territories to Eastern Germany. Thus, mass rape became the logic end to the barbarization of warfare on the Eastern Front, a “social act,” reflecting the way Germans and Russians experienced World War II in relation to each other.<sup>48</sup> It can even be seen as the “final repayment” for “Barbarossa.”<sup>49</sup> Whenever Soviet and SED authorities were confronted with this issue, they refused, first, to call rape by its name, and they hastily sought to put these unnamed crimes into historical perspective. Exemplary for this approach was the following comment by General Nikolai E. Berzarin (1904-1945), the short-time commandant of Berlin in 1945, which implicitly

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 121.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 114.



justified the material destruction and violent outbursts the Red Army brought over Germany in 1944/1945: “During my whole life, I have seen nothing like the bestial way German officers and soldiers pursued the peaceful population [of Russia]. All of the destruction you have here in Germany is nothing in comparison.”<sup>50</sup> Yet, with the indeed unprecedented destructive consequences of the Nazi invasion in mind, Berzarin might just as well have reacted with this statement to a popular mood which harbored little empathy for and little interest in the Soviet fate in the early postwar years. Returning from her Mexican exile to the Soviet zone in 1947, the writer Anna Seghers observed this attitude as well, feeling she had returned to live amongst a “people of cold hearts.”<sup>51</sup>

#### SOWING GERMAN-SOVIET FRIENDSHIP: THE SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF SOVIET CULTURE

“Mobilize all means, the past included!” was the motto of the SED’s attempts to instil lasting friendship and respect for the Soviet Union in East Germany’s population – a truly grandiose undertaking in view of the popular mood described above. Anton Ackermann, KPD-member since 1926, NKFD founding member and after the war one of the SED’s leading foreign policy experts, coined this succinct instruction already in 1944 in context of considerations about Germany’s postwar relations to the Soviet Union.<sup>52</sup> These

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<sup>50</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 108.

<sup>51</sup> Anna Seghers, „*Hier im Volk der kalten Herzen*.“ *Briefwechsel 1947* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2000). Travelling the Western Zones and Berlin in 1949, Hannah Arendt made very similar observations, see her „The Aftermath of Nazi Rule in Germany. A Report from Germany,“ *Commentary*, 10, 4 (1950), 342-353.

<sup>52</sup> „Deutschland und die Sowjetunion.“ Handwritten outline for a lecture in the KPD party school, 15 October 1944. Quoted in Manfred Wilke, Peter Erler, eds., „*Nach Hitler kommen wir*.“ *Dokumente zur Programmatik der Moskauer KPD-Führung 1944/45 für Nachkriegsdeutschland* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1994), 237-240, quote on 240. Ackermann stirred a controversy in 1946 with his essay “Is there a special German path towards Socialism?” in which he argued that socialism in East Germany can be built rather independently from the Soviet example. In the wake of the Stalinization campaign of the SED since 1947 Ackermann had to renounce his theses in 1948. In 1953, as Foreign Minister, resp. Deputy Minister of

instructions read like an outline for the postwar organisation of German-Soviet friendship and they already contained the major aspect of the SED's pro-Soviet campaigns: the opportune invocation of the past for the sake of a new antifascist and socialist Germany. Ackermann's notes for a lecture at the KPD party school contained the hallmarks of the SED's postwar policy principles with regards to the Soviet Union:

“Germany and the Soviet Union  
 The great importance of an honest and consequential policy of peace and friendship of a new Germany towards the Soviet Union.  
 The most to make up.  
 He who has the Soviet Union as a friend, has a strong, sincere friend.  
 He who attacks the Soviet Union with force, will be smashed.  
 The political advantages for Germany.  
 The economic advantages for Germany. ...  
 Not only on narrow, class-restricted grounds but a broad, national motivation. ...  
 Denunciation as the repetition of the methods of fascist foreign policy which plunged Germany itself into disaster.  
 [Hitler's Anti-Comintern-policy] was a mask before the grimace of war-hungry German imperialism. Behind this mask attack, war prepared against all. ...  
 Behind every such attempt, a new Hitler lures.  
 Thus clear: such a policy towards Soviet Union a greatest danger to all peoples – catastrophic for the German people itself  
 ‘Anti-Soviet policy is high treason against Germany.’ ...  
 Friendship with the Soviet Union = special importance.  
 Mobilize all means, the past included. ...  
 History teaches that friendship with Russia has always been for the good of Germany, war, however, always [meant] disaster and defeat.”<sup>53</sup>

The SED wholeheartedly adopted these views soon after the war, even if the role of the Soviet model for postwar reconstruction was initially played down by party officials.<sup>54</sup> Accordingly, the Soviet Union was to become the prime ally and friend of a future socialist Germany, it was recognized as the prime victim of German fascism, thus most

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Culture, he again came in trouble after supporting the anti-Ulbricht faction around Rudolf Herrnstadt and Wilhelm Zaisser, expelled from the ZK in 1954, rehabilitated in 1956.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 237f., 240.

<sup>54</sup> See the extended discussion in part one of Pike's *The Politics of Culture in Soviet-Occupied Germany, 1945-1949*, 3-245, particularly the chapter on “Sovietization or Democracy?,” 3-69.

deserving of restitutions, and anti-Soviet critique was nothing but camouflaged neo-fascism.

In order to effectively propagate this foreign policy paradigm, the past was deemed indispensable. Indeed the SED believed it to be the most valuable tool for the justification of its present policies and visions for the future. To integrate the lessons of the past with the necessities of present-day politics was one of the primary functions of the Society for the Study of Soviet Culture (SSC). The founding of the SSC was part of a shift in the cultural politics in the Soviet zone in 1947. Increasingly, Soviet and SED officials saw a need to address the still virulent anti-Soviet feelings in the Eastern zone and thus gradually disbanded what could be called the strategy of building socialism without Sovietization. Beginning in 1947, cultural affairs in the Soviet zone were geared towards Sovietization.<sup>55</sup> In practice this meant that any opposition and dissent against SED policy was now subsumed under the blanket accusation of “anti-bolshevism.” The ideological justification for this shift came from leading cultural figures such as Johannes R. Becher and Jürgen Kuczynski, and it was accompanied by a campaign to win over the East German intelligentsia for the socialist project. The campaign was initiated by the Soviet cultural authorities who grew increasingly concerned with what they saw as “fascist” and “anti-Bolshevist” agitation in Germany. Major General Sergej Tiul’panov (, chief of the Soviet Military Administration’s (SVAG) information office, and Major Alexander Dymshits, head of the SVAG’s cultural division, argued in the Soviet sponsored *Tägliche Rundschau* in late 1946 that German intellectuals had an obligation to acquaint

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<sup>55</sup> Pike, *The Politics of Culture in Soviet-Occupied Germany, 1945-1949*, 200ff.

themselves with Soviet culture. The paper's editor, Shemyakin, added in January 1947 that it was time to seize the initiative in view of "reactionaries" who, though no longer daring to oppose openly "political democracy" in Soviet-occupied Germany, increasingly "resisted cultural democracy and could play on certain prejudices that still festered in the minds of Germans because of twelve years of fascism."<sup>56</sup>

The Soviet initiative was accompanied by the SED's increasing tendency to use the terms "fascist" and "anti-Bolshevist" synonymously against any intellectual who seemed disinterested in or indifferent to Soviet culture, or critical of its imposition on German cultural life.<sup>57</sup> The way history was employed in order to ideologically substantiate this campaign can be illustrated with one of Johannes R. Becher's most important postwar essays, "Education for Freedom" (*Erziehung zur Freiheit*). The writer Becher (1891-1958) had spent the years 1935-1945 in Soviet exile, was a founding member of the NKFD and belonged to the group of influential intellectuals in the KPD/SED.<sup>58</sup> After the war he became a founding member and head of the *Kulturbund* (Cultural Union for the Democratic Renewal of Germany, KB), member of the SED's central committee and served as the GDR's first Minister of Culture between 1954 and 1958. His essay "Education for Freedom" (1946) justified the SED's leading role in postwar Germany and established the "historical truth" by "combining collective guilt with the plea for a

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<sup>56</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 285.

<sup>57</sup> On the communists' tradition of conflating fascism with anti-communism, see Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion. The Idea of Communism in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000).

<sup>58</sup> During the time of the Stalinist purges he was attacked by the KPD leadership for "Trotzkyist wavering" and tried unsuccessfully to leave the USSR in 1936; he undertook several suicide attempts thereafter.

radical revision of German culture.”<sup>59</sup> Since German culture had given rise to fascism and imperialism, only a radical renewal could lead to Germany’s redemption. One central pillar of this “national act of liberation and reconstruction in the ideological-moral sphere” was the fight against a resurgence of anti-Soviet and anti-Bolshevist views, and their replacement by “a new realistic perception [of the Soviet system] based on reason and truth.”<sup>60</sup> This was ultimately an act of “genuine German nationalism,” Becher argued, and referred in this context to the war against the Soviet Union as “Germany’s war against Germany.” The causes for the crusade against Russia were primarily to be found in the cultural sphere, namely in an “unparalleled intellectual process of degeneration.” The Nazi propaganda campaign against the Soviet Union had “thrust the German people in their entirety into a psychotic condition” without which such an unprecedented brutal undertaking could not have been executed.<sup>61</sup> In this reading, the victory of the Red Army over Nazi Germany spoke to the “unbroken power” of the Soviet Union and it was both a historical fact and a political necessity to place the national reconstruction of Germany within the wider context of a German-Soviet alliance. Consequently, a refusal to join in this “national act of liberation and reconstruction” was synonymous with anti-Bolshevism and (neo-) fascism and thus had to be prosecuted and punished mercilessly.

In sum, Becher’s argumentation encapsulated the two main functions of the memory of the war against the Soviet Union in SED policy. On the one hand, it served openly to legitimate the communist seizure of power in East Germany for this was the logical

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<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Pike, *The Politics of Culture in Soviet-Occupied Germany*, 203.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 203f.

outcome of history. The SED was to fulfill the historical legacy of the Red Army's victory by working towards the national reconstruction of Germany according to (Soviet) socialist principles. On the other hand, a refusal to "learn" from the mistakes of the past, namely the fatal attack against the Soviet Union – Hitler's "greatest crime" –, entailed being branded as an enemy of this reconstruction effort. The declared necessity to eliminate "anti-Soviet prejudices" in order to fulfill the promise of "Never Again!" legitimized the labeling and bullying of *any* opposition against the SED-regime.

The realization of this program was the main motivation for the foundation of the SSC, which in 1949 was renamed the Association for German-Soviet Friendship (DSF).<sup>62</sup> Both, Soviet authorities and SED leaders initiated the drive for a cultural "opening" towards the Soviet Union in 1947, and this campaign went hand in hand with the Stalinization of the SED, or as it was called in party-jargon, the creation of the "party of a new type." A handbook written by an East German "collective of authors" in 1975 about the history of German-Soviet relations emphasized this connection:

The process of the development of a party of a new type, which found its conclusion at the beginning of the 1950s, was therefore a process of maturation for the SED in its relationship with the Soviet Union, which radiated into the population of the Soviet occupation zone and transformed the friendship towards the Soviet Union into a mass movement. This movement was given its organisational frame with the foundation of the Association for German-Soviet friendship.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> On the history of the DSF as Soviet propaganda tool in the GDR see Jan C. Behrends, *Die Erfundene Freundschaft. Propaganda für die Sowjetunion in Polen und in der DDR*. (Köln: Böhlau, 2006). And with a focus on the 1980s, Katja Kühn, „Wer mit der Sowjetunion verbunden ist, gehört zu den Siegern der Geschichte...“ *Die Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft im Spannungsfeld von Moskau und Ostberlin*. (Dissertation Manuscript, University of Mannheim, Institute for Political Science, July 2002; online available at <http://bibserv7.bib.uni-mannheim.de/madoc/volltexte/2003/64/> [May 2007].

<sup>63</sup> Günter Gorski, Alfred Anderle, Günter Rosenfeld, eds., *Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft. Ein historischer Abriss von 1917 bis zur Gegenwart* (Berlin (Ost): Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1975), 207.

The roots of the DSF go back to the SSC, a loose organization of semi-official initiatives to erect “Houses of Soviet Culture” in every larger town in the Eastern zone. It was established on June 30, 1947 in Berlin with Jürgen Kuczynski, a historian, KPD veteran and remigrant from wartime exile in England and the United States, as its first president, and Anna Seghers serving as vice president.<sup>64</sup> In November 1947, the Allied Control Council (ACC) granted the Society permission to operate in Greater Berlin.<sup>65</sup> The first “House of Soviet Culture” was opened in East Berlin in March 1947. The occasion was used by Soviet authorities to launch a campaign for the “familiarization” of Germans with Soviet history and culture in the Eastern zone. The SVAG’s organ *Tägliche Rundschau* announced that it was “intended to help overcome the fear of all things Soviet used by the Nazis to establish the ideological preconditions for the war against the USSR.”<sup>66</sup> Major General Tiul’panov gave a speech that was published in the same paper on March 4, 1947, entitled “Overture to Cultural Understanding. Thoughts of a Russian Officer.” The General linked the crimes of the German troops on the Eastern Front with the need to study Soviet society and culture: because Germans had been cut off completely from developments in the Soviet Union during the Nazi period, they had been

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<sup>64</sup> Born in a Hungarian Jewish tradesmen family, student of philosophy and history, 1924 PhD, 1925 Berlin, 1928 KPD, 1933 exile in Paris, 1941 Mexico, co-editor of “*Freies Deutschland*,” 1947 return to Germany, vice president of KB and DSF, as one of the most famous GDR writers, 1952-1978 head of the German Writers Union.

<sup>65</sup> A copy of the decree “Zulassung der Tätigkeit der ‘Gesellschaft zum Studium der Kultur der Sowjetunion’” dated November 29, 1947, can be found in the records of the Stasi’s “Division for State Apparatus, Culture, Church, Underground” (*Hauptabteilung Staatsapparat, Kultur, Kirche, Untergrund*): BSTU, MfS, HA XX/5958, 1. This decree required a preliminary limitation of the SSC’s activities to Greater Berlin; in addition it ruled that a general congress with participants from all occupation zones could not take place without Allied permission.

<sup>66</sup> „Die Kultur der UdSSR,“ *Tägliche Rundschau*, March 1, 1947. Quoted in Pike, *The Politics of Culture in Soviet-Occupied Germany, 1945-1949*, 315f.

susceptible to hostile feelings in the first place.<sup>67</sup> He stressed the responsibility of Germans for atrocities on Soviet territory and deduced from this a responsibility to study Soviet history, culture, politics, science and economics. With this statement, Soviet occupation authorities practically called an end to the “no sovietization” policy in the Eastern zone. The war on the Eastern Front served as vehicle to mobilize for this fundamental policy shift.

In accordance with this new policy, the SSC was to “provide the German people of today with knowledge and the serious study of Soviet culture.” As a result of the “yearlong isolation from the external world,” Germans had only “inadequate perceptions about the cultural roots of Soviet democracy” and the SSC was to fill this gap without any party-political affiliations.<sup>68</sup> The claim that the SSC was a non-political organization was a deception as it “proselytized ... aggressively and quickly acquired all earmarks of another ‘mass organization.’”<sup>69</sup> It was the SVAG who initiated the founding meeting in the Berliner “House of Soviet Culture,” but German intellectuals who had been active in Soviet-German relations during the Weimar years joined the Society willingly. Yet, the SVAG’s involvement with this new organization was ambivalent, one could say it was limited to effective lip-service and financial aid. During the first few years, Kuczynski sent multiple requests to SVAG authorities and the Moscow-based “All-Union Society for Cultural Ties with Foreign Countries” (VOKS) to provide books, posters, exhibitions,

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<sup>67</sup> Sergei Tiul’panov, „Auftakt zur geistigen Verständigung. Gedanken eines russischen Offiziers zur Eröffnung des ‚Hauses der Kultur der Sowjetunion,‘“ *Tägliche Rundschau*, March 4, 1947. Quoted in Pike, *The Politics of Culture in Soviet-Occupied Germany, 1945-1949*, 316f.

<sup>68</sup> “Bericht über die Gründung der zentralen Gesellschaft zum Studium der Kultur der Sowjetunion in Berlin,” *Tägliche Rundschau*, July 1, 1947. Printed in Ministerium für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten der DDR, ed., *Um ein antifaschistisch-demokratisches Deutschland. Dokumente*, 472f.

<sup>69</sup> Pike, *The Politics of Culture in Soviet-Occupied Germany, 1945-1949*, 317.



phonograph records et cetera for the dissemination of Soviet culture in Germany – without much success. Even with Tiul’panov supporting the requests, VOKS did not fulfill the material wishes of the new German friends. The only areas in which exchange was lively and fruitful were opera and ballet.<sup>70</sup> Kuczynski at one point was “angry and frustrated by Moscow’s apparent indifference to his enterprise.” Indeed, he felt that his situation “resembled that of the unrequited lover.”<sup>71</sup>

Rhetorically and politically however, the Soviets were deeply involved. At the SSC’s founding meeting on June 30, 1947 Major General Tiul’panov once again appeared to explain the purpose of studying Soviet culture. It was the task of “progressive Germans” who criticized the lack of knowledge among their fellow citizens to work for the goals of the SSC and it was thus necessary to expand the activities to “the broad mass of the people.”<sup>72</sup> Anna Seghers was elected Kuczynski’s deputy, and several professors and artists joined the chairing committee. From the very beginning it was stressed that only those can become SSC members who stand in “resolute, clear distance” towards “any agitation and diffidence against the Soviet Union.” It was thus not enough to not “agitate” against the USSR; even a reserved stand ultimately made someone an enemy of the Soviet Union. By proselytizing Soviet culture in East Germany, it was concluded at the founding meeting, the Society for the Study of Soviet Culture “contributes to the moral

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<sup>70</sup> Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, 412f.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 413. On another occasion, Kuczynski complained directly to VOKS about the “complete one-sidedness of the communications from the Germans with the Soviet Union, between our society and VOKS”, 414.

<sup>72</sup> “Bericht über die Gründung der zentralen Gesellschaft zum Studium der Kultur der Sowjetunion in Berlin,” *Tägliche Rundschau*, July 1, 1947. Printed in Ministerium für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten der DDR, ed., *Um ein antifaschistisch-demokratisches Deutschland. Dokumente*, 472f.

renewal of Germany, ... to the overcoming of fascism and to the elevation of Germany's cultural level.”<sup>73</sup>

In practice this meant that the Eastern zone was soon flooded with activities supposed to enhance knowledge of and affection for anything Soviet. According to DSF's own historians this was a success:

through interesting cultural, political and scientific events, lectures, discussions, exhibits, movie screenings, laymen workshops, language courses, and rich libraries the Houses [of Soviet Culture] developed quickly into cultural centers, into true adult education centers [*Volkshochschulen*] of Soviet culture.<sup>74</sup>

The membership numbers increased steadily as a result of these activities. In June of 1947, the SSC had counted just 2,200 members, by late 1948 the numbers had risen to about 35,000, and by December of 1949, the DSF counted 655,000 members.<sup>75</sup> Although the SSC/DSF was not part of the “National Front of Democratic-Antifascist Bloc,” acquiring membership therein soon was a necessary precondition for political and professional advancement, and over the years joining became a matter of course. No doubt, many thousand East Germans used theater, movie or lecture events to enrich their leisure-time program but the political purpose of these events, exhibits and so on was one of aggressive mass propaganda and agitation. It was not only a campaign for the popularization of the Soviet Union, but even more importantly, for the popularization of the SED. The campaign-like character of these activities prompted Victor Klemperer in 1947 to a sobering assessment of the German-Soviet-friendship project which the SED

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 473.

<sup>74</sup> Gorski, Anderle, Rosenfeld, eds., *Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft*, 198f.

<sup>75</sup> Thomas Schönknecht, “Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft (DSF),” in Broasatz, Weber, eds., *SBZ-Handbuch*, 746.

refused to make for another four decades: “I think these USSR-celebrations are fairly inopportune. They are worsening the mood. Or at least they are deadening.”<sup>76</sup>

Already at the first two annual meetings of the SSC held in May 1948 and July 1949 in the Opera of Berlin, this propagandistic role became explicit, and the deadening effect Klemperer was writing about becomes feasible. The list of guests to the second congress reads like a who is who of the political and cultural elite in the Eastern zone: politicians such as later GDR president Wilhelm Pieck, later Prime Minister Otto Grotewohl (1894-1964)<sup>77</sup>, CDU leader Otto Nuschke (1883-1957), the two later foreign ministers Vincenz Müller (1894-1961, NDPD) and Georg Dertinger (1902-1968, CDU), leading SED members such as Anton Ackermann, Paul Wandel (1905-1995), and ZK member Heinrich Rau (1899-1961), the mayor of East Berlin, Friedrich Ebert (1894-1979, SED); artists such as Willi Bredel, Johannes R. Becher, and Anna Sehers, Ernst Thälmann’s widow Rosa, as well as Soviet representatives Ambassador Vladimir S. Semenov and Major General Tjulpanpov were present. The key note speaker at the first annual meeting, Tiul’panov again, asserted the importance of pro-Soviet agitation for Germany’s present and future. The fact that Tiul’panov was the one to give a first assessment of the SSC’s work also shows how committed Soviet occupation authorities in the zone – unlike their comrades in Moscow – were to German “reeducation” and “renewal.” The political implications of loosing – or rather not winning over – the hearts and minds of East

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<sup>76</sup> Klemperer, *So sitze ich denn zwischen allen Stühlen*, 452.

<sup>77</sup> Son of a worker, learned typographer, 1912 SPD, 1918 USPD, 1934-1938 tradesman in Hamburg, underground activities, several arrests, CEO in a private firm in Berlin. 1946 member of the executive committee of the newly founded SED, 1949-1964 Prime Minister of the GDR, since 1960 severely ill and no longer involved with politics.

Germany's population were all too obvious. Indeed as it turned out in 1953 and 1961, a "lasting friendship" could eventually only be secured by force, not conviction.

In 1948, however, Soviet and SED officials were still enthusiastic about the realistic prospects of imbuing former arch-enemies with mutual friendship and respect.

Tiul'panov's key-note address reflected on the ideological and political motives behind the SSC's activities. He pointed to the threat of present-day "reactionary" tendencies in "Anglo-American, imperialist circles," and again elaborated on the direct link between atrocities in the war on the Eastern Front and neo-fascist agitations of the day:

In our view, the Society for the Study of Soviet Culture has developed into an influential organisation in a relatively short period of time and has generated comprehensive activity with regards to the popularization of Soviet culture. It has contributed to the further spreading of a truthful and honest reporting about the Soviet Union. This is a great and important, not only cultural task – in the narrowest sense of the word – but also a moral task, and I wish to say not only task but also duty; because not a single nation in the world has inflicted so much damage on the culture of the USSR – the Russian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Lithuanian, Latvian, Estonian – like the Nazism which originated in Germany. It is also a moral task because the study of culture builds a dam against the anti-Soviet defamations which are being instilled into the German people every day by foreign Anglo-American imperialist circles and the German reaction. The reaction relies on prejudices of the Nazi era and continues to work with Goebbels-arguments, and despite the severe lessons of the past it still finds believers in Germany.<sup>78</sup>

Reminding his listeners of the crimes against the Soviet Union – albeit in very general terms – Tiul'panov continued to employ Germany's most recent history in order to justify the German-Soviet alliance practiced mostly against popular will in East Germany.

The founding meeting also passed a resolution to organize lectures, meetings and exhibitions dealing with the thirty-years-period since the October Revolution. In a broad sense, SED and DSF cadres understood these activities to be one form of reparations

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<sup>78</sup> Stenographic protocol of the first annual meeting of the Society for the Study of Soviet Culture, BA/SAPMO, DY 32/10002, "1. Kongreß der DSF, Mai 1948," 8.

payment for the Soviet Union as they too pointed to Nazi Germany's responsibility for the temporary halt of the otherwise successful Soviet project:

First, Germans would learn about the ways in which the peoples of the Soviet Union overcame 'unbelievable difficulties,' making Germany's problems of postwar reconstruction seem less daunting and overwhelming. Second, lecturers were instructed to demonstrate that the Soviets had overcome all of their inherent problems of development, indeed had reached the pinnacle of modern civilization by the first half of 1941, when the Germans attacked. In other words, any problems with Soviet soldiers in the zone or deficiencies in the organization of the military government were to be attributed not to some weaknesses in the Soviet system itself but to the devastation caused by the German-incited war.<sup>79</sup>

In addition, this view of the past fit well into the emerging Cold War against "reactionary tendencies" in the Western democracies. Yet, while the ideological motives are clear, Tiul'panov's above-quoted remarks contained some painful truths. As I will demonstrate in the sections of this chapter dealing with the Western zones, a certain continuity between sentiments raised against the Soviet Union by the Nazi regime, and the anticommunism of the postwar era cannot be denied, regardless of whether the "prejudices of the Nazi era" were reemployed intentionally or not. What Tiul'panov and most other communists in turn denied, however, was that the anti-totalitarian, liberal critique of Soviet expansionist communism voiced by the democratic parties in the Western zones, had in fact nothing to do with Nazism or "fascist reactionary" tendencies.

Whether the officially promoted connection between responsibility for atrocities on the Eastern Front and a need for cultural understanding and friendship with the Soviet Union actually resonated with the population in East Germany remains difficult to assess. Nonetheless, there are sources which shed some light into the popular mood at that time, revealing both a limited willingness to address German war crimes and a sense of

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<sup>79</sup> Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, 410. Naimark paraphrases a draft letter to all regional branches of the SCC informing about the decisions and plans discussed by the congress.

skepticism towards anything Soviet in light of the occupation experience. Other than the letters to RIAS examined earlier, records of a discussion series between Soviet and SSC officials and ordinary citizens in 1948/49 under the title “About the Russians and About Us” provide us with a more differentiated, unique sample of popular opinions and attitudes. The minutes of these public meetings, published in a censored version by the SED after their conclusion, have already been discussed elsewhere, yet never with a special focus on the way the pre-1945 past was addressed by citizens and officials.<sup>80</sup> The meetings were dominated by discussions about the experience of violent occupation, i.e. rape, robberies, and intimidation by Red Army soldiers, even though it is fascinating to realize that these issues were debated without ever really calling them by their names.<sup>81</sup>

The text that kicked off the series of public meetings was an essay entitled “About ‘the Russians’ and About Us” by Rudolf Herrnstadt (1903-1966), editor of the SED organ *Neues Deutschland*. Herrnstadt was a trained lawyer and publicist, a long-time member of the KPD, during the war a NKFD founding member, and a former agent for the Red Army. Thus; he was an expert on “Russian” affairs in many respects. Herrnstadt had prepared the text for a SED party conference in 1948 and his paper carried it on November 18, 1948. The *Tägliche Rundschau* published it a day later “because it deals with the decisive questions of the fate of the German people.”<sup>82</sup> Herrnstadt argued that the German working class was confronted with two main issues: there was “no orientation in

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<sup>80</sup> Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, 134-140, focuses on the problem of rape for German-Soviet relations in the zone. See also Badstübner-Peters, “Über ‘die Russen’ und über uns.“ And Christoph Berger, *Das russische Deutschland. Eine Bearbeitung der sowjetischen Besetzung Ostdeutschlands* (Berlin: Weissensee Verlag, 2001), chapter 5 „Über die Russen und über uns Deutsche,“ 79-104, which includes a short section on the debate about the war.

<sup>81</sup> Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, 137f.

<sup>82</sup> Rudolf Herrnstadt, “Über ‘die Russen’ und über uns,” *Tägliche Rundschau*, November 19, 1948.

the class struggle ... without a correct assessment of the Soviet Union's role," and even in SED circles "attitudes towards the Soviet Union were deficient – gutless, divided and not free of enemy influence" as a result of which "the complex of the Soviet Union does not appear as it is."<sup>83</sup> At the heart of these issues was a "wrong basic opinion" about Soviet history since 1941. For only by realizing that the Great Patriotic War led to the destruction of the strongest alliance ever to have been formed against the USSR, the leading role of Soviet socialism can be recognized. Noting that the Eastern block could in case of war mobilize 200 million Soviet citizens, 100 million Eastern Europeans and 450 Chinese in East Asia, Herrnstadt claims that "after 1941 the balance of power is such that peace *can* be preserved."<sup>84</sup> He openly contemplated the idea of a new world war while at the same time assuring the "working class" that such a war would be winnable. Yet, the primary goal of the Soviet Union and its allies was, Herrnstadt further claimed, the securing of world peace, which was only possible if the working people recognized the importance of enemy propaganda and the fight against it. This is the crucial point in the essay at which the author sets out to explain why "everything – in principle – everything" is good about the Soviet Union. In dialogical form Herrnstadt addressed the central aspects of his argument. A "provocateur" might ask:

Are you saying therefore that there are only good, beautiful and noble things in the Soviet Union? The answer must be: Little provocateur! How can there be only good things in the Soviet Union if the nature, the greatness of the Soviet Union lays in the fact that the good seeks to overcome the evil? Of course there is still evil in the Soviet Union; 300 years of crippling men by capitalism don't just vanish without a trace in 30 years. ... Yet, what is the main difference? While in the imperialist states the crooks dominate and shape public life, where murderers prepare war as state representatives and educate the masses to unworthy instincts, the remaining bureaucrats and careerists, felons and

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<sup>83</sup> Rudolf Herrnstadt, "Über 'die Russen' und über uns. Zur Vorbereitung der Parteikonferenz der SED in Berlin," ed. by Zentralsekretariat der SED, Abteilung Werbung, Presse, Rundfunk (Berlin, 1948), 3.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 4f. [Emphasis in original].

murderers in the Soviet Union are about to be liquidated by the whole dominating people unbound to progress.<sup>85</sup>

Therefore, “only he endorses the Soviet Union, who endorses her entirely.” The answer to the question whether one supported everything about the Soviet Union could thus only be: “everything, everything, everything.”<sup>86</sup> It was this rather sophisticated exegesis of a Manichean dogmatism with which the SED set out to address “anti-Soviet” feelings in the population, and both past and present were to be judged under this paradigm. Herrnsstadt himself demonstrated what such a debate with an ordinary citizen may look like. If your “brother in law” having stood on the sidewalk when the Russians marched into Berlin complained that one of them stole his bike, the following reasoning was suggested: knowing that total defeat was inevitable by early 1945, Germans even then refused to take up arms and join in the fight with the Red Army; instead they had passively witnessed the terribly costly final battles of the world war unleashed by the Hitler regime. “What went on in his head?” And Herrnsstadt took the reader on a journey through the mind of this “brother in law:”

He believed he was a progressive man although he was not. And the army that approached? It was a creepy army because instinct told him they could not possibly befriend him, because he had not fought. Did he see where they came from? ‘From Frankfurt (Oder),’ he’d probably say. No, they came from where he *didn’t* come from, namely from a class war in its most bitter, wildest form, from the war of liberation of an attacked people, against whom a four-year-long struggle for life or death had been launched. They didn’t come in the worn-out but clean boots he wore himself. ... They came in clumsy shoes on which the dirt of history stuck, resolute, injured, alert, experienced and brutalized, yes in part also brutalized, because war brutalizes men. Who has a right to judge that?<sup>87</sup>

With this vivid reference to the battle experience of Soviet soldiers on the Eastern Front, Herrnsstadt established the categories in which Germans were to view Russians: as

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 10f. [Emphasis in original].



victims, first of all, but also as liberators of themselves and of the German people. This interpretation did not allow for Germans to judge their occupiers as perpetrators, thus any complaints about the violent behavior of Soviet soldiers – be it stealing a bike or raping a woman (for which the former might well have been a codification). And he added that it was worth asking what the justified revenge against the Germans could have looked like in light of the Nazis’ “total war” strategy, if the Soviet armies were not infused with “the spirit of progress and human dignity.” How, Herrnstadt asked, “would such an end have looked like?”<sup>88</sup>

This is the application of the collective guilt theory on East German society, albeit eventually turned upside down. East Germans, instead of complaining about the behavior of their occupiers, should remember the war crimes committed against and in the Soviet Union. Consequently, the relative mildness with which the Red Army allegedly treated her occupied territories could only prompt gratitude and support for the Soviet presence on German soil. Thus, friendship with the Soviets should not only grow out of regret for past crimes, but also out of positive experiences in the present. It was precisely the intermingling of these two aspects which made the attempted double justification of the German-Soviet alliance ever more complicated and unrealistic. The public reactions to Herrnstadt’s theses were accordingly.

The two multi-hour-long meetings between SED and Soviet officials and ordinary citizens of East Berlin took place on December 10, 1948 and on January 7, 1949.<sup>89</sup> They

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>89</sup> The debates were documented and published by the SSC under the title “About the ‘Russians’ and About US. Discussion About a Burning Topic.” Cf. Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft, ed., *Über*

are most remarkable events in East Germany's postwar history because. In retrospective, these meetings were the liveliest and most open public debates in East Germany until the end of the SED regime in 1989.<sup>90</sup> Aside from that, the debates testify to the fact that the theory of collective guilt was, other than in West Germany, widely discussed and practically *applied* in East Germany. There might be no stronger evidence for this than the minutes of these two meetings for they speak not only the language of the official politics of the past but also include popular responses. Overall, the SED rather successfully employed the collective guilt theory in order to substantiate a second founding narrative of the GDR: German-Soviet friendship.<sup>91</sup> Yet, collective guilt was discussed here not as an issue that just required admission and regret but as a potential starting point for collective redemption.<sup>92</sup> Consequently, individual experiences in and after the war remained marginal; at most, the fate of Russians in the war was retold, descriptions of German women's experiences with rape, for example, on the other hand, remained vague to non-existent.

The meeting room in the Berliner "House of Soviet Culture," located on *Unter den Linden* just a few blocks from the Brandenburg Gate, was packed on the evening of December 10, 1948. According to several speakers, Herrnsdorf's essay "About the Russians" was the talk of the town at that time. People discussed his theses in the tram

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"die Russen" und über uns. Diskussion um ein brennendes Thema (Berlin: Verlag Kultur und Fortschritt, 1949). A summary of the discussions was also printed in *Tägliche Rundschau*, December 12, 1948, and January 9, 1949.

<sup>90</sup> Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, 135.

<sup>91</sup> Antifascism is widely perceived as the (one, I would suggest) founding myth of the GDR. See Danyel, "Die Opfer- und Verfolgtenperspektive als Gründungskonsens?" in idem, ed., *Die geteilte Vergangenheit*, 31-46. Meuschel, *Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft*, 29-122. Grunenberg, *Antifaschismus*. Münkler, "Antifaschismus und antifaschistischer Widerstand."

<sup>92</sup> See on this Herf, "Hegelianische Momente," 198ff.

and on the sidewalks, presumably with a “negative attitude” for one speaker remarked that enemy propaganda still seemed to work effectively.<sup>93</sup> Peter Alfons Steiniger (1904-1980) from the SSC, a Humboldt University professor of international law and member of the Constitutional Commission of the *Deutsche Volksrat*, functioned as discussion leader. He summarized Herrnsstadt’s essay and set the tone for the debate to follow – not without encouraging people to raise any questions they wanted.<sup>94</sup> In addition to about 700 interested people,<sup>95</sup> other prominent SED members such as the philosopher and later dissident Wolfgang Harich (1923-1995) and Alexander Abusch were present. Vice president Anna Seghers was invited but could not attend. Questions centered mostly around past and present relations between Germans and Russians. The SSC documented all questions raised by the audience in an internal report, a sample reads as follows:

Can all [German] prisoners of war [in the Soviet Union] write?  
 Why have not all POWs been repatriated until the end of 1948 as promised?  
 Do Russians acknowledge us as friends?  
 Why did the Russians not behave differently during the invasion?  
 How can one explain hate and disdain of the German people against the Soviet Union?  
 Can we learn culture from a people who was obviously underdeveloped until recently?  
 Was the Soviet Union prepared for the German attack [in 1941]?  
 Why are there only soldiers in Soviet films?  
 Do the Russians have culture?<sup>96</sup>

This selection exemplifies the range of topics people thought about at the time, they included many questions about the history of the war against the Soviet Union, including the delicate question of the German-Soviet non-aggression treaty of 1939,<sup>97</sup> Stalin’s unpreparedness for the German invasion, and the military capacities of the Red Army as

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<sup>93</sup> *Über “die Russen” und über uns. Diskussion um ein brennendes Thema*, 31, 47.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>95</sup> Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, 135.

<sup>96</sup> „Fragen, die in den durchgeführten Veranstaltungen ,Über die Russen und über uns’ gestellt wurden,“ BA/SAPMO DY32/10085 Büro des Sekretariats, 1-8.

<sup>97</sup> *Über “die Russen” und über uns. Diskussion um ein brennendes Thema*, 18f.

it compared to the Anglo-American forces in 1948/49.<sup>98</sup> In this context, crimes on the Eastern Front were mentioned explicitly, and, what is important, they were always connected to postwar events in East Germany. In short, what had happened to the Soviet Union during the German invasion was cause and reason for the postwar calamities, including the “occasional rude behavior” of Red Army soldiers in the Soviet zone of occupation. SED officials were eager to explain that until 1941, the Soviet Union was a constantly progressing nation where socialism was about to materialize in its purest form. But the Nazi attack stopped this process, even reversed it here and there, and brought back wildness and barbarity into the country.<sup>99</sup>

Accordingly, Wolfgang Harich who had deserted the Wehrmacht in 1943 to join the KPD’s underground work in Berlin, suggested that one could overcome the “trauma of the invasion” (in 1945) by reading the Soviet humanists and studying the achievements until Hitler invaded in 1941. “On the scale of world history,” he concluded, events in 1945 did not weigh much; it was time to move on.<sup>100</sup> Responding to a question from the audience whether friendship was possible at all between occupiers and occupied, Harich’s comrade Alexander Abusch reminded his listeners that the victors invaded Germany after having witnessed the destruction of their homes. Back then, the Soviet Union had been fighting an “antidemocratic Germany.” But it would become the true friend of a “democratic Germany” today.<sup>101</sup> Some in the audience voiced understanding

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 42-46.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 15f.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 22f.

for the Soviets' behavior: it was "up to the Germans themselves, how the Russians treated them."<sup>102</sup>

A Russian captain Tregubow, introduced by Steiniger as a "representative of a great nation," retold his experience during the war on the Eastern Front stressing the Germans' collective responsibility for the crimes and demanding to appreciate the Soviets' commitment to a "peaceful Germany:"

Judging from this discussion, the problem emerged for you only in May 1945. But for us the problem Germans and us emerged much earlier, namely on June 22, 1941 [*lively applause*], when Hitler treacherously attacked the peoples of the Soviet Union. ... Dear Sirs and Madams! I am a Red Army soldier since June 22, 1941, and I know very well, which thoughts Russian soldiers and officers had on the day of the attack. We knew that Hitler had destroyed all democratic forces in Germany. But every one of us believed that the workers and farmers of Germany would not fight against the might of the workers and farmers of the Soviet Union. [*Very good*]  
I, an ordinary soldier of the Red Army of 1941, was very disappointed at the German workers and farmers. Don't be offended! They forced me to bear a weapon four years long without interruption. The brutal war that was launched by Hitlerism lasted four long years. Four long years and still today millions of Russian women weep and bemoan their men, brothers and children. No country which was attacked by Hitler's hordes has suffered as much loss as my home and my people. [*Very true!*]  
... But can one even measure the value of the lives of the fallen, the wounds, and the blood of the mutilated and the tears and the misery of the women and children and the bereaved?<sup>103</sup>

The captain concluded his remarks by reminding the audience that they too had been liberated and his argumentation was a brilliant example of what SED leaders such as Anton Ackermann had in mind when he demanded that "all means must be mobilized" to achieve lasting German-Soviet friendship – "including the past." Not only that Germans as a nation were squarely blamed for the crimes against the Soviet Union, what happened to them afterwards was a direct result thereof: the loss of the Eastern territories was attributed to the "crimes committed against the East" and justified as self-inflicted

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 49.

calamity.<sup>104</sup> Rape was relativized by asking how someone can complain about “occasional incidents” while forgetting at the same time the “mass rape of entire countries.”<sup>105</sup>

Besides, rape was a direct result of the barbarization of warfare caused by the German invasion, as Professor Steiniger pointed out: “war is the enemy of men, and also of the survivors, and the question can only be how can I deal with this barbarization. ... By fighting against war, by preventing it!”<sup>106</sup> Harich even claimed that before the war, rape was “not a normal thing” in the Soviet Union; rather men and women had lived respectfully with each other.<sup>107</sup>

This approach was summarized aptly by one speaker who recalled talking to a “few girls” about this problem and reminding them of the proper context:

You expect that the Russians and especially the Poles forget what shameful crimes were committed in the name of the German people in their countries. But you want to blame the Russian people for the unpleasant deeds of a few. *These* you don't want to forget while you expect from the others that they shall have forgotten much greater crimes and monstrosities in such a short period of time. [Applause].<sup>108</sup>

Here we encounter exemplarily why it was problematic to try to teach people lessons of the past by invoking a guilt that is both abstract and concrete depending on whom you are talking to, and whose real-life experience in the present overshadowed everything which had happened in the past. Naimark has analyzed the intricate connection between the Eastern Front war and the postwar behavior of Red Army soldiers in Germany. Yet this was not a connection most (East) Germans were willing even to consider. Ultimately,

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 39f.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 35. Steiniger had lived in the USSR between 1934 and 1937, calling these years during which thousands were executed in mass purges „peaceful times”!

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 28. [Emphasis in original].

no amount of positive propaganda about the Soviet Union seemed to suffice to dent the hatred of Russians resulting from National Socialist hate-campaigns against the Soviets in the past as well as from the every-day experience under Soviet occupation in the present.<sup>109</sup> After all, every person has individual memories which often contradict or undermine the officially proclaimed memory. Which of the existing memories are favored in public discourse is mainly a matter of political power, yet the multitude of individual experiences and memories makes the forging of official narratives extremely difficult. It was exactly for these reasons that the SED's politics of memory remained of questionable success, ultimately doomed to become a central factor causing the SED's demise into ideological illegitimacy and moral incredibility.

The established "frozen past,"<sup>110</sup> the official narrative that declared "Operation Barbarossa" the ultimate crime of Hitler Germany and molded East Germany's future into the alleged lessons to be drawn from this past, collided sooner or later with individual experiences and perceptions during and after the war. Thus, the role the postwar present for both individual and official attempts to come to terms with the past cannot be emphasized enough. The more interesting it is therefore to investigate what was told and what was suppressed about the war on the Eastern Front, and how it was interpreted. No doubt, the extent to which the Eastern Front was discussed in the Eastern zone had no parallel in the West. This explains why the "myth of a clean Wehrmacht" could not emerge in the East the way it did in the West. Very early, the crimes on the Eastern Front were connected to the Wehrmacht, as a last example from the "About the

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<sup>109</sup> Naimark, *Russians in Germany*, 134.

<sup>110</sup> Judt, „The Past is Another Country.“

Russians” debates illustrates. Asking herself whether Russians could ever truly befriend Germans after what both had done to each other, a German woman with front experience remembered the brutal routine of German war crimes in the Soviet Union:

I was also stationed at the front and when we entered one village we discovered that Germans had left the village two days earlier. Before they left they had locked up the remaining inhabitants: elderly, children and cripples in the houses and burned them. A small child which had jumped out of one of the burning windows kneeled before a commander and pleaded for his life and this child was kicked back into the houses with the feet. I later asked witnesses, Soviet citizens who had seen this happening, who these troops were, whether they were SS troops, but they had to tell me that these were ordinary rank-and-file soldiers acting on orders.<sup>111</sup>

Despite the occasional allusion to the Wehrmacht’s role on the Eastern Front, the SED state was far from becoming the advocate of historical truth. If it was opportune to deal with such crimes in detail, i.e. if it served the purpose of mobilizing for socialism and against Western “reaction,” the SED encouraged it. Over the years, however, the “German working class” was exculpated from any responsibility and the “fascist hordes” who committed crimes had nothing in common with the worker soldiers who were forced by Hitler into the abyss of a senseless war.

One group in particular, the German POWs in Soviet captivity, served this purpose suitably: those returning until 1949 were canvassed by the SED for their potential moral credibility as first-hand witnesses of “progress” and “humanism” in the Soviet Union and as contributors to reparations resulting from the forced labor they had performed in Soviet captivity. Most of the returnees to the Eastern zone retreated into apolitical private life because they were unwilling to serve such propagandistic purpose; quite a few, however, joined the German-Soviet friendship movement. They in fact became the

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<sup>111</sup> *Über “die Russen” und über uns. Diskussion um ein brennendes Thema*, 65.



“backbones” of the DSF.<sup>112</sup> In contrast, the Soviet government refused to repatriate 23,000 German soldiers in 1949 most of which it had convicted for “war crimes.” By accepting and embracing Moscow’s claim that these remaining POWs were convicted war criminals, the SED found a way to blame Nazi war crimes in the Soviet Union on a concrete, yet distant group of people. At the same time, by supporting the continuous imprisonment of this group, the SED put itself into a position from which it was no longer necessary to publicly debate a share of responsibility among its own people – the “German working class.”<sup>113</sup> I will come back to the POW issue but for the moment it is important to note that returnees started to play a crucial role in the campaign for German-Soviet friendship in 1948/49. Their individual, potentially criminal, conduct on the Eastern Front was erased by an asserted personal cathartic experience in Soviet imprisonment which could be manifested upon return by joining the collective movement to build socialism in the Eastern zone.

#### “LEARNING FROM HISTORY:” BUILDING DEMOCRACY, FIGHTING DICTATORSHIP

Although the so-called anti-totalitarian consensus did not emerge until the 1950s in West Germany, its roots can be found in the early postwar years.<sup>114</sup> The most outspoken critic of Soviet communism and its prophets in East Germany was Kurt Schumacher (1895-1952) who emerged as the leader of West German social democracy. Schumacher,

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<sup>112</sup> Naimark, *The Russians in Germany*, 419. See Chapter 7.II.

<sup>113</sup> See Christina Morina, “Instructed Silence, Constructed Memory: The SED and the Return of German Prisoners of War as ‘War Criminals’ from the Soviet Union to East Germany, 1950-1956,” *Contemporary European History*, vol. 13, no. 3 (2004), 323-343, quote on 328.

<sup>114</sup> Kurt Sontheimer, *Die Adenauer-Ära. Grundlegung der Bundesrepublik* (München: dtv, 2003). Sontheimer juxtaposes the emergence of such a broad and „efficient consensus against any sort of totalitarianism” during the Adenauer era with the concurrent disappearance of the antidemocratic right after 1945. See *ibid.*, 167f.

a former Reichstag deputy and World War I veteran, had suffered ten years of imprisonment in the Nazi concentration camp Dachau and was the “man of the hour” for the SPD in 1945.<sup>115</sup> Schumacher’s speeches and programmatic contributions were immersed in history. He defined the role of history for his political commitment with the following words: “History is what has happened, and particularly today it fulfills only one purpose for the politician, namely to learn from it.”<sup>116</sup> Schumacher was most outspoken about the failure of the German communists to anticipate the fascist catastrophe, and he also harshly criticized Allied policies in occupied Germany more than any other leading politician between 1945 and 1949. He was a rare voice in advocating to grant surviving Jews restitution in material form and to acknowledge their singular fate under Nazism in moral and political terms.<sup>117</sup> Nonetheless, the crimes of the past remained vague; he seldom referred to them in explicit terms. Honoring the war dead, Schumacher commemorated all victims of Nazism indiscriminately, and he stressed that the main war criminals in politics and industry must be prosecuted. He saw the German working class, much as the KPD asserted, as the abused victim and blinded tool of fascism. During his opening speech at the first SPD Party Congress in Hannover in 1946, Schumacher recalled first and foremost the suffering and martyrdom of “our own dead:”

Friends and Comrades!

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<sup>115</sup> Heinrich August Winkler, *Der lange Weg nach Westen II. Deutsche Geschichte 1933-1990* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, 2004), 124. See also Peter Merseburger, *Der schwierige Deutsche. Kurt Schumacher. Eine Biographie* (Stuttgart: dtv, 1995). And Arno Scholz, Walter Oschilewski, eds., *Turmwächter der Demokratie. Ein Lebensbild von Kurt Schumacher* (Berlin: Arani, 1952).

<sup>116</sup> This statement was made in Schumachers first „programmatic declarations” for the SPD in October 1945. Printed in Willi Albrecht, ed., *Kurt Schumacher: Reden, Schriften, Schriften, Korrespondenzen 1945-1952* (Berlin: Dietz, 1985), 312.

<sup>117</sup> Herf, „Multiple Restorations,” 27-32.

Our first thought goes to our dead. The victims of fascism in our own people. The dead of the fight for liberation in other countries. The women and children who were carried off to death by air-war, hunger, and disease. The Jews who fell victim to the bestial race delusion [*Rassenwahn*] of the Hitler dictatorship. All, without difference in nation and race, who lost their life in the fight against dictatorship, oppression and expansionism.<sup>118</sup>

Schumacher's explicit reference to the Jewish catastrophe is noteworthy and was not a common *topos* in political rhetoric of that time. Yet, he was never quite clear on who was to blame for these crimes – aside from the acknowledgment, that the “cliques” around Hitler were responsible for the war and that “many Germans” bore a share of responsibility for the rise of National Socialism.<sup>119</sup> He called for the “punishment of the Nazi criminals” and the prosecution of “those responsible for these policies going as far as extermination (*bis zur Vernichtung*).”<sup>120</sup> Yet, he did not identify the “German working class” as participants in Hitler's war of aggression against Europe, but as sacrificing “fighters against Nazism.” Thus, German workers “must not shy away from comparison with other working classes in the world:”

If one points at the armed uprisings in the territories occupied by the Nazi armies, then we respond that these parallels don't make sense. Almost the entire nation stood behind the insurgents there. They had to fulfil a national mission. The penetration of Germany with Nazism, the closely-knit net of the Gestapo, which the Germans felt on the streets, at work and in the family, does not allow a comparison between German and other conditions. We cannot imagine that a working class without which socialism in its current form would be unthinkable shall simply disappear into the abyss together with the guilty.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> „Eröffnung des Parteitages und Ehrung der Opfer des Faschismus,” May 9, 1946. Quoted in Albrecht, ed., *Kurt Schumacher: Reden, Schriften, Schriften, Korrespondenzen*, 386.

<sup>119</sup> See for example “Programmatische Erklärungen Schumachers auf den Konferenzen von Wennigsen und Hannover,” 5-6 October 1945. Printed in Albrecht, ed., *Kurt Schumacher: Reden, Schriften, Schriften, Korrespondenzen*, 314. And „Grundsatzreferat Schumachers auf dem Nürnberger Parteitag der SPD: „Deutschland und Europa,” June 29, 1947. Ibid., 505.

<sup>120</sup> “Programmatische Erklärungen Schumachers auf den Konferenzen von Wennigsen und Hannover,” 5-6 October 1945. Printed in Albrecht, ed., *Kurt Schumacher: Reden, Schriften, Schriften, Korrespondenzen*, 315.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 319.

Schumacher extended the resistance of a few social democrats to the entire German working class, and thus did something very similar to what KPD/SED leaders propagated in the Eastern zone: the legendary story of proletarian antifascism was extended to the mass of ordinary Germans thereby disassociating them, and practically exculpating them, from Nazi war crimes. Yet, whereas the KPD/SED at least sought to preserve an awareness that millions of German workers had served in the “fascist Wehrmacht” – not because they were committed to the historical truth but because this was the necessary pretext for establishing a “proletarian dictatorship” eternally securing German-Soviet friendship – Schumacher refrained from even making this connection in his major speeches of the postwar years.

The reasons for this partial silence lay in politics. Squarely denouncing the Soviet Union as totalitarian state, Schumacher did not see the past for what it was, but – in accordance with his credo – learned from it for the present. The fact, that the USSR had occupied Eastern Europe and was imposing Soviet-style “democracy” was the overriding theme and motivation of Schumacher’s stand towards “Russia,” as he called it. Not once did he refer to “Barbarossa” as a historical burden or a possible and plausible source of certain security concerns in Moscow. Although the cost and legacy of the Nazi war against the Soviet Union were undoubtedly on his mind, he did not make them part of his public speech and political thought. Here he differed greatly from his popular heir, Willy Brandt, who, as we will later see, introduced a new openness and honesty with regards to past and present German-Soviet relations causing a paradigm change in the way not only social democrats viewed the historical, political and moral implications of the war on the Eastern Front. Schumacher knew that a peaceful Europe needed Russia, albeit not at all

cost: “Europe is possible with Russia, Europe is best possible with Russia; but Europe and Germany are not possible the Russian way.”<sup>122</sup> He accused the East German communists of selling the zone to the Soviets by “paying as much reparations as Russia demands, by giving up and sacrificing the [remaining] prisoners of war, by slaughtering the idea of freedom in Germany and at the will of Germany.” All this, he concluded, was in fact “pan-Slavic politics” guised in “pan-Germanic agitation.”<sup>123</sup> Schumacher also noted the importance of fear: “they speculate on the masses’ fear of violence,” fear of a new war instigated with the “tactics of power, the monopoly over agenda-setting, constant agitation, denunciations and defamations.” Yet, Schumacher claimed, even if Germans were “weakened in spirit and ethos” by twelve years of dictatorship, “they have not become so weak and poor not to realize that now the same thing is going on here that had been going on for the last twelve years.”<sup>124</sup> For the SPD-leader, the reality of Soviet totalitarianism was just as bad as the Nazi regime.

Indeed by 1947, Soviet communism, had risked and lost the grandiose historical credit and popular support it had generated around the world during the fight against Nazi Germany. In the course of this process the Soviet Union had lost even the potential compassion of the fascist enemy’s former most virulent resisters – German antifascist dissidents such as Schumacher. As a result, World War II came to be viewed not as the past war between Germany and the Allies, but as a prelude to later confrontations

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<sup>122</sup> „Grundsatzreferat Schumachers auf dem Nürnberger Parteitag der SPD: ‚Deutschland und Europa,‘“ June 29, 1947. Printed in Albrecht, ed., *Kurt Schumacher: Reden, Schriften, Schriften, Korrespondenzen*, 491.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 513.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 512.

culminating in the Cold War. The shadow of the present inescapably hung over the past. And just as the memory of World War II was overshadowed by rising Cold War tensions and the long-term division of Europe, the war on the Eastern Front was hardly taken for itself in East and West Germany until the 1990s. In the West, it was the most politicized and ideologically charged aspect of the history of the entire war for two very different reasons. First, the Holocaust was carried out under the guise of the crusades against Poland and the Soviet Union, and any historical research was bound to unearth the connection between the Wehrmacht's Eastern campaign and the mass murder of the Jews. Second, the main victim of "Barbarossa," the Soviet Union and its citizens, transformed into the chief enemy, indeed became the main "perpetrator" in the global East-West conflict after 1945. Only in part resulting from its own actions in Eastern Europe, for decades to come the Soviet peoples were denied, a truthful and sincere acknowledgement of the nature and extent of Nazi war crimes committed on the Eastern Front. These conclusions remain just as valid if we look beyond the political borders in the Western zone and even beyond the caesura of dual state-hood in 1949.

The two other emerging influential and charismatic leaders in the West, Konrad Adenauer of the Christian-Democratic Union (CDU) and Theodor Heuss of the Free German Party (FDP) subscribed in general to the same world view as their social democratic counterpart. Yet, in Adenauer's speeches the large group of former soldiers, POWs and their families figured more prominently, and Heuss engaged in more than routine lip service when discussing the role of the Wehrmacht, its criminal legacy and defeat. Konrad Adenauer, 69 years old in 1945, had been mayor of Cologne during the Weimar years and spent the Nazi era in inner exile and political abstinence. Often

described as “democratic patriarch” or “democratic autocrat” (Sebastian Haffner), he is said to have been the strong charismatic fatherlike figure Germans needed in the transition towards democracy.<sup>125</sup> Adenauer defined democracy and Christianity as the two fundamentals of his political thought. His answer in 1945 to the question of how Nazism could have happened was more spiritual than political: a wrong understanding of the state, a deification of the state and its institutions, and the godlessness of the age had paved the way for amoral “materialism.” Dissecting “National Socialism” into right nationalism and left socialism Adenauer traced its roots back to the grand transformations of the nineteenth century: industrialization, urbanization, nationalization, secularization, materialism and consumerism. The total negligence of the individual’s dignity and freedom deriving from its divine creation had been lost along the way – the main calamity of modernity in Adenauer’s eyes. Consequently, what he required of Germans was not an admission of “collective guilt” for what had gone wrong with Germany, but an individual “search of conscience.” He expressed both shame and pride in light of the catastrophe; shame for the crimes committed in the German name, and pride for the “heroic” way in which Germans “bore their fate.”<sup>126</sup>

It was always part of Adenauer’s political rhetoric and conviction to side with the small Nazi and to save the “decent German soldier’s” memory from maculation and condemnation. Already in 1946 he demanded to “finally” leave the former nominal

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<sup>125</sup> Sontheimer, *Die Adenauer-Ära*, 21-24ff. Sebastian Haffner, *Im Schatten der Geschichte. Historisch-Politische Variationen aus 20 Jahren* (Stuttgart: dtv, 1985), 291. Standard on Adenauer’s life and political work are still Hans-Peter Schwarz, *Adenauer. Der Aufstieg 1876-1952* (Stuttgart: dtv, 1986), and idem., *Adenauer. Der Staatsmann 1952-1967* (Stuttgart: dtv, 1991).

<sup>126</sup> Speech as mayor before the city-council of Cologne, October 1, 1945. Printed in Hans-Peter Schwarz, ed., *Konrad Adenauer. Reden 1917-1967: Eine Auswahl* (Stuttgart: dtv, 1975), 80-89.

members of the Nazi Party (“*Mitläufer*”) alone, notwithstanding that the “National Socialist and militarist spirit must be expunged” from German society. During a March 1946 speech about CDU principles at Cologne University, he also addressed the question of denazification and cautiously differentiated between personal and collective guilt. He clarified that those “active Nazis and active militarists, those responsible for the war and its prolongation – including certain economic leaders – must be removed from their positions.” The “misery they have brought over Germany and the world cries to heaven” and they should be indicted and judged before German courts. Yet, he specified:

We only want to hit him who is really guilty. The followers [*Mitläufer*], those who did not oppress others, who did not profit, did not commit any crimes, one must finally leave alone. They themselves should behave with restraint for they bear part of the guilt, even if only a miniscule part, for this terrible development. They can join our party even if they cannot yet fulfil a task.<sup>127</sup>

The same goes for former soldiers, Adenauer concluded: a soldier who has fought “in a decent way and who did nothing else than that” was not an “active militarist *per se*, regardless of his rank, whether he was officer or not.” Consequently, former soldiers “must not be relegated.” For if “one affronts harmless followers and soldiers just because they believed to fulfil their duty, one practically breeds a vulgar and extreme nationalism.”<sup>128</sup> As first chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, Adenauer stuck to this tactical argumentation, pragmatically manoeuvring between accusation and integration, yet ultimately advocating the white washing of the Wehrmacht. Regardless of the gruesome and incriminating facts unearthed during the Nuremberg trial in 1945/46, and the successor trials, particularly the so-called OKW-trial of 1948 (“Case 12”), Adenauer turned out to be one of the most prominent architects of the “myth of the clean

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.



Wehrmacht.” He was convinced that the number of “truly guilty higher officers” was so “extraordinary small” that “the honor of the Wehrmacht is not derogated by that.”<sup>129</sup>

The political consequences of this view are evident: Adenauer incessantly denounced the continuing incarceration of German POWs in the Soviet Union without ever referring to the reasons why they were taken prisoners, leave alone explaining why they were on Soviet territory in the first place.<sup>130</sup> Similarly to Schumacher, the perception of present Soviet injustice justified the negligence of past German injustice. The political argumentation became one-dimensional in the sense that preceding historical events were simply removed from the reference frame of political speech and action.

Russia as global power and as potential threat, however, remained at the center of political and security considerations. In a semi-public speech to students in Bonn in July 1948, Adenauer elaborated on the possibility of a new war with Russia. He stated that the scenarios of “paganism” flooding Europe and the “Russians on the Rhine one day” was no mere fiction. He also reminded his young listeners that “Russia has been and will be a land of hunger” but that the country’s economic, military and human capacities have been reduced by the last war so that one cannot consider it a “world power” any longer.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> This comment was made during parliamentary debate in 1951. Printed in *Verhandlungen des Deutschen Bundestages/Stenographische Berichte (VDB)* (Bonn: Heger, 1950ff.), vol. 6: 1. Wahlperiode, 130. Sitzung vom 5.5.1951, 4984. Quoted in Reichel, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, 100.

<sup>130</sup> See for example a campaign speech of September 1946 “Demonstrate that you are on the way to political maturity...,” printed in Felix Becker, ed., *Konrad Adenauer: “Die Demokratie ist für uns eine Weltanschauung.” Reden und Gespräche (1946-1967)* (Köln: Böhlau, 1998), 23ff. And his campaign speech “The German nation will again enter the international community...,” printed in *ibid.*, 32ff. See also the remarks during Adenauer’s first speech as German chancellor in the Bundestag in September 1949, printed in Auswärtiges Amt, ed., *40 Jahre Außenpolitik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: eine Dokumentation* (Stuttgart: Bonn Aktuell, 1989), 21.

<sup>131</sup> Speech before students of the Institute of Chemistry, Bonn University, July 21, 1948, printed in Schwarz, ed., *Konrad Adenauer. Reden 1917-1967*, 115-118. Adenauer’s remark about „paganism” is quoted from a campaign speech in Heidelberg in 1949, printed in *ibid.*, 148. It belongs into the following

Mixing a persisting sense of superiority – in spite of the total defeat of Germany! – with the verdict of inferiority about the ever-backward Russian lands, Adenauer appropriated the past accordingly: reference to the destruction caused by the Wehrmacht in the Soviet Union was, if made at all, tainted by the cynical conclusion that this thorough and bloody curbing of Russia's capacities had permanently ended its aspirations as global player. After all, the “twelve years of National Socialism were an episode in history” which cannot count as justification for the “Russian occupation in half Germany.” This kind of a “historization of National Socialism”<sup>132</sup> – i.e. the attempt to place the Nazi period within the larger context of world history – in fact aimed at de-contextualizing the war against the Soviet Union. It disconnected present policy concerns and decisions from the past. Given the critical international situation in 1948 this is well understandable. The West had good reason to fear expansionist communism in its Soviet design. For, as John Lewis Gaddis has phrased it, the Western empire arose “by invitation,” but the Soviet “by imposition,” by the use of force.<sup>133</sup> Yet, it also meant a durable settlement, or rather non-settlement, concerning one of the most horrible wars ever waged in human history with severe and long-term implications for German national identity, collective memory and political culture.

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context. Adenauer claimed the world was divided into two powers, good and evil, literally: the latter was “Soviet Russia, which can be equaled with Asia [...] This power is a direct enemy of Christianity, an enemy of God [...] The danger for us Germans and Europeans to be swallowed by communist pagandom is by no means banned.”

<sup>132</sup> Martin Broszat coined this phrase decades later during the so-called historians' controversy in Germany, pleading for the integration of Nazi history into the larger context of German history and repudiating attempts to dissociate the Third Reich as “abnormal episode” from the otherwise “normal” course of German history. See Martin Broszat, “Plädoyer für eine Historisierung des Nationalsozialismus,” *Merkur* no. 435 (1985), 373-385

<sup>133</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *We now know. Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1-53, quote on 52.

The leading politician of postwar German liberalism, Theodor Heuss (1884-1963), declared that he wanted to serve his country as “intermediary” upon swearing his oath as the first president of the Federal Republic in Germany in 1949. He had grown into this role during the preceding four years, particularly as leader of the FDP since 1948 and as member of the constitutional convent in 1948/49 assembled to draft a “Basic Law” (*Grundgesetz*) for the West German state. As journalist, writer and intellectual, Heuss had a much more ambiguous past than Schumacher and Adenauer. Despite having been well aware of what “Hitler’s Path” meant for Germany (he had written a book with this title about the rising Nazis in 1932<sup>134</sup>), he voted for Hitler’s “Enabling Law” in 1933 as Reichstag member for the *Deutsche Staatspartei*, certainly the darkest hour in his life as *homo politicus*.<sup>135</sup> He spent the Nazi years in inner exile, writing biographical studies, and returned to politics in 1945 joining the Liberals in Wurttemberg-Baden. As Minister for Culture in Wurttemberg-Baden, Heuss began his career as public speaker and was soon recognized as apt intermediary between the past and present. With “cold frankness” he repeatedly insisted that the war had been caused by Germany, that its leaders “had wished for it.” Echoing Karl Jaspers’ dictum to let the “good-will of communication reign,”<sup>136</sup> Heuss warned that “without such clear speaking-out we will loose the ground beneath our feet” in a March 1946 speech before the *Kulturbund* in East Berlin.<sup>137</sup> The Nuremberg

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<sup>134</sup> Theodor Heuss, *Hitlers Weg: eine historisch-politische Studie über den Nationalsozialismus* (Stuttgart: Union Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft, 1932).

<sup>135</sup> Sontheimer, *Die Adenauer-Ära*, 17-21. See also Karl-Dietrich Bracher, *Theodor Heuss und die Wiederbegründung der Demokratie in Deutschland* (Tübingen: Wunderlich, 1965).

<sup>136</sup> Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, 106.

<sup>137</sup> „Um Deutschlands Zukunft,“ speech before the KB in East Berlin, March 18, 1946. Printed in Theodor Heuss, *Aufzeichnungen 1945-1947* (Tübingen: Wunderlich, 1966), 186. The Soviet occupation authority prohibited the airing of this frank, much-noted speech over radio in Eastern zone.

trials, taking place simultaneously, were not even needed for this, he claimed, people had known what would follow once Hitler attained power and they knew of the crimes his regime committed all over Europe. His Salomonian verdict: “we were conscientiously forced into this war”<sup>138</sup> and now the well-known “bitter truths”<sup>139</sup> were presented.

With this in mind, Heuss approached the difficult question of judging the Wehrmacht soldiers’ role during the war with much sensitivity for the individual tragedy but also with much willingness to overlook historical facts, precisely those facts discussed by the International Military Tribunal in Nuremberg at the time. He underlined that it was “difficult to speak of the situation of the German soldier in this last war:”

It is a tragic conversation. One must not forget the people who believed to be fighting for Germany and who died for Hitler. One example for many others: A young man foresaw his death and wrote to his mother: ‘I will perish. Don’t write in the paper that I died for the Fuhrer, because I hate him and despise him.’ The obituary was already in print with the ‘Fuhrer’ and everything, and the family felt that it had betrayed its son’s legacy. Thousands, millions, who stood in the line of duty as soldiers, cannot be released of this legacy. It is not permitted to disregard this fighting and dying of millions and even to speak of it disdainfully. They stood in a tragic bond.<sup>140</sup>

It is not clear who disregarded and disdained these dead soldiers but obviously Heuss was hinting at revelations about the Wehrmacht’s involvement in war crimes on the Eastern Front – the killing of the Jews, civilians, and maltreatment of Soviet prisoners of war as it was unearthed during the IMT’s proceedings. Instead, he contended, it was necessary to speak of the “historical greatness of the German soldierly tradition (*Soldatentum*), ... yet, we see it clearly, this part of German history is over.” And Heuss recalled what Hitler had propagated about this war, namely that there would not be

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

<sup>139</sup> Theodor Heuss, “Kapitulation,” May 9, 1946, *Rhein-Neckar-Zeitung*. Printed in Heuss, *Aufzeichnungen 1945-1947*, 214.

<sup>140</sup> „Um Deutschlands Zukunft,“ speech before the KB in East Berlin, March 18, 1946. Printed in Heuss, *Aufzeichnungen 1945-1947*, 187f.

victors and vanquished but only those “exterminated” and those who survived: “We are the exterminated and we are the survivors. For a nation there is no comfortable exit such as a little suicide was for Hitler or Goebbels or [SS-leader Heinrich] Himmler who simply sneaked out of history through a postern.” Yet by granting the surviving Germans that they were merely the “witnesses of their own fate,” Heuss turned history itself upside down and – to say the least – equalled the suffering of Germans with those who actually *were* exterminated by them. That “thousands and millions” had died, mainly on the Eastern Front, he did not link directly to the aggressive war waged in Eastern Europe and to the million-fold deaths among the local populations occurring in the wake of it. The memory of and empathy for the “other” victims was there but vague, present but aloof, and authentic but relativizing.

This section should be concluded with one of Theodor Heuss’ memorable remarks that actually reflects these very ambiguities and limitations. In an essay prepared for a meeting of liberal leaders in January 1946, he dealt extensively with the question of narrating and writing history. The following lines document both his historical insight and his humanity:

Each generation writes its history anew. Though the pasts remain what they are. They lay like deceased in the what-has-been, but the dead can come back and become the haunting present.<sup>141</sup>

Heuss recalled that during the Nazi period, historians have come to disregard Ranke’s understanding of writing history, namely to “show how it really was.” Historiography had mutated into a science of picking and choosing from history, had

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<sup>141</sup> „Bindung und Freiheit,“ January 6, 1946. Printed in Heuss, *Aufzeichnungen 1945-1947*, 166. The original quote might be added here for its meaningful translation is difficult: “Jede Generation schreibt sich ihre Geschichte neu. Die Vergangenheiten bleiben zwar wie sie sind. Sie liegen ja wie gestorben im Gewesenen, aber die Gestorbenen können ja wiederkehren und gespenstische Gegenwart werden.”

become “a selection procedure serving current political purposes.”<sup>142</sup> Unfortunately, this way of reading history continued to dominate historical discourses in postwar Germany. Heuss’ warning that “a politically motivated interpretation of history is not worth much” and his call for a “return to uncommitted (*zweckentbundenen*) truthfulness” trailed away for at least two decades without much resonance. Ultimately, his own speeches helped erect some of the obstacles for such an undertaking in truthfulness.

The calculated presence of the Eastern Front war in East German political memory did not generate a genuine interest in historical reality, in the question of individual guilt and responsibility. Rather, the SED’s project of German-Soviet friendship aimed at the collective redemption of East Germany’s citizen. It offered absolution in exchange for political loyalty. The general absence of “Operation Barbarossa” from West German memory led to a different kind of disinterest.<sup>143</sup> While the political leaders commemorated and acknowledged the Wehrmacht’s sacrifices in a “clean” Eastern war, they remained silent about the complicit role of the Wehrmacht in the war of extermination and about the extent of Soviet suffering. Yet, as already hinted at in the previous pages, it was

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> On a side note, I consulted all issues of the *Frankfurter Hefte* published between 1946 and 1949 in search for an intellectual discourse on the legacy of the Eastern Front, but this was absent, too. Remarkably few contributions to *Frankfurter Hefte* dealt with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe at all, even fewer with the war in the East and its ramifications for the present. The remaining German POWs in the Soviet Union were a recurrent issues (see for example an article in the December issue of 1946, 795f., which reminded the Soviets of their moral responsibility to release the prisoners and appealed to “the humanity of those who went to fight against fascism in the name of a better cause” – a rare recognition of the Soviet contribution to the victory over Hitler). The journal also carried a review of Theodor Plievier’s *Stalingrad* stressing that the battle symbolized more than unspeakable human suffering. Instead it was the cataclysmic high-point of German “irrationality” and absolute obedience. Hans-Peter Berglar-Schröder, “Memento Stalingrad”, in *Frankfurter Hefte*, vol. 4, no. 3 (April 1948), 375f.

during those same years, that the Nuremberg Trial in 1945/46, the OKW-Trial in 1947/48 and the Manstein-Trial in 1949 constituted moments of historical truth during which most of the realities of “Operation Barbarossa” were publicly discussed – only to disappear from the political memory in both Germanys not long after the sentences were handed down.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Nothing but the Truth: “Operation Barbarossa” and the Prosecution of War Crimes**

“Attracted by the militaristic and aggressive Nazi policies, the German generals found themselves drawn into adventures of a scope they had not foreseen. [They] planned and carried through manifold acts of aggression which turned Europe into a charnel-house, and caused the Armed Forces to be used for foul practices foully executed of terror, pillage, murder and wholesale slaughter. Let no one be heard to say that the military uniform shall be their cloak, or that they may find sanctuary by pleading membership in the profession to which they are an eternal disgrace.”

From the Nurmberg Indictment (1945)



## I. Nuremberg and the Question of Guilt 1945/46

The Nuremberg Tribunal, the trial of the Wehrmacht High Command (OKW) as well as the Manstein Trial represent three examples for the early and sincere reckoning with German war crimes after World War II in Germany. They were initiated by the Allies which explains to a great extent the sincerity and thoroughness with which the criminal legacy of the Nazi regime was treated. These trials signify moments of historical truth in Germany's early postwar history. This chapter reconstructs what these trials had to say specifically about Nazi war crimes on the Eastern Front, and it examines the reactions to them in all four zones of occupation. By paying attention to the details of these judicial proceedings, the chapter offers also the opportunity to clarify what is meant by the "legacies" of Stalingrad and the Eastern Front war. The wealth of historic evidence introduced before the trials not only informed the public about the crimes and their victims; it also speaks to the degree of ignorance this evidence received after the trials were over.

Political memory is not only about *commemorating* the past. It is political because it usually transports a certain historical *knowledge* into the public sphere. The history of the Eastern Front memory in postwar Germany illustrates the pitfalls of a "public use of history"<sup>1</sup> if this "use" is reduced to the communication and selection of historical knowledge for political purposes. In both Germanys, the historical knowledge emerging from the meticulously working Allied tribunals was largely neglected by the political elite – albeit to varying degrees and for differing reasons. This chapter thus investigates

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<sup>1</sup> Habermas, "Concerning the public use of history," 40-50.

what was known, debated and judged before the courts and in the public between the years of 1945 and 1949 about “Operation Barbarossa.” And as these facts were largely neglected until the heated controversy surrounding the Wehrmacht exhibit fifty years later, it also demonstrates just how complete this negligence of historical truth regarding the “war of extermination” on the Eastern Front was in West German society, and just how selectively and calculated the SED’s Eastern Front war memory was in the GDR. In so far, Dolf Sternberger’s contemporary diagnosis that by 1949 West German society had grown a “thick skin” immersing in a “vital forgetfulness” with regards to the Nazi past, can also be applied on the selective forgetting of the Eastern Front war in West *and* East Germany.<sup>2</sup>

The International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg was established by the four Allies in order to prosecute Nazi war crimes and crimes against humanity. The main task and most valuable achievement of eventually thirteen trials between 1946 and 1949<sup>3</sup> was the “discovery, collection, examination, translation, and marshalling of documentary evidence demonstrating the criminality of the former leaders of the Third Reich.”<sup>4</sup> It was the first time in history that “legal proceedings have been instituted against leaders of an enemy nation.” They accordingly received much attention, and prompted approving as

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<sup>2</sup> Dolf Sternberger, “Versuch zu einem Fazit,” *Die Wandlung*, 4 (1949), 700-709, quote on 701. This was the last *Wandlung* issue to come out.

<sup>3</sup> Full documentation: International Military Tribunal, *Trials of War Criminals Before the Nuernberg Military Tribunals under Control Council law No. 10. Nuernberg, October 1946-April, 1949*, 15 Vols. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1949-1953). See for an overview with a focus on the Wehrmacht involvement Telford Taylor, *Sword and Swastika. Generals and Nazis in the Third Reich* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1952).

<sup>4</sup> Office of the United States Chief Counsel for Prosecution of Axis Criminality, ed., *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1946), v.

well as critical commentary among contemporaries.<sup>5</sup> The twenty-two defendants on trial in Nuremberg were leading political, economic and military functionaries of the former Nazi regime and their individual indictment testified to the Allies' willingness to avoid any claims of German collective guilt. The defendants were accused of three central charges formulated in Article 6 of the IMT Charter:

The following acts, or any of them, are crimes coming within the jurisdiction of the Tribunal for which there shall be *individual* responsibility:

- (a) CRIMES AGAINST PEACE: namely, planning, preparation, initiation or waging of a war of aggression, or a war in violation of international treaties, agreements or assurances, or participation in a common plan or conspiracy for the accomplishment of any of the foregoing;
- (b) WAR CRIMES: namely, violations of the laws or customs of war. Such violations shall include, but not be limited to, murder, ill-treatment or deportation to slave labor or for any other purpose of civilian population of or in occupied territory, murder or ill-treatment of prisoners of war or persons on the seas, killing of hostages, plunder of public or private property, wanton destruction of cities, towns or villages, or devastation not justified by military necessity;
- (c) CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY: namely, murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation, and other inhumane acts committed against any civilian population, before or during the war; or persecutions on political, racial or religious grounds in execution of or in connection with any crime within the jurisdiction of the Tribunal, whether or not in violation of the domestic law of the country where perpetrated.

Leaders, organizers, instigators and accomplices participating in the formulation or execution of a common plan or conspiracy to commit any of the foregoing crimes are responsible for all acts performed by any persons in execution of such plan.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from providing evidence that proved the defendants responsibility for any or all of these crimes, the Tribunal also discussed the question of individual guilt by association or membership in a group or organization. It was in this context that the criminal conduct of the Wehrmacht and the relationship between the Wehrmacht leadership and the Nazi rulers was debated. Article 9 of the IMT Charter provided the Tribunal with the possibility to declare a group or organization as “criminal:”

At the trial of any individual member of any group or organization the Tribunal may declare (in connection with any act of which the individual may be convicted) that the group or organization of which the individual was a member was a criminal organization.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 5. [Emphasis added].

The indictment proposed to declare the leadership of the Wehrmacht – a group of about 130 high-ranking officers who formed the general staff of the three armed services (army, navy, air force) and the High Command (OKW) – a criminal organization. This declaration was rejected in the final judgment; what stuck with the public thereafter was the conclusion that “the Wehrmacht was no criminal organization.” The Tribunal’s reasoning for this decision was largely disregarded: it held that “the number of persons charged ... is still so small that individual trials of these officers would accomplish the purpose here sought better than a declaration such as is requested.” Furthermore it reasoned that General Staff and High Command were “neither an ‘organization’ nor a ‘group’ within the meaning of those terms as used in Article 9 of the Charter,”<sup>8</sup> because its member had not joined a declared “organization” in a voluntary act but as a matter of course determined largely by their professional careers.<sup>9</sup> They should thus be tried individually. By advocating the individual prosecution of the wider Wehrmacht

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 6. The proceedings for such a declaration are discussed in chapter XV of the Indictment, see Office of the United States Chief Counsel for Prosecution of Axis Criminality, ed., *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression*, vol. 2, 1-400, on the OKW specifically: 316-400.

<sup>8</sup> Office of the United States Chief Counsel for Prosecution of Axis Criminality, ed., *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression. Opinion and Judgment* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1947), 105.

<sup>9</sup> The detailed – certainly partly disputable – reasoning was as follows: „To derive from this pattern of [the OKW’s] activities the existence of an association or group [in the sense of Art. 9 of the IMT charter] does not, in the opinion of the Tribunal, logically follow. On such a theory the top commanders of every nation are just such an association rather than what they actually are, an aggregation of military men, a number of individuals who happen at a given period of time to hold the high-ranking military positions. Much of the evidence and the argument has centered around the question whether membership in these organizations was or was not voluntary; in this case, it seems to the Tribunal to be quite beside the point. For this alleged criminal organization has one characteristic, a controlling one which sharply distinguishes it from the other five indicted [Nazi Party Leadership Corps, Reich Cabinet, SA, SS, Gestapo/SD]. When an individual became a member of the SS for instance, he did so, voluntarily or otherwise, but certainly with the knowledge that he was joining something. In the case of the General Staff and the High Command, however, he could not know he was joining a group or organization for such organization did not exist except in the charge of the [IMT] indictment. He knew only that he had achieved a certain high rank in one of the three services, and could not be conscious of the fact that he was becoming a member of anything so tangible as a ,group,’ as that word is commonly used.“ Ibid., 106f.

leadership, which in itself was another prove against the widely lamented “collective guilt” theory – the Tribunal inadvertently paved the way for the emergence of the “myth of the clean Wehrmacht.” Yet, as the following paragraphs will demonstrate, the facts were out in the public, the true nature of the war on the Eastern Front was extensively documented by the Tribunal, and communicated via print media and radio in all four occupation zones.

With regards to the war against the Soviet Union, the prosecution clarified the main objectives already in the indictment: first, to disprove the Nazis’ claim that “Barbarossa” was a preemptive war forced upon Germany to avoid an impending Soviet aggression; secondly, to demonstrate that the Eastern campaign was an aggressive war violating international law and bilateral agreements, and that it was a premeditated attack; and thirdly, that the war was waged for the economic exploitation of the USSR and for the acquisition of *Lebensraum* with the ultimate aim to eliminate the USSR as political power in Europe.<sup>10</sup> In conclusion, the prosecution sought to demonstrate that “in the history of relations between sovereign nations, a blacker chapter has never been written than the one which tells of the Nazi conspirators’ unprovoked invasion of the territory of the Soviet Union.”<sup>11</sup>

The facts, documents, photographs and film materials presented before the court in the appendix to the indictment laid the foundation for the historiographical, judicial and political reckoning with the Nazi past. The material was published in English in 1946/47 and on order of the ACC a 42-volume German edition appeared between 1947 and 1949.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 794-834.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 833f.

The evidence was also partially reproduced and commented by all main newspapers across Germany.<sup>12</sup> The press reports about the Tribunal's proceedings demonstrated to the German public not only the deep entanglement of the military elite with National Socialism. It also informed them about the scope of crimes committed, particularly in the Eastern occupied territories, and even highlighted the presence and participation of rank-and-file soldiers in these crimes.<sup>13</sup>

What happened to this knowledge after 1946? It obviously did not enter political and collective memory and conscience in the immediate postwar years. In the Western zones, where no ideological imperative demanded the continuous public presence of the crimes on Soviet territory, these facts soon disappeared in libraries and court archives. This is a sad example of a collective amnesia, of the public forgetting of common knowledge about the past. It is important to keep in mind, though, that this does not mean that the war on the Eastern Front was obliterated from collective memory altogether; in fact, it was widely discussed and remembered, yet only in selections, in bits and pieces, often lacking the historical context (e.g. in literature, media) and focused on the tragedy of individual soldierly suffering – with the Stalingrad disaster as its historical incarnation.<sup>14</sup>

Already in 1946, attentive and interested contemporaries could learn about the war on the Eastern Front what the organizers of the Wehrmacht exhibit “War of

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<sup>12</sup> See Jörg Echternkamp, „Wut auf die Wehrmacht? Vom Bild der deutschen Soldaten in der unmittelbaren Nachkriegszeit,“ in Müller, Volkmann, eds., *Die Wehrmacht. Mythos und Realität*, 1058-1080.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 1080.

<sup>14</sup> See the evidence provided in Christina Morina, „Der Angriffskrieg als Lesestoff: Der Krieg an der Ostfront in der deutsch-deutschen Nachkriegsliteratur, 1945-1960,“ *Zeitgeschichte Online/Contemporary History Online*, Special Issue on the Sixtieth Anniversary of the End of World War II, May 2005. Online available at: <http://www.zeitgeschichte-online.de> [June 2005]. See further section 3 of this Chapter, as well as Chapter 8 “War and Literature.”

Extermination. Crimes of the Wehrmacht, 1941-1945” unearthed again and anew fifty years later. Only in 1995, this historical knowledge entered the public conscience and thus undermined the durable “Wehrmacht myth.” A brief recollection of the Tribunals findings and judgements does not only illustrate the thoroughness of the just mentioned process of forgetting but also details those very historical facts which inspire this study. I therefore distil from the IMT’s evidence what is relevant to the picture of the Eastern Front as it *could* have emerged in German political culture and popular perception.

According to the before-mentioned three main objectives of the prosecutors, the indictment contained the documentary evidence for “Plan Barbarossa” concluding “that this directive was no mere staff planning exercise [in 1940]. It was an order to prepare for an act of aggression which was intended to occur and which actually did occur.”<sup>15</sup> Further documents such as operational plans and military orders demonstrated “beyond any doubt that the invasion of the Soviet Union was undeniably a premeditated attack.”<sup>16</sup> In sum, the documents

are sufficient to establish the premeditation and calculation which marked the military preparations for the invasion of the U.S.S.R. Starting almost a full year before the launching of the attack, the Nazi conspirators planned and prepared every military detail of their aggression against the Soviet Union with all that thoroughness and meticulousness which has come to be associated with the German character. The leading roles were performed in this preparation by the military figures – Goering, Keitel, Jodl and Raeder [all among the present defendants].<sup>17</sup>

The prosecution further maintained that the Nazis had ensured that the attack would be “economically profitable.” It detailed the “political and economic motives” for the attack but it lacked a discussion of the racist background of the *Lebensraum* project. “Greed for

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<sup>15</sup> Office of the United States Chief Counsel for Prosecution of Axis Criminality, ed., *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression*, vol. I, 799.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 800.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 808.

the raw material, food, and other supplies” was what the Nazis drove to the East, materials “which they conceived of themselves as needing for the maintenance of their war machine.”<sup>18</sup> The “political aim” was “the elimination of the U.S.S.R. as a powerful political factor in Europe, and the acquisition of *Lebensraum*,”<sup>19</sup> for which the writings and activities of Alfred Rosenberg – Hitler’s commissioner or *Reichsleiter* for the Eastern occupied territories – were presented as evidence. The Soviet prosecutors introduced evidence showing “how all this planning and preparation for the elimination of the U.S.S.R. as a political factor was actually carried out:” the planned execution of the intelligentsia, for example, was presented as one part of the “program to destroy the Soviet Union politically and to make impossible its early resurrection as a European Power.”<sup>20</sup>

The way the attack was planned and carried out, the indictment concluded, showed that the reasons for it could not have been “self-defense or treaty breaches.”<sup>21</sup> Instead, all of the mentioned reasons

appear to blend into one grand motif of Nazi policy. The pattern into which these varied reasons fall is the traditional Nazi ambition for expansion to the East at the expense of the U.S.S.R. This Nazi version of an earlier imperial imperative, “*Drang nach Osten*,” had been a cardinal principle of the Party almost since its birth, and rested on the twin bases of political strategy and economic aggrandizement. Politically, such action meant elimination of the powerful force to the East, which might constitute a threat to German ambition, and acquisition of *Lebensraum*. Economically, it offered opportunities for the plunder of vast quantities of food, raw materials, and other supplies. ...

If any doubt existed that at least one of the main purposes of the invasion was to steal the food and raw material needed for the Nazi war machine, regardless of the consequences to the Russian people which such robbery would entail, that doubt is dispelled by [a series of cited documents] showing clear and conscious recognition by the Nazis that their plans would no doubt result in starving to death millions of people.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 814-828.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 828.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 830.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 831-833. See also chapter XIII of the Indictment, 1040-1052.



Neither could there be doubt in the public mind about the fact that the military campaign “Barbarossa” was expected to and actually did entail devastating consequences for the Soviet population. It was “a program of premeditated murder on a scale so vast as to stagger human imagination.”<sup>23</sup> Up to this point, the systematic hunt-down and killing of “partisans,” “Bolshevik commissars” and “Jews” in that territory had not even been mentioned. In 1946 and after, the anti-Jewish policies of the Nazi regime were commonly viewed as merely “one part” of the Nazi program, not as one of its central pillars as later historians would conclude.<sup>24</sup> The indictment therefore simply noted that “anti-Jewish policy was part of the plan for unification” of Germans according to the motto “one race, one state, one Fuehrer.” The Nazis were convinced that the “Jews would not contribute to Germany’s military program, but on the contrary would hamper it. The Jews therefore must be eliminated.”<sup>25</sup> Yet, the Tribunal also stressed that “the treatment of the Jews within Germany was as much part of the Nazi plan for aggressive war as was the building

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 1046.

<sup>24</sup> One of the famous contemporary works arguing that anti-Semitism was peripheral to Nazi policy, i.e. that it served mainly economic and propagandistic purposes, was Franz Neumann’s *Behemoth. The Structure and Practice of National Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944). Also other representatives of the Frankfurt school reasoned that anti-Semitism was a mere tool of Nazi policy, see for example, Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1971): “Antisemitismus ist kaum mehr eine selbständige Regung, sondern eine Planke der Plattform: wer irgend dem Faschismus die Chance gibt, subskribiert mit der Zerschlagung der Gewerkschaften und dem Kreuzzug gegen den Bolschewismus automatisch auch die Erledigung der Juden.“ (180) And: „Daß, der Tendenz nach, Antisemitismus nur noch als Posten im auswechselbaren Ticket [dieser oder jener ideologischen Bewegung] vorkommt, begründet unwiderleglich die Hoffnung auf sein Ende. Die Juden werden zu einer Zeit ermordet, da die Führer die antisemitische Planke so leicht ersetzen könnten, wie die Gefolgschaften von einer Stätte der durchrationalisierten Produktion in eine andere überzuführen sind“ (185). Both statements, though, have been met with great skepticism or were even rejected by later historians. For a summary of the discussion and an assessment see Jäckel, *Hitler’s World View*, 13-26, 47-66.

<sup>25</sup> Office of the United States Chief Counsel for Prosecution of Axis Criminality, ed., *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression*, vol. I, 978.

of armaments and the conscription of manpower.”<sup>26</sup> The court thus made clear that waging aggressive war against Europe in any case entailed exporting anti-Jewish policies to all conquered and occupied territories. Then followed a detailed description of these policy stages, ranging from discrimination to segregation, to slave labor to physical extermination. The two main means of destruction employed under the guise of war in the East were the extermination camps in the “General Government” established in Poland and the execution of Jews, other civilians, partisans and other declared “hostile elements” behind the front lines. While the indictment discussed the first in detail, it mentioned the second only in passing. Still, the facts were clear:

It was not always necessary, or perhaps desirable, to place the Jews within Ghettos to effect elimination. In the Baltic States [i.e. on Soviet territory after June 1941] a more direct course of action was followed. According to a report by SS Brigade Fuehrer Stahlecker to Himmler, dated 15 October 1941, entitled “Action Group A” ..., 135,567 persons, nearly all Jews, were murdered in accordance to basic orders directing the complete annihilation of the Jews.<sup>27</sup>

The SS report was cited at length and is particularly interesting because of its description of various pogroms first instigated by advancing German troops and then carried out by local “auxiliary forces.”

The nature and degree of the involvement of Wehrmacht leaders and troops in such crimes was debated in connection with the question whether the OKW was a “criminal group or organization.” The prosecution’s argumentation, as already mentioned, was not adopted by the Tribunal (excluding the Soviet prosecutor) in the final judgement.

Nonetheless, its other conclusions provided “clear and convincing” evidence for such an

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 998f.

involvement.<sup>28</sup> With regards to the categorization of the Wehrmacht as criminal organization, the Tribunal explicitly acknowledged the veracity and justification of the prosecution's arguments in its final verdict. Noting that the Reichswehr/Wehrmacht antedated the Nazi regime, the indictment weighed soldierly tradition and recent practice in the German armed forces carefully against each another. And it also clarified that the "group" referred to in the indictment was the Wehrmacht leadership and that an army is not potentially criminal *per se*:

Needless to say, it is not the prosecution's position that it is a crime to be a soldier or sailor, or to serve one's country as a soldier or sailor in times of war. The profession of arms is an honourable one, and can be honorably practiced. But it is too clear for argument that a man who commits crimes cannot plead as a defense that he committed them in uniform.<sup>29</sup>

This was the bottom line for the Tribunal's handling of war crimes charges against the Wehrmacht leadership. It constituted a balanced acknowledgment of the difficult situation a soldier could find himself in while serving in the Wehrmacht under Hitler. Yet, it also set a standard of accountability for crimes possibly committed in uniform. As the last section of this chapter will demonstrate, this bottom line was not accepted by postwar German public opinion and political leadership – neither in East nor West Germany. Only, the first half of this reasoning, the claim that being a soldier was not a crime *per se*, was integrated into the respectively formulated soldierly narratives about World War II.

The indictment argued further, focussing on the leadership group, that the group agreed with the basic objectives of National Socialism and thus supported it. "Hitler

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<sup>28</sup> Office of the United States Chief Counsel for Prosecution of Axis Criminality, ed., *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression. Opinion and Judgment* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1947), 107.

<sup>29</sup> Office of the United States Chief Counsel for Prosecution of Axis Criminality, ed., *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression*, vol. II, 317.

attracted the generals to him with the glitter of conquest and then succeeded in submerging them politically.” That they became a “tool” did not mean, however, that “they were unwitting, or that they did not participate fully in many of the actions which are charged as criminal.”<sup>30</sup> In connection with the discussions and preparations of “Barbarossa,” the prosecution granted that some generals might have opposed the plan, yet as a group they failed to take action against it. The “events of 1941 and 1942 do not suggest that the High Command embarked on the Soviet war tentatively or with reservations, but rather with ruthless determination backed by careful planning.”<sup>31</sup> Once again, the indictment took up the issue of a soldier’s role in a criminal war, clarifying that the generals were not accused on the grounds that they were soldiers: they were not accused because they had done “the usual things a soldier is expected to do, such as make military plans and command troops.” With the help of a very simple analogy, the indictment explained its main point:

“It is an innocent and respectable business to be a locksmith but it is none the less a crime if the locksmith turns his talents to picking the locks of neighbors and looting their homes. And that is the nature of the charges against all the defendants. ...

The Charter (Article 6 (a)) declares that wars of aggression and wars in violation of international treaties, agreements, and assurances are crimes against peace. It is no defense to plead that they practice a particular profession, whether it is arms or the law. It is perfectly legal for military men to prepare military plans to meet national contingencies, to carry out such plans and engage in wars if in so doing they do not knowingly plan and wage illegal wars.”<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, by drafting and executing illegal war plans, the group also disregarded the rules of traditional warfare and became “wedded in a policy of terror.” The High Command either initiated such crimes, for example the illegal treatment of Soviet POWs,

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 318.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 357.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 358.

or the actual crimes were committed by others such as SD and SS, in which case the prosecution believed that the group was “well aware that they were assisting in the commission of war crimes.” In fact, the prosecution was convinced that

many crimes committed by the SS or SD were committed with the knowledge and necessary support of the General Staff and High Command, and that frequently members of the German Armed Forces [i.e. ordinary soldiers] acted in conjunction with the SS and SD in carrying out tasks then known by such respectable terms as “pacification,” “cleansing,” and “elimination of insecure elements.”<sup>33</sup>

In one of the most important sections on war crimes, the Tribunal made a distinction between the limited warfare in the Western occupied territories after 1940, and the brutal fighting amidst a hostile population on the Eastern Front. This is also the section where the nature of the war on the Eastern Front became most clear and explicit. The means of conventional warfare were deemed all but suitable to “respond” to the military resistance of the Red Army and partisan fighters. Crucially, the Tribunal unmasked the “partisan war” as the pretext for the murder of millions of civilians, thus in fact, for race war:

The activities of the German Armed Forces against partisans and other elements of the population became a vehicle for carrying out Nazi political and racial policies, and a cloak for the ruthless and barbaric massacre of Jews and of numerous segments of the Slavic population which were regarded by the Nazis as undesirable... The German Armed Forces supported, assisted, and acted in cooperation with the SS Groups which were especially charged with antipartisan activities. Members of the General Staff and High Command Group ordered, directed, encouraged, and were fully aware of these criminal policies and activities. ...

The German High Command developed and applied a policy of terror against commandos and paratroopers, in violation of the Hague and Geneva Conventions, on the Western Front. On the Eastern Front it descended to savagery. In advance of the attack against the Soviet Union, the High Command ordered the troops to take ‘ruthless action,’ left it to the discretion of any officer to decide whether suspected civilians should be immediately shot, and empowered any officer with the powers of a Battalion commander to take ‘collective despotic measures’ against localities. Offenses committed against civilians by German soldiers, however, were not required to be prosecuted, and prosecution was suggested only where desirable in order to maintain discipline and security from a military standpoint. ...

The High Command and the chief lieutenants of Himmler jointly planned the establishment of the *Einsatzgruppen* ... These groups when in operational areas were under the command of the German Army, and German soldiers joined in their savagery. The *Einsatzgruppen* were completely dependent upon the Armed Forces for supplies with which to carry out their atrocities.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 361.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 374f, 397.

Already during the proceedings before the Nuremberg Tribunal in 1946 it became abundantly clear that army and SS worked “hand in glove”<sup>35</sup> in the commission of war crimes on the Eastern Front. Yet, especially in the West, almost none of these conclusions entered the official (and popular) memory of the war on the Eastern Front. When in 1995, a group of historians at the Hamburg Institute for Social Research reached similar conclusions and provided visual evidence for the involvement of ordinary German soldiers in the “war of extermination,” a public outcry shook post-unification Germany with a lasting impact on its historical self-image and political culture.<sup>36</sup>

After the verdict was handed down in October 1946, only a small part of the Tribunal’s arguments stuck in the public mind: neither the General Staff nor High Command (and thus nor the Wehrmacht on the whole) were declared “criminal organisations” in the sense of Article 9 of the IMT Charter for reasons already mentioned above. The Soviet prosecutor issued a dissenting opinion in this regard, basically repeating the arguments of the indictment.<sup>37</sup> The text of the verdict however contained an

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 382.

<sup>36</sup> Heer/Naumann, eds., *Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941-1944*. On the public debates following the exhibition see Greven/von Wrochem, eds., *Der Krieg in der Nachkriegszeit*. And Hannes Heer, „The Difficulty of Ending a War: Reactions to the Exhibition ,War of Extermination: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941-1944,,” *History Workshop Journal*, 46 (1998), 187-203. And idem, *Vom Verschwinden der Täter. Der Vernichtungskrieg fand statt, aber keiner war dabei* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 2004). This was not the first time, of course, that these facts were documented but perhaps the first time that they were communicated to the public in an effective way (photo exhibition and extensive media coverage).

<sup>37</sup> The Soviet prosecutor claimed that “the verdict incorrectly rejects the accusation of criminal activity directed against the General Staff and the OKW,” a statement which was actually not quite correct. The verdict left no doubt as to the criminal character of the General Staff’s and High Command’ activities, it refused however to declare it a criminal organization. The Soviets’ dissenting opinion is printed in Office of the United States Chief Counsel for Prosecution of Axis Criminality, ed., *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression. Opinion and Judgment*, 166-190, quote on 183.

important conclusive statement clarifying what the Tribunal had found the German military leadership guilty of:

Although the Tribunal is of the opinion that the term 'group' in Article 9 must mean something more than this collection of military officers, it has heard much evidence as to the participation of these officers in planning and waging aggressive war, and in committing war crimes and crimes against humanity. This evidence is, as to many of them, clear and convincing.

They have been responsible in large measure for the miseries and suffering that have fallen on millions of men, women, and children. They have been a disgrace to the honorable profession of arms. Without their military guidance the aggressive ambitions of Hitler and his fellow Nazis would have been academic and sterile. Although they were not a group falling within the words of the Charter, they were certainly a ruthless military caste. ...

Many of these men have made a mockery of the soldier's oath of obedience to military orders. When it suits their defense they say they had to obey; when confronted with Hitler's brutal crimes, which are shown to have been within their general knowledge, they say they disobeyed. The truth is they actively participated in all these crimes, or sat silent and acquiescent, witnessing the commission of crimes on a scale larger and more shocking than the world has ever had the misfortune to know. This must be said. Where the facts warrant it, these men should be brought to trial so that those among them who are guilty of these crimes should not escape punishment.<sup>38</sup>

The individual prosecution of members of this group was picked up only halfheartedly by German courts after ACC Law No. 4 expanded the judicial authority of German courts to war crimes in 1950. Only few former members of the Wehrmacht were actually punished for war crimes. There could be no indictment without complaint, and in most cases where a trial was held, the defendants were acquitted because the courts found it impossible to prove that a murder was "cruel," of "base motives" or "perfidious."<sup>39</sup>

The impressive documentary and judicial work completed by the IMT did not find a proper continuation in the German judicial system after the end of the Allied trials. The devastating conclusions of the Tribunal with regards to the Wehrmacht leadership remained largely unheard even though the prosecutors had denounced this group as the

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>39</sup> Ruth Bettina Birn, "Wehrmacht und Wehrmachtsangehörige in den deutschen Nachkriegsprozessen," in Heer, Volkmann, *Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941-1944*, 1081-1105. See further Chapter 10.I. for details.

“most degrading of all the groups and organizations charged in the indictment” – thus declaring them worse than the NSDAP, the Reich Cabinet, the Gestapo and even the SS:

The bearers of a tradition not devoid of valour and honour, they emerge from this war stained both by criminality and ineptitude. Attracted by the militaristic and aggressive Nazi policies, the German generals found themselves drawn into adventures of a scope they had not foreseen. [They] planned and carried through manifold acts of aggression which turned Europe into a charnel-house, and caused the Armed Forces to be used for foul practices foully executed of terror, pillage, murder and wholesale slaughter. Let no one be heard to say that the military uniform shall be their cloak, or that they may find sanctuary by pleading membership in the profession to which they are an eternal disgrace.<sup>40</sup>

## **II. Towards the Wehrmacht Myth, Despite of it All: The “OKW-Case” and Manstein-Trial, 1947-1949**

The responsibility of individual Wehrmacht leaders was addressed twice more before Allied courts in the so-called Case 12 (“OKW-Trial”) held in 1947/48,<sup>41</sup> the last of the Nuremberg successor trials, as well as in the “Manstein-Trial” held before a British military tribunal in 1949.<sup>42</sup> The “OKW-Trial” against fourteen former high-ranking

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<sup>40</sup> Office of the United States Chief Counsel for Prosecution of Axis Criminality, ed., *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression*, vol. II, 399f.

<sup>41</sup> Two other trials dealt with Wehrmacht crimes: one against Erhard Milch, general inspector of the air force, who was convicted of having conducted medical experiments with civilians and POWs in the KZ Dachau, verdict: life imprisonment, amnestied in 1954. Documented in Nuremberg Military Tribunal, ed., *Trials of War Criminals under Control Council Law No. 10, Nuremberg October 1946 - April 1949* (Washington, Dc: Government Printing Office, 1949), vol. 2: U.S. vs. Milch, the “Milch Case.” And one trial against Wilhelm List and other “South-East generals” for POW abuse and massacres of civilians on the south-Eastern Front in Serbia, verdict for List: life imprisonment, later reduced to 15 years, 1953 released from prison for reasons of ill-health. Documented in International Military Tribunal, ed., *Trials of War Criminals Before the Nuernberg Military Tribunals under Control Council law No. 10. Nuernberg, October 1946-April, 1949* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1949-1953), vol. 11: “U.S. vs. List, the “Hostage Case.”

The “OKW-Trial” is documented in International Military Tribunal, ed., *Trials of War Criminals Before the Nuernberg Military Tribunals under Control Council law No. 10. Nuernberg, October 1946-April, 1949* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1949-1953), vol. 10 + 11: “U.S. vs. von Leeb,” the “High Command Case).

See also for a summery overview Gerd R. Ueberschär, ed., *Nationalsozialismus vor Gericht: die alliierten Prozesse gegen Kriegsverbrecher und Soldaten 1943-1952* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1999).

<sup>42</sup> Oliver von Wrochem, „Der Prozeß gegen Generalfeldmarschall Erich von Manstein,“ *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 4 (1998), 329-353. See also idem, *Erich von Manstein. Vernichtungskrieg und Geschichtspolitik* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2005). Michael Schröders, „Erich von Manstein - ein unpolitischer Soldat?“ in „*Unternehmen Barbarossa*.“ *Edition geschichtswissenschaftlicher Beiträge zum*



officers (actually thirteen for one defendant, General Johannes Blaskowitz (1883-1948), former commander-in-chief of the German army in Poland, committed suicide during the trial) picked up directly were the IMT verdict had left off: with the individual prosecution of war crimes committed by the German Wehrmacht. The American prosecutor in the case, Walter H. Rapp, hoped that this trial would help to prevent the creation of legends about the Wehrmacht.<sup>43</sup> However, after the decision to classify the OKW not as a “criminal group” during the Nuremberg Tribunal, this had already become a mission impossible.

Among the defendants were many who had held leading positions in the Wehrmacht during the Eastern campaign, such as Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb (1876-1956, in 1941/42 Commander-in-Chief of Army Group North), Georg von Kuechler (1881-1968, between 1942 and 1944 Commander-in-Chief of Army Group North), Hans Reinhardt (1887-1963, Commander-in-Chief of Army Group Centre),<sup>44</sup> as well as two other OKW

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*Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion*, ed. Wigbert Benz, 4 (2004), <http://www.historisches-centrum.de/forum/schroeders04-2.html> [08-06-2005]. Christian Schneider, „Denkmal Manstein. Psychogramm eines Befehlshabers,“ in Heer/Naumann, *Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht, 1941-1944*, 402-417. J.H. Hoffman, „German Field Marshals as War Criminals? A British Embarrassment,“ *Journal of Contemporary History*, 23, 1 (1988), 17-35. On Manstein’s biography see Marcel Stein, *Generalfeldmarschall Erich von Manstein. Kritische Betrachtungen über den Soldaten und Menschen* (Mainz: v. Hase & Koehler, 2000) which details Manstein’s knowledge of the killing of Jews in the USSR.

<sup>43</sup> Reichel, *Vergangenheitspolitik*, 65. See also Wolfram Wette, “Fall 12: Der OKW-Prozeß (gegen Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb und andere),” in Ueberschär, ed., *Nationalsozialismus vor Gericht*, 199-212.

<sup>44</sup> Reinhardt became head of the “Society for Military Studies” (*Gesellschaft für Wehrkunde*) in 1954 (together with Admiral Friedrich Ruge), which published the journal *Wehrkunde* in order to “collect and assess the military experience from World War II and to utilize them in case for a reestablishment of German armed forces.” See the foreword in *Fall 12. Das Urteil gegen das Oberkommando der Wehrmacht gefällt am 28. Oktober 1948 in Nürnberg vor dem Militärgerichtshof V der Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika* (Berlin (Ost): Ruetten & Loening, 1960), 18.

members, Hermann Reinecke (1888-1973), and Walter Warlimont.(1894-1976)<sup>45</sup> They were charged on four counts: I) Crimes against Peace; II) War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity: Crimes against Enemy Belligerents and Prisoners of War, III) War Crimes and Crimes against Humanity: Crimes against Civilians; and IV) Common Plan or Conspiracy. Particularly counts II) and III) involved testimony and documentary evidence regarding the nature of warfare on the Eastern Front. Count II) detailed crimes against POWs:

The defendants ... participated in the commission of atrocities and offences against prisoners of war and members of armed forces of nations then at war with the Third Reich or under the belligerent control of or military occupation by Germany, including but not limited to murder, ill-treatment, denial of status and rights, refusal of quarter, employment under inhumane conditions and at prohibited labour of prisoners of war and members of military forces, and other inhumane acts and violations of the laws and customs of war.<sup>46</sup>

Count III) listed the various atrocities committed by and with the support of members of the Wehrmacht against civilians:

The defendants ... participated in atrocities and offences, including murder, extermination, ill-treatment, torture, conscription to forced labour, deportation to slave labour or for other purposes, imprisonment without cause, killing of hostages, persecutions on political, racial and religious grounds, plunder of public and private property, wanton destruction of cities, towns and villages, devastation not justified by military necessity, and other inhumane and criminal acts against German nationals and members of the civilian populations of countries and territories under the belligerent occupation of, or otherwise controlled by Germany.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Chief of Department National Defense in the Armed Forces Operation Staff (*WFST*) of the OKW (November 1938 to September 1944) and Deputy Chief of the *WFST* (January 1942 to September 1944). Warlimont had signed the notorious “Commissar Order” of June 6, 1941.

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in *Fall 12. Das Urteil gegen das Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*, 29. According to the editor, this was the first edition in German of parts of the trial records. The foreword claimed accordingly: With the publication of Case 12, “the editor wishes to contribute to the unmasking and taming of German militarism” since in “the Bonn state seeks to erase the crimes committed by German militarism from the memory of the world by all means.” *Ibid.*, 9. The claim that this was the first German edition is not true: A collection with the legal codes (*Rechtsthesen*) and verdicts of all 13 trials before the IMT was published in German in 1952 by the Institute of International Law at the University of Göttingen, see Kurt Heinze, Karl Schilling, eds., *Die Rechtssprechung der Nürnberger Militärtribunale. Sammlung der Rechtsthesen der Urteile und gesonderten Urteilsbegründungen der 13 Nürnberger Prozesse* (Bonn: Giradet, 1952). Part of the trial material is available in English at <http://www.ess.uwe.ac.uk/WCC/ghctrail1.htm> [06/15/05].

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 30f.

Eleven of the defendants were found guilty by the court on at least one of the four charges. As the Nuremberg Tribunal, the court grew convinced that the defendants had willingly and knowingly participated in an illegal aggressive war, and that they had committed war crimes and crimes against humanity: they “were principals in, accessories to, ordered, abetted, took a consenting part in, were connected with plans and enterprises involved, and were members of organizations and groups which were connected with the commission of war crimes and crimes against humanity.”<sup>48</sup> The verdicts ranged from two acquittals to nine prison sentences, two of which meant life in prison (Reinecke and Warlimont).<sup>49</sup> None of the convicted, however, fully served his sentence.<sup>50</sup>

Equally harshly sentenced but soon amnestied was General Erich von Manstein (1887-1973), supreme commander of the southern Eleventh Army and later Army Group “Don” on the Eastern Front during his trial in October 1949. He was one of the big names connected with the battle of Stalingrad during which he failed to assist General Paulus’ Sixth Army.<sup>51</sup> The most telling document illustrating his view of the war in the East was Manstein’s notorious army order of November 20, 1941 in which he detailed why this war could not be fought according to the “conventional rules of European warfare.” As one of Hitler’s most trusted generals, Manstein supported, disseminated and activated Nazi racial policies among his troops. The rear areas of the front were central in his thinking. There, “partisans, plainclothes snipers ... and Bolshevists terrorize the

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 291f.

<sup>50</sup> Warlimont and Reinecke were amnestied in 1951.

<sup>51</sup> Between July and November 1942 Manstein tried without success to liberate Paulus’ encircled army at Stalingrad. To avoid being encircled himself he ordered the retreat of Army Group A without consulting Hitler; Hitler expectedly protested Manstein’s decision and ordered a new offensive which Manstein carried out despite his disagreement. See Kershaw, *Hitler: Nemesis*, 544ff.

population already liberated from Bolshevism.”<sup>52</sup> And, it was the “Jewry who functioned as the middleman between the enemy in the rear and the fighting remains of the Red Army and Red leadership.” As a consequence, the “Jewish-Bolshevist system” was to be “annihilated once and for all.” Accordingly, Manstein saw the German soldier in a new role:

The German soldier thus has not only the task to destroy the military means of this system. He also acts as the bearer of a Volkish idea and as avenger of all cruelties which have been done to him and the German people. ... The soldier must understand the necessity of tough atonement of the Jewry, the intellectual [*geistige*] bearer of Bolshevik terror. This is also necessary in order to scotch any uprisings incited mostly by Jews.<sup>53</sup>

During his trial, Manstein was accordingly charged and found guilty of having given criminal orders and having acquiesced to criminal orders already issued. The two counts on which he was convicted as charged involved also the abuse of Soviet POWs for the building of military fortifications and the clearing of minefields, as well as deporting civilians from his area of command to Germany.<sup>54</sup> Manstein was convicted of crimes such as the mistreatment and shooting of Soviet POWs, “commissars,” the killing of Jews, Sinti and Roma, and of encouraging disproportionably harsh reprisals against partisans. The defense, however, was able to convince the court that most of the crimes took place in his rear areas by forces withdrawn from his direct command. Thus, “it may be argued that Manstein was convicted of the failure to control the rear areas.”<sup>55</sup> He was sentenced to 18 years in prison; a military review board later reduced this sentence to twelve years. Manstein was amnestied and released in 1953, after having served only five years.

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<sup>52</sup> „Armeebefehl des Oberbefehlshabers der 11. Armee, Generaloberst von Manstein, 20.11.1941,“ printed in Ueberschär, Wette, eds., „*Unternehmen Barbarossa*,“ 343.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 344.

<sup>54</sup> Hoffman, „German Field Marshals as War Criminals?,“ 29.

<sup>55</sup> Hoffman, „German Field Marshals as War Criminals?,“ 29f.

Two years later he published his memoirs “Lost Victories,” which became one of the “classics” of the West German rehabilitation literature. The “strategic memories” of former generals and officers overall pursued a “systematic distortion of the past” and a “new stab-in-the-back legend,” only this time the Führer was blamed for not listening to his supposedly brilliant generals.<sup>56</sup> War crimes were either denied or attributed to a few individual soldiers’ misbehavior. Manstein’s memoirs, which appeared in at least six editions, made no mention of the above-quoted order of November 20, 1941. Rather, the general recalled at length the conflicts between Hitler and the military leadership to the effect that the war against the Soviet Union could have been won without the Führer’s amateurish interference.<sup>57</sup> He presented the defeat in the war against the Soviet Union as an avoidable “lost victory.” In no way did one of its major military advocates reflect on the illegal and criminal nature of the campaign. By the mid-1950s, with the help of men like Manstein, the “myth of the clean Wehrmacht” had become an integral part of West German memory, just a few years after the court files had been closed which contained ample evidence for the horrible reality of the war on the Eastern Front – and for the responsibilities for it.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Gerhard L. Weinberg, „Rollen- und Selbstverständnis des Offizierskorps der Wehrmacht,“ Müller/Volkman, eds., *Die Wehrmacht. Mythos und Realität*, 73. See also Friedrich Gerstenberger, „Strategische Erinnerungen. Die Memoiren der deutschen Offiziere,“ Heer, Naumann, eds., *Vernichtungskrieg*, 620-633.

<sup>57</sup> Erich von Manstein, *Verlorene Siege* (Bonn: Athenäum, 1955). English translation *Lost Victories*. Edited and translated by Anthony G. Powell (Chicago: H. Regnery, 1958). Cf. Also Oliver von Wrochem, *Erich von Manstein. Vernichtungskrieg und Geschichtspolitik*. (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2005).

<sup>58</sup> Notably, neither the full records of the OKW-case nor of the Manstein-trial have been published in German until today.

### III. Published vs. Public Opinion or: The Immunity of Collective Memory Against Facts

Recent studies of the press coverage of the Nuremberg Tribunal have demonstrated that there was a fundamental difference between the *published* opinion about war crimes trials and the *public* opinion thereof. In fact, the first dominated the latter.<sup>59</sup> This can partly be explained with the then still Allied-controlled press seeking to educate Germans about Nazi war crimes. Yet, many Germans felt subjected to the concept of collective guilt during the trial despite the Tribunal's individual approach. Indeed, the notion of a collective responsibility for the crimes committed during the Third Reich was a constant theme in the press. The majority of Germans also showed strikingly little interest in the trial proceedings (except during its opening and ending) even though the German licensed press reported extensively and continuously about them. The seven main daily and weekly papers in all four zones published 2,442 articles on the Nuremberg trials between October 1945 and October 1946.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, while the licensed press defended and supported the integrity of the war crimes tribunal, many Germans thought a "short trial" ("*kurzer Prozeß*") would have sufficed since the defendants' guilt was obvious.

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<sup>59</sup> Norbert Frei, „Der Nürnberger Prozeß und die Deutschen,“ in Wolfram Wette, Gerd Überschär, eds., *Kriegsverbrechen im 20. Jahrhundert* (Darmstadt: Primus Verlag, 2001), 477-492, esp. 480. And idem, *Vergangenheitspolitik*.

<sup>60</sup> Heike Krösche, „Der Nürnberger Prozess gegen die Hauptkriegsverbrecher und die Spaltung der deutschen Nachkriegsöffentlichkeit“ (quotes from the unpublished manuscript of a dissertation project at the History Department, University of Oldenburg, Germany). Krösche has systematically examined the *Nürnberger Nachrichten*, *Der Tagesspiegel*, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Neues Deutschland*, *Die Welt*, and *Die Zeit*. Most articles were of informative nature (2,190), 252 were commentaries/editorials. Krösche's conclusion is based on her finding that it was the journalists of the German licensed press themselves who overwhelmingly came to the conclusion that most Germans cared little about the IMT. See also Echternkamp, „Wut auf die Soldaten? Vom Bild der deutschen Soldaten in der unmittelbaren Nachkriegszeit.“

Consequently, public support, initially quite strong, plummeted in the course of the Tribunal's duration.<sup>61</sup>

While these findings aptly summarize the situation in the three Western zones, the specific character of the Soviet-/Communist-dominated press in the Eastern zone limited the scope and diversity of point of views from the very beginning.<sup>62</sup> Throughout the duration of the trial, the SED's organ *Neues Deutschland* had carried a number of reports on the proceedings in Nuremberg. Special attention was averted to the persecution of communists and workers in the Third Reich, to Hitler's "big business" connections and the profiteers of the regime, and to the crimes committed on the Eastern Front in the war against the Soviet Union. On June 22, 1946, five years after the invasion, *Neues Deutschland* devoted the title page and two inside pages to "June 22, 1941 and its Consequences." Photographs of destroyed Soviet cities and body piles were accompanied by articles detailing the preparation and execution of "Barbarossa." An article about the invasion's assessment before the Nuremberg Tribunal discussed the evidence that proved the conspiratorial and treacherous character of the war and demonstrated to the "German people the extent and monstrosity of the betrayal to which it fell victim in 1941." The article concluded that "the Nuremberg trial destroys the web of lies and meanness into

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<sup>61</sup> On the problem of the IMT's legitimacy and German attempts to undermine it see Frei, „Der Nürnberger Prozeß und die Deutschen.“ Frei stresses that this changing support must be view in context of the Allied overall success in denazifying German society – and the largely negative popular assessment of this attempt.

<sup>62</sup> For an overview of the postwar history of the German press see Hermann Glaser, *Deutsche Kultur 1945-2000. Ein historischer Überblick von 1945 bis zur Gegenwart* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, 1997), 149-159. And Norbert Frei, „Die Presse,“ in Wolfgang Benz, ed., *Die Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, Vol. 4: Kultur* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1989), 370ff. On the American sector in particular Jessica Gwienow-Hecht, *Mission Impossible. American Journalism as Cultural Diplomacy in postwar Germany, 1945-1955*. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999). On the Eastern zone in particular see Pike, *The Politics of Culture in Soviet-Occupied Germany*.

which the German people has become entangled.”<sup>63</sup> Being well aware of the persisting hostile attitudes towards the Soviets in the German population, it was one of the SED’s greatest concerns to counter the legend of a preventive war.

According to the press in the SBZ, their coverage of the Nuremberg Trials “contributed to a clear picture of the recent past among many people, also in view of a new, better future free from fascism and war.”<sup>64</sup> As the previous chapter has already demonstrated and as the following will further elaborate, this “clear picture of the recent past” was in fact a mere clipping of World War II history focusing almost exclusively on the Red Army and the antifascist struggle in the East. Yet, even this focus entailed very few specific, selected and calculated references to the criminal nature of warfare on the Eastern Front as exposed during the Nuremberg Trial.

In the West, in contrast, former Wehrmacht generals and mainstream politicians started creating the “myth of the clean Wehrmacht” even before the trial was over. In his study of the licensed press in the American occupation zone, Jörg Echternkamp has demonstrated how the public knowledge about crimes was translated into popular notions of a “clean Wehrmacht” – despite of all the facts presented at Nuremberg. The Tribunal and the respective press reports left no doubt about the intricate (and effective) relationship between Wehrmacht leadership and the Nazi regime, about the extent and monstrosity of crimes on and behind the front lines, or about the ideological nexus between Wehrmacht and National Socialism in general. Yet, the picture of Wehrmacht soldiers emerging from all this in the public mind – and the political memory – was one

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<sup>63</sup> „...Und das Spiegelbild von Nürnberg,“ *Neues Deutschland*, June 22, 1946, 3.

<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Krösche, „Der Nürnberger Prozess gegen die Hauptkriegsverbrecher,“ chapter 3.3.



of ordinary men who had served their country faithfully and dutifully. Hence, the “potential perpetrator became an actual victim,” the Wehrmacht turned into an “abused army.”<sup>65</sup> Echternkamp’s conclusion summarizes the birth of a mode of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* which would dominate West German political culture for at least two decades to come:

The rage about the Wehrmacht [caused by the results of the Nuremberg trial] did not go without resistance. Already at an early point in time strategies of exculpation became visible which aimed at disconnecting military warfare from the political context, particularly by invoking the myth of soldierly tradition [*Soldatentum*] and by redressing the secondary virtues of war which then made room for the acknowledgment of soldierly achievements. They also facilitated the cover up of Wehrmacht activities under the garb of ordinariness and helped to dissolve a concrete, personal responsibility in the haze of the past. The discourse over the Wehrmacht is thus symptomatic for the handling of the question of guilt in the early postwar years.<sup>66</sup>

As stated above, matters were different in the Soviet occupation zone. Here, the official discourse over the past went hand in hand with political indoctrination. The Nuremberg trial served not only to denounce capitalism, imperialism and fascism in one stroke, but also – in the long run – to exonerate the mass of Germans who had held out the Nazi years on the home or military fronts with more or less ideological zeal. Even though the East German public was said to have attained a “clear picture of the recent past” during the trial, the SED and Soviet press in the SBZ heavily attacked the IMT once the sentences were announced. Reportedly, the Soviet prosecution had demanded to see the location reserved for the execution of the Nuremberg defendants on the first day of preparations for the trial in late 1945, before the trial had even started. For the Soviet side it was clear that the death sentence would await all twenty-two Nazi leaders. Yet, when

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<sup>65</sup> Echternkamp, „Wut auf die Soldaten? Vom Bild der deutschen Soldaten in der unmittelbaren Nachkriegszeit,“ 1076.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 1080.

the verdict was handed down on September 30, and October 1, 1946, only twelve defendants were hanged.<sup>67</sup> The Soviets issued dissenting opinions. The SED in line with the Soviet prosecution, protested the “mild” judgment of the other defendants, particularly the acquittal of von Papen, Fritzsche and Schacht. They called for a “German court” to judge these “representatives of the Nazi regime” for crimes committed “against the German people” as defined in the German criminal code: “high treason, incitement of murder, extortion, intimidation, deprivation of liberty.”<sup>68</sup> But on the other hand, the SED praised the hanging of the twelve defendants as “an act of justice in the history of mankind.” The “extraordinary importance” of this verdict derived from the fact, the SED further declared, that “for the first time the initiators of an imperialist war have suffered the deserved and dishonorable death for crimes against the international community.” Without mentioning the USSR specifically, the statement referred to the “suppression of the working people in Germany” by Hitler, and to the “series of criminal attacks against neighbors” with the mere purpose to “enrich the German bourgeoisie” in the course of

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<sup>67</sup> Former Reichsmarschall and Commander of the Airforce Hermann Göring, former Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop, OKW chief Wilhelm Keitel, former highranking SS-leader and *Einsatzgruppen* Commander Ernst Kaltenbrunner, former NSDAP chief ideologue Alfred Rosenberg, former Governor-General of Poland, Hans Frank, former Minister of Interior and “Protector” of Bohemia and Moravia Wilhelm Frick, former editor-in-chief of *Der Stürmer* Julius Streicher, former *Gauleiter* of Thuringia Fritz Sauckel, former chief of the OKW’s Operations Division Alfred Jodl, former Reich Commissioner in occupied Netherland Arthur Seyss-Inquart and former head of the NSDAP’s party chancellery Martin Bormann were sentenced to death by hanging. Hitler’s former deputy Rudolf Hess, former Minister of Economics and Reichsbank chief Walther Funk and former commander-in-chief of the navy Erich Raeder were sentenced to life imprisonment, Admiral Karl Dönitz 10, former Foreign Minister Konstantin von Neurath 15, former head of the Hitler youth Baldur von Schirach and former Armament Minister Albert Speer 20 years in prison. Former Economics Minister Hjalmar Schacht, former Vice-Chancellor and Ambassador to Austria Franz von Papen and Propaganda Ministry worker Hans Fritzsche were acquitted. See Office of the United States Chief Counsel for Prosecution of Axis Criminality, ed., *Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression. Opinion and Judgment* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1947), 107-165.

<sup>68</sup> „Vorschlag zur Einsetzung eines deutschen Gerichtshofes zur Aburteilung von Papen, Schacht und Fritzsche,” October 7, 1946. Printed in ZK SED, ed., *Dokumente der SED. Beschlüsse u. Erklärungen d. Zentralkomitees sowie seines Politbüros u. seines Sekretariats, Band I* (Berlin (Ost): Dietz, 1948), 104f.

which “singular crimes were committed against individuals and whole nations.” Overall, the IMT’s conclusion was interpreted as a dual signal to all Germans: as satisfaction and relief, on the one hand, and as a reinforcement of the “sincere will” to fight for a “Never Again!”<sup>69</sup>

In order to get a more comprehensive picture of “German reactions” to the trial, it seems wise to look for sources outside Germany. One such excellent group of sources are the reports of *New York Times* correspondents dispatched to Germany in 1945 and 1946.<sup>70</sup> With the inside view of the outsider, the authors provided readers in the United States with a glimpse into the “German mind” of the postwar years. Based on a series of conversations with ordinary citizens as well as with politicians and public intellectuals, a series of articles printed during the trial adds some important evidence to the observation that public opinion differed greatly from published opinion during those months. These articles also further highlight the immunity of German collective memory to facts.

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<sup>69</sup> „Das Zentralsekretariat der SED aus Anlaß der Hinrichtungen in Nürnberg,“ appendix I to ZS protocol no. 43, 14 October 1946. BA/SAPMO, DY 30 IV 2/2.1/38, 3.

<sup>70</sup> Other sources include opinion surveys conducted by the US occupation authorities and US army, see Anna J. Merritt, Richard L. Merritt, eds., *Public Opinion in Occupied Germany: The OMGUS Surveys, 1945-1949* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970). This edition contains the results of roughly 200 public opinion surveys among German prisoners of war and civilians made between March 1946 and December 1949 by the Information Control Division of the US Military Government. The most striking results of the studies pertain the continuation of Nazi views in postwar Germany (limited to Germans in the US zone of occupation): 15 to 18 percent of the adult population remained “unreconstructed Nazis”, between 42 and 55 percent admitted to considering Nazism “a good idea badly carried out” (as against a “bad idea”). In their comprehensive introduction to the surveys, the authors summarize further important tendencies in German popular opinion: while most Germans had not read Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* and while few trusted him to the very end of the war and while most were satisfied with the outcome of the Nuremberg trials, the Merritts claimed, the surveys demonstrated that “large numbers of postwar Germans in the area under American control continued to express perceptions characteristic of National Socialist ideology.” See *ibid.*, 31. In Germany, the Allensbach Institute for Opinion Polling conducted thematic surveys beginning in 1947. See for example *IfD-Report No. 320: Die öffentliche Resonanz der Entnazifizierung. Ergebnisse von Bevölkerungs-Umfragen im September 1948 und November 1953* (Allensbach: Institut für Demoskopie, 1954).

With a series of interviews the *New York Times* opened its investigation of popular attitudes towards the trial in November of 1945. Reporters spoke to thirty “prominent Germans” (politicians, government officials, professors, union leaders, journalists, lawyers and business men), and reported that “there was widespread agreement among those interviewed that the German people sympathized, and still do, with Adolf Hitler’s pre-war demands based on the ‘injustices’ of the Versailles ‘*Diktat*.’” Furthermore, the interviews prompted the following general conclusions illustrating the public mood which accompanied the trial:

That the anti-Nazis and the most of the disillusioned non-Nazis were looking forward to the trial and punishment of the Nazi leaders. ...

That many feared that the trial would arouse a new wave of world hatred against the Germans and lead to new drastic measures against the German population. In this connection some of the Nazis urged that full details of the trials be withheld from publication to prevent this. ...

One encounters in all interviews two main currents of German thought, a strong and sensitive German nationalism and a desire to have the leaders of the National Socialist party punished.

One view is that Hitler did not want war but nevertheless was responsible for it because of his clumsy diplomacy. The people who hold this view condemn Hitler, not because his aims were wrong but because he failed to realize them and brought Germany to disaster.<sup>71</sup>

“‘So what?’ Say Germans of Nuremberg” was the title of an article appearing four weeks later in December of 1945. And the subtitle read: “Despite the evidence, their attitude toward the war crimes trial is one of indifference.” Reporter Raymond Daniell lamented that despite the eight months of intense U.S. propaganda since the end of the war aimed at demonstrating the German people their share of collective responsibility, “Germans are not interested.” When most of the licensed press carried the text of the indictment in full length, “it was interesting to watch the Germans skip that part of their papers.” To Daniell, the cause for this indifference laid in an emotional void in German

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<sup>71</sup> Drew Middleton, „Germans Criticize War Crimes Trial,“ *New York Times*, November 1, 1945, 8.

hearts and minds: “the great mass of Germans have an ethical lacuna which makes it possible for them to accept the proof of certain acts attributed to them without recognizing the concept of evil ... which is implicit in the deed.” Connecting the present to the past, Daniell presented a sober analysis of the moral-political consequences of the Third Reich, while at the same time criticizing the American approach to reeducation:

Perhaps our approach itself was wrong. It can be argued that we started in the middle instead of at the beginning of the argument. We assumed an ethical moral standard among the Germans after twelve years of Nazi domination which just did not exist. And so, instead of starting with the fundamental premise that it is wrong to hate and persecute people of another race or nation for that reason alone, we set out merely to prove that the Nazis with support of a goose-stepping, [hailing] nation had done these things. And now that proof acceptable to the majority of the German people is being adduced, there is a general attitude of ‘so what,’ because for all they know to the contrary they have merely acted as the master race they were taught to believe – and still believe – themselves to be.<sup>72</sup>

So, it was not that Germans did not realize the crimes debated at Nuremberg, they just did not see their basic wrongness because Nazi indoctrination still continued to influence most Germans’ world view.<sup>73</sup> This could indeed be one plausible explanation for the apparent collective refusal to absorb these very facts. Not the fact that the German army fought on Polish or French or Soviet territory was the problem in many peoples’ minds but – if at all – it was the monstrosity of human suffering this war had cost on *all* sides. Daniell concluded accordingly, “the only sense of guilt that the German has is one of self-criticism for not working harder and making greater sacrifices so that the war might have been won instead of lost.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Raymond Daniell, „‘So what?’ say the Germans of Nuremberg,” *New York Times*, December 2, 1945, 5, 53, 55, long quote on 5.

<sup>73</sup> On the problem of moral standards in Nazi Germany and beyond see the intriguing discussion by Gesine Schwan, *Politik und Schuld*.

<sup>74</sup> Daniell, “‘So what?,”” 53.

After visiting Germany for the first time after the war, the German-Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) who had fled Nazi Germany in 1933, made very similar observations: people seemed to flee from reality and responsibility alike, they commonly “treated facts as though they were mere opinions.” And in general, nowhere, she sensed, the “nightmare of destruction and horror was less felt and less talked about than in Germany itself:”

A lack of response is evident everywhere, and it is difficult to say whether this signifies a half-conscious refusal to yield to grief or a genuine inability to feel. Amid the ruins, Germans mail each other picture postcards still showing the cathedrals and market places, the public buildings and bridges that no longer exist. And the indifference with which they walk through the rubble has its exact counterpart in the absence of mourning for the dead, or in the apathy with which they react, or rather fail to react, to the fate of the refugees in their midst. This general lack of emotion, at any rate this apparent heartlessness, sometimes covered over with cheap sentimentality, is only the most conspicuous outward symptom of a deep-rooted, stubborn, and at times vicious refusal to face and come to terms with what really happened.<sup>75</sup>

Just as Anna Seghers pondered about the “cold hearts” she encountered among many East Germans upon her return, Arendt detected a similar disinterested “heartlessness” among many West Germans during the immediate postwar years.

Discussing a recent survey conducted by the U.S. War Department’s Information Control Division (ICD) in January 1946, another *New York Times* report speaks to the validity of these harsh judgments and concluded that the “war crimes trials were dull to Germans.” While the “vast majority” of those interviewed believed, as they did before the trial, “that the defendants will have a fair trial, that the German newspaper coverage of the proceedings is adequate and the guilty should be punished,” there was beyond that

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<sup>75</sup> Arendt, „The Aftermath of Nazi-Rule,“ 342f. Her observations precipitated the basis of the Mitscherlich’s controversial thesis of the Germans’ inability to mourn. Cf. Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, *Die Unfähigkeit zu trauern. Grundlagen kollektiven Verhaltens* (München: Piper, 1967).

“little interest in the historic revelations of the trial.”<sup>76</sup> Nonetheless, in the course of the trial, particularly after the defense took up its task in the spring of 1946, popular interest increased. In fact, “the fullness and freedom of the defense has shocked the Germans into the idea that perhaps it was a real trial and a fair one, after all.”<sup>77</sup> This and the fact that most people reporters talked to after the verdict was handed down said it was justified and by no means too harsh,<sup>78</sup> led one staff member of the American prosecution, German-born Robert M. W. Kempner (1899-1993) to the hopeful conclusion that the Tribunal will have a “lasting effect on the German mind.” Kempner recalled that the information coming out of the Palace of Justice in Nuremberg were disseminated in the most effective and widest possible way and through all possible media channels – papers, radio and newsreels. Referring to “a constant flow of letters from all four zones,” Kempner saw a mostly “favorable” reaction to the trial among the population which he took as “evidence of some success.”<sup>79</sup> He noticed a feeling of shock and awe among Germans about the brutality of the crimes, about details such as the quantities of gold teeth taken from murdered Jews and deposited in the vaults of the German Treasury. It should not be forgotten, Kempner concluded mildly, that Germans “who had been loath to admit it, have been forced to acknowledge that atrocities were committed by the leaders of their country.” And he expressed hope that “the principle of moral standards apply to public as well as to private life has been revived”, yet the “full effect of the Nuremberg trial, however, moral and otherwise, cannot be fully evaluated for many years. They will be

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<sup>76</sup> „War crimes trial dull to Germans,” *New York Times*, 2 January 1946, 6.

<sup>77</sup> Dana Adams Schmidt, „Germans await Nuremberg Verdict,” *New York Times*, August 4, 1946, 75.

<sup>78</sup> „Noose too easy for Nazis, Frankfurt Germans say,” *New York Times*, October 2, 1946, 24.

<sup>79</sup> Robert M. W. Kempner, „Impact of Nuremberg on German Mind,” *New York Times*, 6 October 1946, 8.

cumulative as qualified representatives of German political and intellectual life study the documents and testimony, and the lessons of the trial permeate the thought of the German people.”<sup>80</sup>

#### FROM “BARBAROSSA” TO LIBERATION

This, as we know, happened neither in the East nor West of Germany as the Cold War unfolded and the present came to overcast the past in every respect. History, historical facts, became subordinated to current political and ideological considerations in the course of which not only the historical truth suffered severely, but also individual and official memory drifted apart. On both sides of the Iron Curtain, political leaders had, mostly independent from their occupiers, engaged in a lively debate about the past war and established differing narratives of the war on the Eastern Front. The multiple political-cultural “restorations” after 1945 included addressing the question of guilt, and particularly the concurrent, in fact competing, issues of German crimes and German suffering. One fundamental aspect of these debates was the way VE Day was interpreted: already here, and very early on, the basic differences between East and West emerged in so far as the East German KPD functionaries sought to charge “1945” with a positive, victorious connotation, namely that of a “liberation.” In the Western zones where plural discourses soon revived the political-cultural sphere, “1945” came to signal not only the end, the defeat of Nazism, but also the hour of deepest sorrow for the German nation as a whole.

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 66.



This crosswords interpretation of the end of World War II anticipated the way the Eastern Front – its costliest theater – was remembered and interpreted in divided Germany. The fact that the Eastern Front was perceived as the bloodiest battle field of the entire war and as the epiphany of the Wehrmacht's total defeat, made it impossible for future leaders to ignore its multiple legacies. In the Eastern zone, the reality of Soviet occupation spoiled official attempts to imbue East Germans with a lasting sense of responsibility for the suffering inflicted on the Soviet peoples by Wehrmacht and SS. The mere repetition and ideological aesthetization of the Soviet sacrifices (and those of German communists fighting alongside) could not make up for the fact that the reality of Soviet occupation in Germany caused new injustice and hardship, and therefore contributed to the persistence of anti-Russian feelings. Neither the founding of an "Association of German-Soviet Friendship" in 1947, nor the unusually candid debate about the "Russians" in Germany in the winter of 1948/49 could ameliorate this dilemma. If nothing else came out of it, the SED-sanctioned public discourse "About 'the Russians' and about Us" provides a unique source for the deep contempt and popular resentment which would continue to pose a main challenge to SED. An honest reckoning with the legacies of Stalingrad and the Eastern Front war was impossible in such an atmosphere of Soviet military intimidation and SED political domination. Although the crimes and costs of the Eastern Front war were discussed in much greater detail than the Holocaust, the official narrative of Stalingrad and the war against the Soviet Union was crafted during the first postwar decade in East Germany and would remain unchanged over the course of

forty years. In the SED's "administered past,"<sup>81</sup> facts were routinely subordinated to ideological necessities.

A sincere reckoning seemed similarly impossible in the Western zones where the Soviet Union was increasingly perceived as the external threat number one. Old anti-Bolshevist sentiments merged with a new democratic anti-totalitarianism into a position of intellectual and political neglect of all things "Russian," including all historical burdens resting on Germany as a consequence of the Wehrmacht's invasion in 1941.<sup>82</sup> Hence, in the immediate postwar years the Nazi race war against the Soviet Union was even less discussed than the Holocaust. An official and public acknowledgment of the crimes committed against Soviet civilians and POWs occurred much later than the memory of the Holocaust – in part also because the number of persons potentially incriminated by a truthful reckoning with the legacies of "Barbarossa" was much larger (millions!) than of those hundred thousand or so involved in the Holocaust. Apart from these individual, even private motives to be discussed in a later chapter, the political order of the day called for a resolute stand against an expansionistic Soviet communism with little room for and interest in recalling crimes committed against "Jewish Bolshevism." This close interconnectedness of the memory of Stalingrad and the Eastern Front with the Cold War paradigm on both sides of the Iron Curtain is a running theme in this study. The next chapter deals explicitly with these multiple intersections during the

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<sup>81</sup> Sabrow, *Verwaltete Vergangenheit*.

<sup>82</sup> See Peter Jahn, "Rußlandbild und Antikommunismus in der bundesdeutschen Gesellschaft der Nachkriegszeit," in Babette Quinkert, ed., „*Wir sind die Herren dieses Landes. Ursachen, Verlauf und Folgen des deutschen Überfalls auf die Sowjetunion* (Hamburg: VSA-Verlag, 2002), 223-235. Idem, 'Russenfurcht' und Antibolschewismus: Zur Entstehung und Wirkung von Feindbildern," in Peter Jahn, Reinhard Rürup, eds., *Erobern und Vernichten. Der Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion 1941-1945. Essays* (Berlin: Aragon, 1991), 47-64.

1950s, and thus illustrates the intricate, malleable relationship between memory and politics.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Cold War: The Political Memory of the Eastern Front in Divided Germany, 1949-1961**

“Do they know that the birch crosses on the graves of new ‘Barbarossa’-adventurers will not stand in Stalingrad but in Cologne?”

*From Neues Deutschland, June 1961*

“I think that if we enter a new era in our relations – and that is our sincere will – that then we should not look into the past too deeply, because then we will only build up obstacles before us.  
The beginning of a new era also requires a psychological cleansing.”

*Adenauer in Moscow, September 1955*

## I. “Barbarossa” as Historical Analogy in Communist Propaganda during the 1950s

This chapter reconstructs the official master narrative of this war in East Berlin, Moscow and Bonn. Yet in doing so, I seek to go beyond the mere description of official memory by turning to specific events which illustrate the intersection of memory and politics, of meaning and power. In the East German case, these examples – the campaign for the “building of socialism” in 1952, the June uprising in 1953, and the building of the wall in 1961 – underline the SED’s continuing effort to place the past into the service of present-day political purposes. The SED applied history on politics primarily to gain and retain political legitimacy. It was a calculated effort to politicize history and its memory. But the East German communists also *believed* in the righteousness of their interpretation of the past, they had often witnessed it first-hand, and they believed to be drawing the “right” lessons. This is also one of the reasons why the Eastern Front war became the main historical reference point in the SED’s political-historical propaganda.

In West Germany, the continuous absence of the Eastern Front war from the political memory of World War II turned Adenauer’s historic trip to Moscow in 1955 into an event of significant meaning. In his conversations with Soviet leaders he was forced to address the recent German-Soviet past in some form or another. He managed to balance a hint at the tremendous wartime suffering in the Soviet Union with the critique of Soviet postwar aggressive expansionism. Yet, overall Adenauer’s political memory of the Eastern Front war continued to evade facing historical reality unless historical references assured the continuation of the West-German-Soviet dialogue that was about to begin.

## THE SED MASTER NARRATIVE

Official versions of a historical event do not necessarily, and in fact rarely, absorb scholarly knowledge about the past, but rather constitute a conglomerate of a certain world view, popular memories and personal experiences which politicians communicate in public speeches and commemoration ceremonies. To varying degrees, these official narratives can be called propaganda, as they create images of the past designed to fit in with a certain ideological and political agenda.<sup>1</sup> The fact, that Ulbricht and the SED had Soviet blueprints and the entire apparatus of a one-party state at their disposal – along with an efficient security service – to articulate and transport their version of the Eastern Front war, explains why history could be imposed on the East German population albeit without ever actually convincing a majority of the righteousness of Soviet domination and the necessity of German-Soviet friendship. The fundamentally different structural preconditions for the genesis of the Eastern Front memory in the dictatorial GDR and the pluralist West German society thus determined not only its content but also its political functions and instrumentalizations. This section will therefore not just recall the official narratives of the Eastern Front but rather seeks to place these narratives into the political realm; what I am most interested in are those pieces of evidence which suggest and illuminate the practical intersection of memory and politics.

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<sup>1</sup> Used in this context, I thus follow the recent very useful definition of propaganda proposed by Thymian Bussemer: Propaganda is the „in der Regel medienvermittelte Formierung handlungsrelevanter Meinungen und Einstellungen politischer oder sozialer Gruppen durch symbolische Kommunikation und als Herstellung von Öffentlichkeit zugunsten bestimmter Interessen. Propaganda zeichnet sich durch die Komplementarität von überhöhtem Selbst- und denunzierendem Feindbild aus und ordnet Wahrheit dem instrumentellen Kriterium der Effizienz unter. Ihre Botschaften und Handlungsaufforderungen versucht sie zu naturalisieren, so dass diese als selbstverständliche und nahe liegende Schlussfolgerungen erscheinen.“ Bussemer, *Propaganda*, 29f.

In order to recapture the SED master narrative I have chosen to examine the speeches and writings of three leading communists, each representing a certain approach to political memory in the GDR: Alexander Abusch, a leading communist intellectual, Walter Ulbricht the leading political functionary, and Albert Norden, the party's chief agitator. While Abusch's writings focused on interpreting recent German history, Ulbricht's and Norden's writings and speeches concentrated on the political capital to be gained from relating the past to the present and vice versa.

The basic line of the Soviet and East German interpretation of "Operation Barbarossa" can be found in a small book entitled *Stalin and the Vital Questions of the German Nation* written in 1949 by the Jewish remigrant to East Germany, Alexander Abusch. Since the publication of his influential *Der Irrweg einer Nation in 1946*,<sup>2</sup> Abusch had risen to the position of one of the SED's chief historical analysts. As long-time KPD-member, he could draw from his experience as former editor of *Free Germany*, the voice of the antifascist resistance in Mexico City. Abusch's 1949 tractate about Stalin's attitude towards the German nation sought to put the events shaping the four postwar years into the "historical context of an entire epoch."<sup>3</sup> The years of "utter challenge" between 1941 and 1945 were for Abusch years of trial and triumph. His depiction of the events on the

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander Abusch, *Der Irrweg einer Nation: ein Beitrag zum Verständnis deutscher Geschichte* (Berlin, 1946).

<sup>3</sup> The third edition was published in 1952 after Abusch had been purged in 1950, rehabilitated shortly thereafter and, as he declares in the foreword, with improvements after "a self-critical revision" of the first edition. Ibid., 5. Abusch was arrested in connection with the Noel-H.-Field-case in July 1950 and accused of a „pro-Zionist attitude" during his time as editor of *Free Germany*. Between 1951 and 1956 he cooperated with the MfS as informer, returned to public office (1951) and served in several functions, most notably as Minister of Culture between 1958 and 1961. In March 1955 he was a prominent witness for the prosecution in the trial against Paul Merker, his once-important wartime collaborator in the anti-Nazi movement in Mexico-City. See further Karin Hartewig, *Zurückgekehrt. Die Geschichte der jüdischen Kommunisten in der DDR* (Köln, Weimar: Böhlau, 2000), 164-172.

Eastern Front contain the main elements of the official Soviet and East German memory thereof. Particularly noteworthy is his claim, that while the Soviet Union fought an existential battle of mythical dimensions – with unprecedented resolve and under unimaginable sacrifices – the victory over German fascism was not a myth, not a miracle, but the real-life manifestation of socialism’s historical superiority: The war destroyed not only cities, monuments and human lives, but it also destroyed the many “legends fabricated during the previous twenty-five years about the Soviet Union and its leading statesman Stalin.” The year 1941 saw the “miracles of Moscow and Leningrad,” followed by the “miracle of Stalingrad which shattered the hearts of all freedom-loving people in the world.” They all occurred “under the supreme command of the man who once had said: ‘We Bolsheviks do not believe in miracles.’” And Abusch conceded, that “these were no miracles, indeed, and no new myth was created.” Instead, “worldly and real, the new superior political system of socialism and the higher morality of its people had passed the historical test in a battle for life and death: against an enemy that embodied the darkest powers of the capitalist reaction.”<sup>4</sup> Like many other official statements about the war at that time, Abusch omitted the Nazi-Soviet-Non-Aggression pact of 1939, and reduced the history of World War II to the years 1941 until 1945. Often in these narratives, the attack against Poland, and thus the beginning of the war on September 1, 1939 is relegated to a position of forming the mere pre-history of Hitler’s “essential war.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>5</sup> This was already observed by contemporary West German historians, see for example, Andreas Hillgruber, Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, “Der Zweite Weltkrieg im Spiegel der sowjetkommunistischen



Playing with the idea that the Red Army's victory appeared as a miracle-like triumph, Abusch dismissed any "previously held doubts" about socialism as political project and endowed the victory of 1945 with the spell of an idea turned reality. And indeed, despite the sobering reality of Soviet postwar occupation in Eastern Europe, the end of the war inaugurated a decade during which the Soviet ideology "exercised its greatest fascination over the twentieth-century political imagination."<sup>6</sup> The communist idea had become the "greatest beneficiary of the Nazi apocalypse:"<sup>7</sup> the militant anti-fascism of the communists – temporarily aligning themselves with the democratic West in the struggle for liberty – lent the Soviet Union's fight against Hitler a universal fascination. Its victory in 1945 "combined the two gods that make or break historical times: power and ideas."<sup>8</sup>

It was precisely the fascinating power of antifascism's victory from which the East German communists hoped to gain ideological legitimization and political capital. While in the Soviet Union the war inspired a series of myths – the personality cult of Stalin and a popular memorial culture celebrating legendary stories of trial and triumph in the fight against Hitler's armies – the SED primarily sought to endow the recent past with anticipatory meaning for the future of socialism in the GDR, declared the "other

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Geschichtsschreibung," in Boris S. Telpuchowski, *Die sowjetische Geschichte des Großen Vaterländischen Krieges*, ed. Andreas Hillgruber and Hans-Adolf Jacobsen (Frankfurt/Main: Bernard & Graefe, 1961), 66. Hillgruber and Jacobsen concluded that according to Soviet historiography only with the Soviet Union's entry in 1941, the pure "imperialist war of conquest" turned into a truly "just war of liberation." The periodization was thus: September 1939-July 1940 "imperialist war;" July 1940-June 1941 "transitional phase;" June 22, 1941-1945 "truly just struggle for liberation." Notably, the Western allies' war effort thus also transformed into a "just war" in 1941.

<sup>6</sup> Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion*, 361.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 358.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 349.

Germany.” In the Soviet Union, the Eastern Front was remembered as the “Great Patriotic War” and this memory, indeed “cult,” was overload with stories of heroism and sacrifice.<sup>9</sup> The war experience became a “dominant myth” within Soviet society endowing the permanent Bolshevik revolution with a renewed sense of legitimacy and reinforcing the institutions of Soviet power, the one-party state and its socioeconomic order.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, since the war cult was both a “cult of heroes” and a “cult of strength,” which rested heavily on the use of veterans for socialist propaganda, the “Soviet Union was unable to mourn.”<sup>11</sup> However, while socialism in whatever current outlook and degree of “perfection” was already in place – and invigorated – in Soviet Russia in 1945, the idea had yet to materialize in the GDR.

Abusch’s text points to this *political* relevance of the war’s memory and reveals the peculiar East German interpretation: it was to provide real, actual proof of the superiority of a political system-to-be about to be established in East Germany against popular will. In that sense, Leningrad and Stalingrad were indeed no “miracles;” these battles were no “myths” but sheer reality and proof of a historical logic: Soviet socialism’s rise to power. This led East German communists to believe that not only the Eastern Front war on the

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<sup>9</sup> See Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead*. Although this is not a scholarly work, but rather a personal account of the author’s trips to the USSR and her visits to local commemoration events of the war, it is an informed and well-written depiction of the cultic dimension of the Soviet memory of the Second World War. Tumarkin, a Russian-born Jewish exile to the United States, is most concerned with how Russians mourned millions of dead while, at the same time, the war played an extraordinary role in sustaining a certain self-image as Soviet citizens with great pride and self-confidence inspired by the experience of suffering and victory in World War II.

<sup>10</sup> Weiner, *Making Sense of War*, 7f.

<sup>11</sup> Sabine Rosemarie Arnold, „Das Beispiel der Heldenstadt wird ewig die Herzen der Völker erfüllen.’ Gedanken zum sowjetischen Totenkult am Beispiel des Gedenkkomplexes in Wolgograd,“ in Reinhart Koselleck, Michael Jeismann, eds., *Der politische Totenkult: Kriegerdenkmäler in der Moderne* (München: Fink, 1994), 351-374, quote on 372. See also her *Stalingrad im sowjetischen Gedächtnis. Kriegserinnerung und Geschichtsbild im totalitären Staat* (Bochum: Projekt, 1998).

whole but also its ending, the liberation of Germany from Nazism by the Soviets, embodied one of the century's "Hegelian moments." The reduction of World War II to the years 1941 to 1945, forming a "Hegelian moment," was a key point in the East German communists' Eastern Front memory. The *Weltgeist* had found its successful end in the rise of Soviet power at the end of World War II, just as Hegel used to claim that with Prussia's rise the *Weltgeist* had reached its ultimate destination in the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> The "Hegelian moment" deduced from the experience of the war between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union was a two-fold construct: it included both the attack and devastation of the Soviet Union by Nazi Germany as well as the Soviet Union's ultimate triumph over Nazi Germany. This is an important aspect because it alludes to the central elements of the postwar antifascist founding narrative. Struggle, sacrifice, and suffering had not only been inevitable, but they had inevitably led to ultimate victory.

To communists in Moscow and East Berlin, the battle of Stalingrad was the cataclysmic event signaling the dawn of this "Hegelian moment." The memory of the Eastern Front found its ultimate climax in this battle – it was its quintessence. The instant death of 60,000 German and 500,000 Soviet soldiers during the battle of Stalingrad inspired a memory of loss and heroism. The (East) German side remembered the allegedly "senseless" sacrifice of innocent rank-and-file soldiers (usually without commemorating specifically the Soviet victims), and the Soviet side the costly defense of the homeland.<sup>13</sup> While "German fascism" was clearly identified as the aggressor in Soviet

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<sup>12</sup> Herf, „Hegelianische Momente,“, 201.

<sup>13</sup> On the losses see Chapter 2, fn. 46. In addition to those 60,000 German soldiers who died in Stalingrad, over 100,000 died during prisoner transports or in captivity.

memorial culture, Stalin and his comrades had been eager from the beginning (1941) to point out that the Red Army sought to destruct “not the German people” but the “fascist armies” on the Eastern Front. In his Order No. 55 of February 1942 “On Germany and Germans,” Stalin made this explicit distinction which the SED later cited on numerous occasions:

Occasionally it is babbled that the Red Army’s goal was to extinguish the German people and to destroy the German state. That is naturally a silly lie and a foolish denunciation of the Red Army. ... It would be ridiculous to equalize the Hitler-clique with the German people. The experience of history demonstrates that the Hitlers come and go, but the German people, the German state persists.<sup>14</sup>

Only Hitler and his “clique of Nazi war criminals” had to fear the victory of the Red Army. This alludes to a second key point in the East German memory of the Eastern Front: The question of concrete agency, of who was responsible for war crimes in the Soviet Union, was instantly absent from the official narratives in Moscow and East Berlin. Even though the thesis of a German collective guilt was part of the KPD’s initial propaganda in postwar Germany in 1945/46, they never boiled it down to identifying concrete groups or persons outside the “Hitler-clique,” the “monopoly capital,” Gestapo, and the SS. Stalin’s 1942 declaration “On Germany and Germans” was an important and politically far-sighted rhetorical concession to the East German communists because it

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<sup>14</sup> Here quoted from a NKFD leaflet, printed and distributed on April 14, 1945. Two days later the Soviet offensive towards Berlin started on the Oder River. Under the headline “Marshall Stalin on Germany and the Germans” the leaflet was to assure Germans that despite their utter defeat the Red Army and the Soviet people did not harbor racial hate against Germans but instead respect the sovereignty of nations and seek to live in peace and friendship. “Only Hitler and his clique of Nazi war criminals have to fear the inevitable ... victory of the Red Army.” Printed in *Flugblätter des Nationalkomitees Freies Deutschland*, 413. A first German translation of Order No. 55 was printed in 1949 in Joseph Stalin, *Über die Rote Armee* (Berlin: Dietz, 1949), 16-23. See also the handy collection of Stalin’s relevant “positive” statements on Germans and their country prepared for distribution in the Soviet occupation zone in 1946: *Stalin über Deutschland* (Berlin: Huth, 1946). Stalin had made a similar already in July of 1941, cf. Stalin’s Broadcast Message to the People of the Soviet Union, July 3, 1941, printed in Ueberschär, Wette, eds., ‘Unternehmen Barbarossa,’ 326-329, and cf. also Chapter 2.II.

made it easier for them to include ordinary Germans, i.e. also former Wehrmacht soldiers, in the project of building socialism in postwar Germany without losing face.

The communist memory of Stalingrad exemplifies the selectiveness of political memory and the opportunistic nature of remembrance in Moscow and East Berlin. In the Soviet Union, the contrast between individual experience and official memory was particularly striking. While the million-fold deaths in World War II needed mourning first of all, the official politics of memory aimed at the glorification of the war experience. Memorial sites and rites of commemoration left little room for individual memory, mourning and reflections.<sup>15</sup> In contrast to the individual memories of loss and suffering, the Communist Party's version of the war served primarily the mobilization of the masses and was designed by its "managers" to engender "a unifying, cohesive force."<sup>16</sup> It was full of omissions and untruths. In particular, the Holocaust was absent in the official narrative.

Under the banner of its prime slogan, 'no one is forgotten, nothing is forgotten,' the war cult claimed to recall every incident, every person, every moment of those 1,418 days and nights of war. Indeed the official memorialization of the war was obsessively determined to tell the story of the war in the greatest possible detail. The cult's managers manifested a compulsion to display the names of the war dead on slabs and stone obelisks and walls, such as the mosaic walls of the grand memorial at Volgograd wherein are embedded thousands of names of Soviet soldiers who died in the Stalingrad battle. And yet that very compulsion was part of a massive effort to obliterate the real collective memory of the most horrific war in the history of humankind.<sup>17</sup>

The central ingredient of this "war cult" in the Soviet Union was the cult of the heroes which found its perfection at the memorial site in Stalingrad itself. Here, the party-

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<sup>15</sup> Catherine Merridale, "War, death and remembrance in Soviet Russia," in: Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan, eds., *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 61-83. And Catherine Merridale, *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Twentieth Century Russia* (London: Pinguin, 2002). See also Arnold, *Stalingrad im sowjetischen Gedächtnis*.

<sup>16</sup> Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead*, 226.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 51.

official memory “managers” assured that both the individual hero soldier and the collectively heroic Red Army were celebrated. Not the suffering and cruelty of the war were central in the official memory of the battle, but the triumph over the enemy.<sup>18</sup>

The East German communists swiftly adopted the perspective of the victor in their own “history propaganda” seeking to profit from the triumphant interpretation of the war’s end. For that reason, their interpretation of the war against the Soviet Union contained similar ingredients and operated with similar techniques. It is for the same reason that the Kremlin leaders did not have to convince or force their comrades in East Berlin into copying the Soviet view of World War II – they really felt as victors, extended this feeling on the population as a whole and turned it into a state doctrine.<sup>19</sup> The SED’s Eastern Front memory was a truly homegrown project. Walter Ulbricht himself spent the wartime years on the Eastern Front organizing the antifascist resistance among German POWs in the Soviet Union. He spent almost two months in the embattled city of Stalingrad in the winter of 1942/1943 – celebrating Christmas Eve with Nikita Khrushchev – and emerged from the war as Moscow’s most reliable partner and faithful disciple among the German communists.<sup>20</sup> His personal experience at the front lines of the

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<sup>18</sup> Wolfram von Scheliha, „’Stalingrad’ in der sowjetischen Erinnerung,“ in Jahn, ed., *Stalingrad erinnern*, 30f.

<sup>19</sup> On the great influence of the veteran communists in East Germany see in general Epstein, *Last Revolutionaries*.

<sup>20</sup> Mario Frank, *Walter Ulbricht. Eine deutsche Biographie* (Berlin: Siedler, 2001), 165-168. There he worked for the anti-Nazi propaganda patrolling the German front lines in a loudspeaker truck. He spent Christmas 1942 in a POW camp together with Nikita Khrushchev, then political commissar in the Red Army. Ulbricht wrote a report about his Stalingrad visit: „Lehren von Stalingrad für das deutsche Volk,“ in: Walter Ulbricht, *Zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung. Aus Reden und Aufsätzen*, vol. II 1933-1946 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1966), 299-301. He herein described how German soldiers perished senselessly as a result of Hitler’s orders and praised German POWs for surrendering to the Red Army. Under the impression of the battle, Ulbricht felt that now – after Stalingrad had signaled the ultimate turning point of

Eastern Front war strongly influenced the political memory he communicated after the war as head of state in the GDR. The official Eastern Front memory thus was not *only* the product of ideology, Cold War politics and propaganda, but *also* the result of Ulbricht's distinct biography. Strikingly, he largely refrained from placing his veteran status at the center of this memory. In his speeches during the 1950s and 1960s, the *Realpolitiker* Ulbricht set the tone for the official narrative about the war against the Soviet Union by rather focusing on its "lessons," by placing this narrative within the contemporary political context. Ulbricht's along with Albert Norden's public references to the war provide ample evidence for the sophisticated and very practical instrumentalization of the Eastern Front in SED propaganda and policy.

#### THE PAST AS PROGRAM: "BUILDING SOCIALISM," 1952

In Ulbricht's world view, the globe was divided into two "camps," the "peaceful" Soviet Union and its allies, and the "aggressive, imperialist" West. The communist two-camp theory was introduced by Soviet chief-ideologue Andrei A. Zhdanov in 1947 in a speech to the first Comintern meeting in Poland. Zhdanov's speech was partly a response to George F. Kennan's remarks about Soviet aggressive intentions in Eastern Europe,<sup>21</sup> but it was also an attempt to rally support and respect among the national communist

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the war – the German people stood before an existential question: if they were good Germans, they would secede from Hitler once and for all.

<sup>21</sup> Following his confidential "Long Telegram" to President Harry S. Truman in 1946, Kennan (1904–2005), a US diplomat stationed at the Moscow Embassy between 1944 and 1946, had published an article entitled "The Sources of Soviet Conduct" under the antonym "X" in the July 1947 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, 566–582. In the article he argued that the "Soviet power as we know it today is the product of ideology and circumstances." The "Russian expansive tendencies" threatening the free West since the end of World War II, must be checked with a "long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of these power aspirations," an effort to be led by the United States. In Kennan's view, the Soviet Union headed the aggressor camp; the United States and its allies were defending their liberty.

parties for Stalin's course. According to Zhdanov, the world was divided into the "imperialist, anti-democratic camp" on the one hand, and the "anti-imperialist, democratic camp" on the other.<sup>22</sup> After the defeat of Nazism in 1945, he claimed, "American imperialism had shifted to an aggressive, openly expansionist course." The declared "crusade against communism" was a plan to "enslave Europe."<sup>23</sup> With this claim, Zhdanov laid the foundation for the communist (re-)interpretation of World War II: it neglected the fact that the "imperialist camp" had fought alongside the Soviet Union in the anti-Hitler coalition, marginalizing the Western Front as much as the Allied contribution to the victory over Nazi Germany. According to the communist interpretation of the war, the United States and its allies had secretly hoped that Hitler would defeat the Soviet Union. Since the end of the war had brought about the opposite, they were now out to "strengthen imperialism" and to "prepare a new war against socialism and democracy."<sup>24</sup>

Walter Ulbricht, a year-long KPD veteran, antifascist agitator during World War II and experienced, bureaucratically talented party leader with close personal ties to Moscow, adopted this two-camp theory and applied it to the situation in the early 1950s. Zhdanov's analysis seemed verified after the Cold War had manifested the ideological divide. In 1949, the GDR had become a formal part of the Soviet empire, and the Ulbricht regime secured Stalin's foothold in Germany. In 1952, after years of painful and

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<sup>22</sup> Here quoted from the first edition of the speech in German: Andrei A. Zhdanov, *Über die internationale Lage. Vortrag, gehalten auf der Informationsberatung von Vertretern einiger kommunistischer Parteien in Polen, September 1947* (Berlin (Ost): SWA-Verlag, 1947).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 17f.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 3f., 12.



unpopular economic, political and social “reforms” in East Germany, the SED initiated a Stalinization campaign with the II. Party Conference declaring that the time had come to “build socialism according to a plan.” In his key note address at the conference Ulbricht elaborated on the historical lessons that informed this drive towards the Stalinization of party, state and society in an atmosphere of permanent class struggle.<sup>25</sup> Like Zhdanov in 1947, Ulbricht saw the world in 1952 divided into the “camp of democracy and socialism” and the “camp of imperialism.” While the first stood for peace in the world led by the Soviet Union, the second was led by the United States, “the center of the capitalist governments, of warmongering, of the reactionary and exploitative elements in the world.”<sup>26</sup> World War II had demonstrated that the Soviet Union was the “most powerful country in the world” (373), while the United States emerged as the “greatest financial exploiter in the capitalist world” (377). The permanent struggle for markets and profits, Ulbricht continued, has plunged this capitalist world into crisis rendering internal “contradictions and antagonisms” amongst the Western states. Yet, in order to overcome this internal rift, the imperialists were preparing to launch a “new war which they intend to wage primarily against the socialist Soviet Union” and its Eastern European allies, a second “Barbarossa” in the footsteps of Hitler and Mussolini: “For this purpose they engage in an insane arms race, ... they forge military coalitions which mask themselves

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<sup>25</sup> With the rejection of the Stalin-note in the spring of 1952, the SED – encouraged and instructed by Stalin – launched an offensive on several domestic fronts: a “people’s army” was to be created “without clamor,” the collectivization of the agrarian sector intensified, and the party was to be “renewed” by internal purges. See for a brief summary Ulrich Mähler, *Kleine Geschichte der DDR* (München: Beck, 2004), 60ff.

<sup>26</sup> Walter Ulbricht, „Die gegenwärtige Lage und die neuen Aufgaben der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands. Aus dem Referat auf der II. Parteikonferenz der SED, Berlin, 9. bis 12. Juli 1952,“ in idem, *Zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung. Aus Reden und Aufsätzen, vol. IV: 1950-1954* (Berlin: Dietz, 1958), 372. Passim.

hypocritically with the flag of ‘defending’ the West, and follow in every respect the path of the war criminals Hitler and Mussolini” (379). He added quickly that this war would be “the most dangerous war for imperialism” leading to ultimate defeat of men “like Adenauer who in Hitler’s manner speaks of the ‘new order’” in Eastern Europe, and men like Adenauer’s foreign policy advisor Walter Hallstein (1901-1982) who “gabbled of a ‘crusade to the Urals’” (380).

This passage contained the recurring themes in Ulbricht’s political views about the nature of the West German state, its chancellor and Western allies, rooted in a certain interpretation of the Nazi war against the Soviet Union: he literally equaled Hitler’s aggressive expansionism with Adenauer’s anti-totalitarian policy of strength (“*Politik der Stärke*”) vis-à-vis the reality of Soviet power enforced in Eastern Europe (which, Ulbricht claimed, was mighty enough to defeat another army invading from the West).<sup>27</sup> That Adenauer indeed used the term “*Neuordnung*” in connection with his determination to check Soviet power over Eastern Europe, and his commitment to the long-term liberation and independence of those countries under Soviet rule, could have been an unfortunate – more likely a calculated – lapse. Ulbricht also misconstrued Hallstein’s remark on the “crusade to the Ural.” Far from advocating the relaunch of “Operation Barbarossa,” Hallstein occasionally referred to Adenauer’s European vision according to which a

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<sup>27</sup> On the “policy of strength” see Hans-Peter Schwarz, *Adenauer. Vol. 2: Der Staatsmann 1952-1967* (Stuttgart: dtv, 1991), 14ff. According to Schwarz, Adenauer believed in 1950/51 in a Soviet invasion of the Eastern zone but had changed his opinion by 1952. In April 1951, still fearing open military actions from the Soviet side, he had declared that “in the long run, a new regulation [Neuregelung] of the relations with the Eastern bloc will only be possible if the Soviet Union too realizes that it is an unrealistic and peace-threatening policy ... to permanently disrespect the striving of great peoples for self-determination or to break [this strive] with force.” By 1952, Adenauer favored unambiguously a solution to the German question by diplomatic means – albeit he saw the need to bolster these efforts with military might. For “totalitarian states, particularly Soviet Russia, know ... only one decisive factor: that is power.” Ibid., 14f.

unified, free Europe would stretch from the Atlantic Ocean to the Ural.<sup>28</sup> Ulbricht and Stalin, however, interpreted these and similar statements as open military threats to their national security.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, they used them not only rhetorically in the propaganda battle against the Western enemies but also in context of crucial policy decisions, most importantly to legitimize the remilitarization of East Germany and the military build-up in the Soviet sphere of influence. This instrumentalization is exemplified in a caricature printed in June of 1951 in *Neues Deutschland* in context of the commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the beginning of “Operation Barbarossa.” While the American president “Mr. Truman” was depicted as ruthless warmonger sitting on an army and cracking a whip (“I can exterminate 20,000 people in one stroke”), a friendly “Soviet man” promises to “lead hundreds of millions into a happy future.” The caricature identified the “West” led by the U.S. president as a threat to world peace while presenting the Soviet Union as the leader of the “peaceloving nations.”

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<sup>28</sup> Karl-Ludwig Sommer, “Adenauers Konzeption, Heinemanns Alternative und die Nachwirkungen der gefällten Entscheidungen bis zum heutigen Verhältnis zwischen Ost- und Westdeutschen,” in Dieter Dowe, ed., *Verhandlungen über eine Wiedervereinigung statt Aufrüstung : Gustav Heinemann und die Eingliederung der Bundesrepublik in das westliche Militärbündnis* (Bonn: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2000), 29.

<sup>29</sup> Reading Adenauer’s statements closely and in context, Ulbricht’s calculated misinterpretations are clear. For example, in his response to the Stalin note, Adenauer declared in the Bundestag: “Germany has three options: integration into the West, integration into the East, and neutralization. ... western integration means – that is what I want to say towards the East – means in no way pressure on the East but it is nothing else but a preparation of a peaceful new order (*Neuordnung*) of the relationship with the Soviet Union, towards the reunification of Germany, and the *Neuordnung* of Eastern Europe. And these are our political aims.” And on the „policy of strength: „We want the West to be so strong that he can enter a serious talks with the Soviet government. [...] The goal of serious talks between West and East will be: securing peace in Europe, stopping the irrational arms-race, reunification of Germany in freedom, and a new order in the East. Then finally the world will get what it urgently needs after all the past decades: a long and secure peace.” Quoted from Andreas Hillgruber, „Adenauer und die Stalin-Note vom 10. März 1952,“ in Dieter Blumenwitz et. al., eds., *Konrad Adenauer und seine Zeit. Politik und Persönlichkeit des ersten Bundeskanzlers*, vol. 2: „Beiträge der Wissenschaft“ (Stuttgart: dva, 1976), 113 f. On Adenauer’s foreign policy see Arnulf Baring, *Außenpolitik in Adenauers Kanzlerdemokratie. Bonns Beitrag zur Europäischen Verteidigungsgemeinschaft* (München: Oldenbourg, 1969). And Josef Foscchepoth, ed., *Adenauer und die Deutsche Frage* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988).



Fig. 3. “The Stronger One: Mr. Truman: I can exterminate 20,000 people in one stroke. The Soviet man: And I can lead hundreds of millions into a happy future.” (*Neues Deutschland*, June 22, 1951, 3).

In his speech to the II. Party conference, Ulbricht drew a direct line from this alleged threat to the need to establish Soviet-style socialism in East Germany, i.e. “to create facts” as Stalin had demanded in an April 1952 meeting with SED leaders.<sup>30</sup> After duly denouncing West Germany for the rejection of Stalin’s “peace offer” (the infamous note of March 10, 1952)<sup>31</sup> and praising the “peaceful” path chosen in East Germany, Ulbricht

<sup>30</sup> According to Pieck’s notes of the meeting; quoted in Mählert, *Kleine Geschichte*, 61.

<sup>31</sup> The „Stalin-note” has been a controversial issue for decades. For a summary of historiography and debates see van Dijk, „The 1952 Stalin Note Debate.” Van Dijk concludes that “1952” was not a “wasted opportunity” for German unity,” that, in fact, the note was not an opportunity for unification and “can therefore not have been wasted.” Ibid., 3. Recently published documents further support the conclusion that the note was not a serious diplomatic offer but rather a tactical maneuver. The following remarks of Stalin vis-à-vis SED leaders in April 1952 strongly indicate this: “You should continue propaganda for German unity in the future. It has a great importance for the education of the people in Western Germany. Now it is

listed the concrete measures to be taken in order to react to the current threat and to prevent another “Barbarossa.” This list reads like the codified program for the drive towards socialism. It inaugurated a phase of intensified political terror, propaganda and mass agitation, militarization, repression of churches and youth organizations, collectivization of the agrarian and craft sectors, and party purges. In short, the dictatorial grip on East German society would soon be severely tightened. Ulbricht’s phrased it as follows at the II. Party Conference in 1952:

In consensus with the suggestions of the working class, of the working farmers and of other circles of working people the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party has decided to suggest to the II. party conference that in the GDR socialism will be build according to a plan. ... The main instrument for creating the fundament of socialism is the state [*Staatsmacht*]. What are the tasks of the state in the GDR?

Breaking the resistance of the toppled and expropriated big capitalists and big agrarians. Liquidation of all their attempts to restore the rule of the capital.

Organizing the building of socialism by gathering all working people around the working class.

Creation of armed forces ... for the defense of the homeland against external enemies.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, the threat of a “new war,” a “crusade to the Ural” served to justify the realization of a program which – under the guise and in the name of militant pacifism – contained both repressive and aggressive policy steps aimed at the destruction of all (perceived) internal resistance and the deterrence of all (perceived) external enemies.

The officially propagated history of World War II Ulbricht referred to constantly in his political speeches derives from his Manichean world view of the Cold War. Two camps, good and evil, socialists and imperialists, antifascists and fascists confronted each

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a weapon in your hands. *We should also continue to make proposals regarding German unity in order to expose the Americans.*” Quoted in Christian F. Ostermann, ed., *Uprising in East Germany, 1953. The Cold War, the German Question, and the First Major Upheaval behind the Iron Curtain.* (=National Security Archive Cold War Readers) (New York: Central European University Press, 2001), 40. [Emphasis added].

<sup>32</sup> Ulbricht, „Die gegenwärtige Lage und die neuen Aufgaben der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands,“ 407-409. Among other measures, the catalogue also included a complete reorganization of East Germany’s communal and regional administrative structure, the five *Länder* were dissolved and instead 14 *Bezirke* with 217 *Kreisen* (before: 132) were formed in order to “improve the work of the state apparatus.” Ibid., 415f.

other in the permanent class struggle. The Second World War, and in particular the war against the Soviet Union, was a milestone in this historical scheme.<sup>33</sup> This was one of Ulbricht's core convictions. Already in 1945, Ulbricht had published these convictions in a brief pamphlet under the title "Theses About the Nature of Hitler Fascism." The "Theses" represent one of his earliest attempts at writing history himself; it introduced the basic line of argument for all future historical references to World War II in East Germany.<sup>34</sup> Ulbricht insisted that Hitler's invasions of neighboring countries between 1938 and 1940 had served just one purpose – to prepare the war against the Soviet Union. And the main driving force was not expansionism (*Lebensraum*) but anti-Bolshevism.<sup>35</sup> This assertion enabled Ulbricht to prepare the argumentative ground for his later claim that West Germany continued Hitler's hate campaign against Bolshevism:

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<sup>33</sup> Herf, „Hegelianische Momente.” Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion*, 366-371, describes aptly how World War II and the communist response to it, anti-fascism, were seen to have reenergized the communist idea. In practical terms this meant that with the end of the war, the USSR had “established on the front line of history by the twofold means of its military strength and the return of the revolutionary idea.” Ibid., 369. See also above my discussion of the claim that the Red Army's victory proved the historic superiority of communism.

<sup>34</sup> Walter Ulbricht, „Thesen über das Wesen des Hitlerfaschismus,” in idem, *Ausgewählte Reden und Schriften zur Geschichte der deutschen und der internationalen Arbeiterbewegung* (Berlin: Dietz, 1979), 91-100.

<sup>35</sup> In fact, Hitler combined the two in a peculiar merger of race ideology, anticommunism and the drive for *Lebensraum* in the East. Under the guise of anti-Bolshevism he planned the realization of a “twin obsession:” “removing the Jews” and “*Lebensraum*.” Reducing his motives to anti-Bolshevism ignores completely Hitler's plan for the extermination of the Jews. See Kershaw, *Hitler: Nemesis*, 336ff. For a detailed discussion see Gerd R. Ueberschär, “Hitlers Entschluß zum ‘Lebensraum-’ Krieg im Osten. Programmatisches Ziel oder militärstrategisches Kalkül?” in Ueberschär, Wette, eds., *Unternehmen Barbarossa*, 83-110. Ueberschär concludes that the attack on the Soviet Union was a long-term programmatic goal of Hitler's “race and living-space policy” towards the East. Wolfram Wette, „Die propagandistische Begleitmusik,” shows that the claim of Germany as a “bulwark” against Bolshevism has been used by the Nazi regime repeatedly and opportunistically as “*propagandistische Mehrzweckwaffe*,” (deployed between 1933 and 1939 to crush the communist resistance and rally the middle-class, and completely withdrawn during the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact 1939-1941). In Ibid., 111-129, quote on 121. Thus, while Hitler's anti-Semitism was a genuine hate ideology and a driving force behind the plans to invade the Soviet Union, his anti-Bolshevism was an important but mere tactical instrument reflecting a political-military rivalry.

He had Austria occupied militarily as a strategic position for another offensive against the Balkans. The German troops invaded the Sudetenland, accompanied by the claim that Germany wants no Czechs. The invasion of Czechoslovakia followed immediately. Hitler 'quit' his pact of non-aggression with Poland in order to secure the rear for his invasion of France and to move forward the concentration area [*Aufmarschgebiet*] against the Soviet Union. When Hitler finally attacked the Soviet Union perfidiously he didn't reason it, like in '*Mein Kampf*', with the 'conquest of land in the East' but with the alleged 'danger of Bolshevism.' Only after the occupation of the Ukraine, Hitler and Goebbels spoke openly about the war aim of subjugation and exploitation of the Soviet Union and the other countries of Europe. ...

By unleashing the war against the Soviet Union, Hitler had challenged the strongest power in the world and had allowed the formation of the great anti-Hitler coalition. With the crossing of the Soviet border began the German armies' road to catastrophe. Hitler had to lose the war because he was fighting an unjust, an imperialistic war of conquest against the Soviet Union and the other freedom-loving nations.<sup>36</sup>

In Ulbricht's view, the history of World War II was the history of the invasion of the Soviet Union, and anti-Bolshevism was the danger linking the Nazi period with the Cold War. In East Germany, he believed, this danger was being rooted out by striving for "peaceful and friendly relations to other nations, most of all the great Soviet people."<sup>37</sup> Though Hitler by no means had made a secret of his plans for the enslavement of the Eastern Europe – "if we talk about new soil and territory in Europe we must think primarily only of Russia and its vassal border states," Hitler had declared already in 1925<sup>38</sup> – it is true what Ulbricht claimed here: Germany's relationship with Russia had been the most important foreign policy question for Hitler, and on June 22, 1941 he reasoned that the Wehrmacht was mobilized to save Europe.<sup>39</sup> Yet, Ulbricht used these facts to singularize the history of World War II into the history of the German-Soviet war. Since the past was about the "perfidious attack" on the Soviet Union, the present and

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<sup>36</sup> Ulbricht, „Thesen über das Wesen des Hitlerfaschismus,“ in idem, *Ausgewählte Reden und Ausätze*, 99f.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>38</sup> Statement from the second volume of „*Mein Kampf*,“ quoted in Eberhard Jäckel, *Hitler's World View. A Blueprint for Power* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1995<sup>8</sup>), 38.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 36.

future were about preventing its repetition by adhering to the “unbreakable friendship” with the Soviet Union.

In communist narratives such as Ulbricht’s, collective idioms such as “class,” “proletariat” or “Hitlerfascists” (*Hitlerfaschisten*) often served to describe the agents of history; the focus rested on the grand picture, on the right “message,” not on details. The officially propagated history of the war on the Eastern Front – not the historiography<sup>40</sup> – is probably the best example for illustrating what a monopoly over memory means for the tradition of historical facts. The official SED narrative was published as volume five of the eight-volume “History of the German Workers Movement” in 1960s. Although a number of historians had collaborated on the work, it was first and foremost a SED project developed for the Central Committee by the Institute for Marxism-Leninism in East Berlin. Ulbricht personally led this project.<sup>41</sup> According to his official biographers, history was like a “third profession” to Walter Ulbricht, the learned carpenter. He fulfilled his task as chair of the “authors collective” with much dedication:

[H]e reads all manuscripts, and these are, after all, several thousand pages. Again and again he warns the historians of their responsibility to smash the antinational concept of history of the enemy with the weapon of historical truth, to help the party and the people to better resolve the questions of the present by recognizing the historical lessons.<sup>42</sup>

It is this understanding of history as a “weapon” that informed Ulbricht’s interpretation of the war against the Soviet Union already in the 1950s. Eager to place Hitler’s expansionism within a presumed historical continuity of (German) imperialism, the book

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<sup>40</sup> The GDR historiography on the Eastern Front is discussed in detail in Chapter 10. III.

<sup>41</sup> On the meetings of this „collective of authors,“ Ulbricht’s role, and their discussions on how to write World War II history see the detailed analysis in Chapter 11.I.

<sup>42</sup> Lieselotte Thoms, *Walter Ulbricht. Arbeiter, Revolutionär, Staatsmann* (Berlin: Staatsverlag der DDR, 1968), 295f.



was intended to “enlighten” East Germans about the history of the German working class on the one hand, and to rebuke West Germany’s continuing flirt with imperialist militarism, on the other hand. “Hitlergermany’s” attack on the Soviet Union “was not only a severe crime against the Soviet people; it was most of all the severest crime that German imperialism has committed against the German nation since its existence.”<sup>43</sup>

Further, June 22, 1941 changed the “entire course of the Second World War” for now the “character of the war against Hitler-Germany and his satellites as just, antifascist war of liberation emerged completely.”(293) The “Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union” was at once a national war of defense and a transnational war of liberation. Early in the text the authors pointed out that “Barbarossa” was not a preventive war – “the claim of some West German historians and memoir-writing generals [is a] political lie (*Zwecklüge*)” – but that it was the result of “military, political and economic plans of fascist imperialism for the extermination of the Soviet state and the enslavement of the Soviet people.” (290f.) The murder of the Jews was a marginal aspect in this extermination plan,<sup>44</sup> its executioners remained unnamed while its chief resisters, Red Army and German communists, received the most detailed attention. Overall, the narrative stressed – supported indeed by the Nuremberg Tribunal’s conclusions – that the Hitlerfascists’ plan

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<sup>43</sup> Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim Zentralkomitee der SED, ed., *Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*, vol. 5: „Von Januar 1933 bis April 1945“ (Berlin (Ost): Dietz, 1966), 292, passim.

<sup>44</sup> The narrative included a reference to the planned murder of the Jews upfront albeit in passing. It pointed out that the SS *Einsatzgruppen* were to “fight any resistance movement in the occupied territories ruthlessly, exterminate entire parts of the population and to kill communist functionaries as well as Jewish and other citizens of the USSR.” (290) The authors cited the Wannsee Conference as deciding the “murder of eleven million Jewish citizens from 27 countries.” Herewith “the greatest massacre in world history was inaugurated to which six million people fell victim within three years in Auschwitz, Belzec, Chelmno, Majdanek, Sobibor, Treblinka and other fascist extermination centers. No further details were added. The appendix contains an excerpt from the „Wannsee Protocol” with the numbers of Jews “to be considered” for the “final solution” sorted by country. See *ibid.*, 556f.

to “Germanize and colonize” the European continent was ultimately aimed at the “destruction of the Soviet state, the physical extermination of a considerable part of the Russian people and the relocation of other parts of the Russian people in Siberia.” In conclusion, “with this outrageous program of extermination the inhumanity and barbarism of German imperialism and militarism reached unfathomable dimensions” (322).

The official version of World War II history entailed the distortion, marginalization or plain omission of facts, incidents, and persons who did not fit into the grand narrative of trial and triumph.<sup>45</sup> East Germany’s communists saw the war on the Eastern Front as more than just a military battle; it was rather a fight motivated—almost primarily—by political and economic motives, and less so by ideological differences. The stress on the indisputable exploitative character of Hitler’s invasion of the Soviet Union allowed for the causal allusion to “capitalism” and “imperialism” as the true driving forces behind Hitler’s war aims. Accordingly, the main term used in reference to the perpetrators on all levels of the Nazi political and military apparatus was “Hitlerfascist.” It was “Hitlerfascists” who occupied the Soviet territories (296), it was the “fascist troops” and the “fascist occupants” who were defeated at Stalingrad, (334) and throughout the narrative soldiers were never just soldiers but members of the “Hitlerwehrmacht” or of the “fascist Wehrmacht.”

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<sup>45</sup> See the essays in Sabrow, ed., *Geschichte als Herrschaftsdiskurs*, especially Heimann, „Erinnerung als Wandlung,” 39-85, Christoph Classen, „Vom Anfang im Ende: ‚Befreiung‘ im Rundfunk,” 87-118, and Simone Barck, “Widerstands-Geschichten und Helden-Berichte. Momentaufnahmen antifaschistischer Diskurse in den fünfziger Jahren,” 119-173. See further, for example, the aspects discussed in Alf Lüdtke, „Wer handelt? Die Akteure der Geschichte. Zur DDR-Geschichtsschreibung über Arbeiterklasse und Faschismus,” in Georg G. Iggers, ed., *Die DDR-Geschichtswissenschaft als Forschungsproblem* (München: Oldenbourg, 1998), 369-410. Heider, „Das Nationalkomitee ‚Freies Deutschland.’

Only with regards to the communist resistance, the text mentioned concrete names, namely the “usual suspects” of the communist pantheon of antifascists on the Eastern Front: Ulbricht, Pieck, Becher, Bredel, Weinert in Moscow and behind the front lines, and imprisoned Wehrmacht leaders Walter von Seydlitz-Kurzbach (1888-1976), Egbert von Frankenberg, Otto Korfes and Luitpold Steidle in the NKFD. German soldiers entered the stage only as prisoners of the Red Army, “some of which brought the discontent of the various classes of the nation with the Nazi regime and the Hitlerwar (*Hitlerkrieg*) and their longing for peace into captivity.” The German soldier was not the prime culprit in an aggressive war, but stood basically on the same level with the Red Army, the initial victim of this aggression. Ulbricht’s official history thus turned German soldiers from perpetrators into victims: “on the German-Soviet front they had experienced the senseless fascist war the harshest” (356).

Only in light of the refusal of most Wehrmacht soldiers to follow the KPD’s and NKFD’s call for orderly retreat or collective surrender, the narrative noted briefly that the “influence of the fascist ideology on the German soldiers and officers was still strong” (367) in early 1943, when the Sixth Army’s defeat at Stalingrad had signaled the “fundamental turnaround in the Second World War.” (334) From here on, the Wehrmacht, along with the German home front, was fatally mistaken not to rise against Hitler as the KPD had demanded constantly since 1942 (346f.) Between the lines, this collective failure is implicit even if the repressive nature of Goebbels “total war” campaign is depicted in detail. Just as the text – as the official narrative – hardly identifies the soldiers on the Eastern Front as war criminals in concrete instances – exception is for example a photograph showing “Soviet citizens” hanged by “members of

the German Wehrmacht” (384) – the mass of the German population remained spared from charges of complicity. While the nation continued to submit under Hitler’s regime, its avant-garde, the working class, was the first to realize the looming end. The KPD counted on the German “working class” for their plans for eradicating capitalism as the natural breeding ground for fascism and war, and for realizing socialism in its place.

In the SED’s view, World War II had taken place principally on the Eastern Front; party leaders rarely made references to the other fighting members of the anti-Hitler coalition, or the Western Front in general. In their speeches and pamphlets during the 1950s, they instead portrayed the United States, Britain and West Germany as Hitler’s heirs. The triumph of socialism was the logic outcome of World War II and the battle of Stalingrad served as the ideal vantage point for this claim. Ulbricht’s view of the battle thus contains the essence of the war’s lessons:

This victory [at Stalingrad] was no accidental success but was conditional on profound causes which had an objective character. It attested to the fact that the military and economic balance of power had changed in favour of the anti-Hitler-coalition led by the USSR. It proved irrefutably the superiority of the socialist social system and state order. (334)

The victory of the Red Army and the German communists on the Eastern Front liberated the German nation from the “Nazi joke.” It legitimized “the path to a new, democratic life” in Germany. In 1945, a “fundamental turn in the history of the German people began” (438) – a turn which eventually forced the Eastern part of Germany into a second dictatorship. This official view celebrated the arrival of the past in the present, and viewed recent German history – regardless of the factual division of the German nation and the Cold War – as a story with a happy end.

The political capital to be gained from this interpretation of history was enormous. Ulbricht, Abusch and other leading party “historians” sought to instill East Germans with

a feeling of remorseful sympathy for the fate of Soviet citizens during the Eastern Front war, and a sense of pride and confidence in the victorious socialist cause. Their narratives selectively recaptured historical events, their actors and victims. In particular, the SED rewrote the history of the German antifascist movement – a minority movement – to encompass all Germans who subscribed to the idea of socialism in East Germany. Thus, the “unifying, cohesive force” of the Eastern Front memory was not, like in the Soviet Union, the war itself, but the antifascist narrative of the “group Ulbricht” returning from the Eastern Front in the slipstream of the victorious Red Army. It mattered not only ideologically during the immediate postwar years, but constituted the basis for a political agenda inspired by history’s lessons. Just as Ulbricht in 1952 placed the program for the “building of socialism” within the context of the superior mission to realize the lessons of the war by preventing it from happening again, the popular unrests facing the SED regime in 1953 were crushed by pointing to the threat of another “Barbarossa.”

#### THE PAST AS WARNING: JUNE 17, 1953 AND THE “LESSONS OF JUNE ”

The way the SED handled the June uprising in East Germany in 1953 demonstrates the substantial grip which the calculated utilization of history can have on peoples’ lives. This uprising was the first and last expression of massive popular resistance against the SED until 1989. After workers in East Berlin took to the streets to protest the introduction of increased production quotas on June 16, 1953, the rebellion quickly spread throughout East Germany the following days. The over one million demonstrators soon called for a change of government, free elections, and unification. The SED regime, left uncertain about the future course of the Soviet Union after Stalin’s death on March 3, 1953, was incapable of solving the crisis on its own. Only after Soviet tanks intervened on June 17,

1953, killing at least 60 people and wounding hundreds, public order could be restored. The SED denounced the uprising as “fascist coup” and arrested thousands of citizens.<sup>46</sup> The East German uprising was a major event in the postwar history of communism, the “first real mass uprising within the Soviet sphere of influence.”<sup>47</sup> It also exposed the volatility of the SED-regime. Ulbricht survived the crisis as SED leader in a “position of strength by being weak”<sup>48</sup> – his regime’s very existence now openly rested on Soviet tanks.

On the ideological front, the SED relied heavily on history and its propagandistic potential. The hasty search for an explanation of the riots led the party press to intensify the anti-Western propaganda in an unprecedented way: the uprising was a “fascist adventure” incited by Western agitators and spies in order to make the GDR the “starting point” of a new war. On June 18, 1953, the editorial of *Neues Deutschland* asked „What happened in Berlin?,” and explained that „Western agencies had succeeded in confusing and instigating segments of the population for a few hours.” Even though the “great majority had rejected the provocation with hostility,” the same “dark forces” were at work which had “plunged Germany into catastrophe twice.” Yet, it was “shameful that German workers fell for the clever machinations of the provocateurs” so that the Soviets

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<sup>46</sup> Cf. Gareth Dale, *Popular Protest in East Germany, 1945-1989* (London: Routledge, 2005), 9-36. And Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, *17. Juni 1953: Volksaufstand in der DDR. Ursachen – Abläufe – Folgen* (Bremen: Edition Temmen, 2003).

<sup>47</sup> Ostermann, ed., *Uprising in East Germany 1953*, xv.

<sup>48</sup> Gaddis, *We Now Know*, 134.

had to “stand in for the vital interests of the German nation ... with the necessary resolve by declaring a state of emergency.”<sup>49</sup>

In SED propaganda, the “dark forces” of German history harbored by the Bonn government planned a third World War. If it were not for Soviet tanks, German workers would have been tricked – once again – into another war. The nucleus of this legend was crafted in the SED ZK’s “General Division,” the most important organisational link between the SED leadership, the Soviet authorities in Berlin-Karlshorst, Soviet diplomats in the GDR, and Moscow. Responsible directly to Ulbricht, the division filed a report in the summer of 1953 which provided an “Analysis of the Preparation, the Outbreak and the Suppression of the ‘Fascist Adventure’ from June 16 to June 22, 1953.” It claimed that “hostile forces” led by “American agencies” and supported by “the warmongers in Bonn,” had organized an “attempt for a fascist coup” in East Germany. It was their goal “to make Berlin and the German Democratic Republic the starting point of war in Europe.”<sup>50</sup> Repressing the uprising was thus a matter of war and peace in Europe. It was directed primarily not against unpopular SED policies in East Germany but against the Soviet Union. By seeking to “revive the anti-Soviet feelings among the population,” the report reflected the SED’s (indeed justified) concern about persisting anti-Soviet

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<sup>49</sup> *Neues Deutschland*, June 18, 1953, 1. This version of the events was repeated in similar form the next day albeit with a stress on justifying the Soviet military intervention. Under the headline “The Collapse if the Fascist Adventure” the editorial reconstructed on the alleged activities of the “Bonn rulers [*Machthaber*] and their American backers [*Hintermänner*].” Once again, the Soviet intervention was praised as “necessary because the war provocateurs from the West had to get a decided rebuff.” It was “in the national interest of the German people” because it “prevented that Germany takes the path into catastrophe a third time. Of course, it would have been better if the German workers themselves would have rebuked the provocation at the right time. Yet, unfortunately, great segments of the proletariat have not afforded the necessary high consciousness.” *Neues Deutschland*, June 19, 1953, 1.

<sup>50</sup> BA/SAPMO, DY 30 J IV 2/202/15. Here quoted in the translation of Helen Christakos from the online archive Cold War International History Project (CWIHP), [www.CWIHP.org](http://www.CWIHP.org) [May 2006].

sentiments. Yet, at the same time, the true instigators were said to sit in Washington, Bonn and West Berlin. Their goal was nothing less than to start a new war against the Soviet Union.

The most candid and most articulate formulation of this claim was crafted by the SED's chief agitator, Albert Norden (1904-1982), then head of the press bureau in the GDR Information Office.<sup>51</sup> On June 21, 1953 – the uprising was almost completely crushed by then, and it was one day before the twelfth anniversary of the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union – Norden published a lengthy essay on “The Lessons of June 22, 1941” in *Neues Deutschland*.<sup>52</sup> His text bundled the SED's orchestrated propaganda effort to submerge the memory of June 22, 1941 into the June events of 1953 for political profit. “They are preparing a new June 22” was the main message of the essay, and Norden identified a few West German politicians as the “flesh from the flesh of fascist imperialism,” among them chancellor Konrad Adenauer and Jakob Kaiser (1888-1961), the head of the CDU in West Berlin (550). He argued that for German militarism, June 22, 1941 had been “Day X” – the long prepared starting point for gaining “world dominance.” Since 1945, Norden continued, these same German imperialists prepared for another “Day X” on which they would erect a “bloody regime on the territory of the

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<sup>51</sup> Norden was the son of a rabbi, a journalist in the Weimarer Republic (*Rote Fahne*), and since 1921 KPD member. In 1933 he flew first to Czechoslovakia, then to France (where he coauthored the famous *Braunbuch über Reichstagsbrand und Hitlerterror* in 1933/34). In 1941 he emigrated to the United States. Between 1949-1953 he was head of the press bureau in the *Informationsamt der DDR*, and from 1953 to 1955 a professor of modern history at Humboldt University. Norden was a long-time member of the Politburo (1958-1981).

<sup>52</sup> Albert Norden, „Warum das Potsdamer Abkommen für Adenauer ein Alpdruck ist. Lehren des 22. Juni 1941,“ in *Neues Deutschland*, June 21, 1953, 5. Here quoted from Albert Norden, „Die Lehren des 22. Juni 1941,“ in idem, *Die Nation und wir. Ausgewählte Aufsätze und Reden 1933-1964*, vol. 1 (Berlin (Ost): Dietz, 1965), 542-552, passim.



GDR” with “American help:” this day was to be the “prelude for a new, gruesome military adventure against the countries of peace, against the Soviet Union” (542). On June 17, 1953, they had believed “their hour had come” to launch the “refascization” (*Refaschisierung*) of Germany. Yet, just as in the years 1941 to 1945, the “decisive will of the Soviet Union” assured that “another ‘Day X’ was doomed to fail as well” (542f.). Norden’s text referred to contemporary works published by former Wehrmacht generals in the West and cited documents from the Nuremberg trials which proved that “Barbarossa” had been all but a “preventive war:”

Indeed, in order to have an alibi before the German people and in order to awake enthusiasm among the people for a war against the Soviet Union, the lie of the Soviet threat had to be invented and to be painted in the blackest colors. ... You see that the main motif in the foreign policy of the Bonn regime, the ‘threat from the East,’ is merely a duplicate of the score played by Hitler and Goebbels. (546)

Norden recounted the millions of Soviet “men, women and children” killed in accordance with the Nazi “Germanization” plans. He also pointed to the personal continuities between the Nazi era and West Germany suggesting this was the reason why the “same generals, big industrialists and politicians who had approved of Hitler’s attack against the Soviet Union and participated in it, could [now] breed over new ‘Barbarossa-plans’” (551). Not only keeping quiet about the use of former Wehrmacht generals in the East German armed forces,<sup>53</sup> Norden here did something that was typical in the SED’s

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<sup>53</sup> See the useful overview by Niemetz, „Besiegt, gebraucht, gelobt, gemieden.” As a rule, former Wehrmacht officers were (secretly) flattered by the SED for their military expertise, were involved in the NVA to a limited extent, but many in the SED met them with suspicion, deemed them “politically unreliable.” The Stasi therefore kept them under surveillance. Most were removed from the GDR armed forces by the late 1960s. (One of the highest-ranking former Wehrmacht general in the GDR, GFM Paulus, returned from Soviet captivity in 1953 and was on Ulbricht’s order “treated with decency.” He gave two speeches in the Military Academy in Dresden but was not involved with the establishment of the NVA. See *ibid.*, 383.) By 1956, less than one percent (about 500) former Wehrmacht officers were among the 17,500 NVA officers, but mostly in high-ranking positions. In February 1957, the Politburo reacted to the concerns of leading cadres and decided to gradually remove all former Wehrmacht officers from the NVA. In 1958,

rhetorical deployment of the Nazi past: he used known – and indeed scandalous – facts such as the involvement of former Wehrmacht generals in the creation of the *Bundeswehr*, exaggerated, inflated and distorted these facts and presented the implications to be drawn from them creating an enemy image of the “West German reaction” that can only be called a conspiracy theory. While Adenauer, Kaiser, Schumacher and others in the West German political elite fiercely and articulately opposed the Soviet regime over Eastern Europe and its presence in East Germany, to claim that they actively planned to wage aggressive war (yet again) was sheer invention. Notwithstanding, the SED inflated the scandalous dimensions of West German *Vergangenheitspolitik* to such a degree that they appeared to unmask a scandal of historical dimensions – the plan for another “Barbarossa.” This historical rhetoric for the sake of propagandistic profit and political legitimization, not of remembering war and preventing history from being repeated, ultimately disgraced every genuine concern over the persistence of Nazi sentiments and militarism in West German society and politics. It ridiculed the SED’s claim to carry on the antifascist legacy.

Norden’s last lines read like the rational conclusion of an irrational argument, they offer an escape from the conspiracy of “history’s dark forces” to wage World War III: only when “the soil of German society is being stubbed ... as it has happened in the German Democratic Republic,” the nation and the world would be “immunized against the repetition of such crimes as June 22, 1941” (552). Ultimately, the world remained

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their number was reduced to 400, in 1964 only 67 of them were left. By 1972, the category “member of the former Wehrmacht” no longer appeared in the NVA cadre files.

divided into good and evil, peace-loving and war-thirsty. Yet, Norden ended with the claim, that by 1953 the Soviet Union had found true friends among most Germans:

They, the German imperialists, are, like ever, ravenous for other people's land, for cheap fame, for abundant war profits. The German people, however, are starving for peace. They will demonstrate to the troublemakers in Bonn that 1953 is not 1941, and that the friendship with the Soviet Union, which has always displayed friendship and helpful understanding for us Germans, has become today a matter that is near to their hearts, and a program of action of all nationally conscious people between [the rivers] Oder and Rhine. (552)

The officially claimed bond between (East) Germans and Soviet citizens became a notorious claim in SED propaganda throughout the existence of the GDR. To many it was no more than an “invented friendship” because it collided with the reality of the Soviet presence in Eastern Germany.<sup>54</sup>

In West Germany, however, and in contrast to Norden's presumptuous claims, the official and categorical anticommunism mingled with a popular distrust, indeed fear, of everything Russian since the end of the war. It was thus a diplomatic milestone when representatives of both hostile states met in Moscow in 1955 to discuss the prospect of establishing diplomatic relations in exchange for settling one pressing issue pertaining the legacy of the Eastern campaign: bringing home the remaining German POWs.

## **II. The Shadows of the Past: Adenauer in Moscow, 1955**

When Konrad Adenauer met with the leadership of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in Moscow in September of 1955 it was the first direct official encounter between Soviet leaders and representatives of that part of Germany which claimed to be the only legitimate German state, the successor state to the Third Reich (*Alleinvertretungsanspruch*). The way the past was discussed and reflected in the course

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<sup>54</sup> Behrends, *Erfundene Freundschaft*.

of the summit highlights the essence of West Germany memory of the war against the Soviet Union (or “Russia,” as most West Germans still called the country). This section will briefly recapture Adenauer’s personal view of the Wehrmacht role on the Eastern Front, and then examines the talks between the CPSU ZK’s general secretary Nikita Khrushchev (1894-1971) and the German delegation where they touched on the issue of the legacy of the Eastern Front war. The episode serves as snapshot of West German memory of the Eastern Front in 1950s.

In 1955, the German-Soviet relationship was still “abnormal and historically loaded,” and Adenauer knew that his countrymen connected traumatic memories with the war in “Russia” and the Soviet intrusion into Germany in the year 1944/45.<sup>55</sup> To most people, the occupation of East Germany constituted an ongoing outrageous crime. The *criminal* legacy of the Eastern Front war was neither part of the public perception of the Soviet Union nor of Adenauer’s public references to recent history. In August 1953, a poll conducted by the Allensbach Institute found that Adenauer was in sync with public opinion: 55 percent of West Germans did not think “that the German soldiers of the last war [could] be reproached for their conduct in the occupied countries.” Twenty-one percent said, yes, “in some cases,” only six percent said “yes.”<sup>56</sup> Yet, Adenauer also knew he had to find a way to communicate with the Soviets about the past in order to be able to communicate in and about the present and future. In fact, this difficult political situation engendered an ambiguous approach to a difficult past. Soviet power had reached

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<sup>55</sup> Schwarz, *Adenauer*, vol. II, 208.

<sup>56</sup> Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, Erich Peter Neumann, eds., *The Germans. Public Opinion Polls 1947-1966* (Allensbach, Bonn: Verlag für Demoskopie, 1967), 202.

Germany, indeed it controlled one half of the country. A confession of historical guilt could easily be interpreted as a concession to Soviet dominance in the present. This left very little room for historical differentiation beyond the absolutely necessary. To Adenauer, the Soviet Union was and remained a “dreadful power,” threatening the occidental, European family of nations with its “expansionist drive towards the West.”<sup>57</sup>

The talks with the Soviet leaders were the first candid conversation between Germans and Russians after the Eastern campaign had ended (leaving aside the meetings between Moscow and its followers in East Berlin). Accordingly, this conversation was the first opportunity to exchange respective memories and conceptions of the past. In the center of it seemed to stand the fate of the last German POWs. The long history of the repatriation of over two million German prisoners of war from the Soviet Union came to a preliminary end in the fall of 1955 after Adenauer’s meeting with the head of the CPSU, Nikita Khrushchev, resulted in the release of the last 9,626 POWs who had been kept on charges of war crimes. Adenauer received credit for the release, but the Soviets had already decided this before the meeting.<sup>58</sup> The path-breaking negotiations opened

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<sup>57</sup> Gottfried Niedhart, Normen Altmann, “Zwischen Beurteilung und Verurteilung: Die Sowjetunion im Urteil Konrad Adenauers,” in: Foschepoth, ed., *Adenauer und die Deutsche Frage*, 99-117, quote on 100. On the general impact of the political views of the Soviet Union on West German foreign policy see also Arnold Sywottek, “Die Sowjetunion in westdeutscher Sicht seit 1945,” in Gottfried Niedhart, ed., *Der Westen und die Sowjetunion. Einstellungen und Politik gegenüber der UdSSR in Europa und in den USA seit 1917* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1983), 340-350.

<sup>58</sup> The Adenauer visit to Moscow in 1955 has been the subject of a number of historical studies. See for example Michael Krekel, *Verhandlungen in Moskau. Adenauer, die deutsche Frage und die Rückkehr der deutschen Kriegsgefangenen*, ed. Stiftung Bundeskanzler-Adenauer-Haus (Bad Hönnef-Rhöndorf, 1996). Lehmann, *Gefangenschaft und Heimkehr*, 123. Erich Maschke, *Die deutschen Kriegsgefangenen des Zweiten Weltkrieges - Eine Zusammenfassung* (= vol. 15 of *Zur Geschichte der deutschen Kriegsgefangenen des Zweiten Weltkrieges*) (München: Giesecke, 1974), 415ff. It was long believed that Adenauer deserved credit for the release of those 9,626 prisoners, and most of the returned POWs of 1955 themselves saw Adenauer as their liberator. However, a recent study based on newly accessible documents has concluded that Khrushchev already intended to release all remaining POWs in the summer of 1955 as

formal diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and the Federal Republic, and Adenauer was celebrated in West Germany for his alleged triumph over the Soviets who had now agreed to release the last German POWs from captivity. For his countrymen he was “a grandpa [who] traveled to Moscow to bring home Germany’s sons.”<sup>59</sup>

For Moscow, the summit was not so much about dealing appropriately with German “war criminals” but about moving towards more normal relations with West Germany and about preserving the status quo.<sup>60</sup> Adenauer was aware of how crucial a better relationship with Bonn was for Khrushchev. He thus approached the Soviet leaders from a position of strength and with a good measure of openly displayed self-confidence. Upon his arrival in Moscow, he declared that “for the first time a representative of the German people negotiates with the Soviet government.”<sup>61</sup> Such rhetoric along with his well-known previous comments on the issue of war crimes committed by the Wehrmacht during World War II, created and sustained an atmosphere of open detestation. Since his early days in the CDU, Adenauer had shown much sympathy for former Wehrmacht soldiers and nominal members of the NSDAP. Weighing justice against integration he opted consequently for the latter. His program of *Vergangenheitspolitik* was primarily aimed at the amnesty and integration of these groups into West German society.<sup>62</sup> Whenever he

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part of a larger policy agenda aimed at improving relations with the West. Cf. Beate Ihme-Tuchel, „Die SED und die deutschen Kriegsgefangenen in der Sowjetunion 1949-1955,” *Deutschland Archiv*, May 1994, 490-503.

<sup>59</sup> Moeller, „Heimkehr ins Vaterland,” 411. Indeed, asked about Adenauer’s greatest achievement twenty years later, most interviewed Germans responded “return of the German POWs from Russia,” second place was “reconciliation and friendship with France,” and in third place “that he had help regain Germany’s reputation and role in the world” was named. Cf. Schwarz, *Adenauer*, vol. II, 207.

<sup>60</sup> Schwarz, *Adenauer*, vol. II, 204ff.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 209.

<sup>62</sup> Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik*.

addressed the issue of the Wehrmacht's role in the Nazi era, Adenauer was eager to point out that the number of those "truly" guilty of war crimes was "extraordinary small" and that they would not "diminish the honor of the former German Wehrmacht."<sup>63</sup> In his view, members of the Wehrmacht had not belonged to the "activists and profiteers" of the Nazi regime. Thus the "chapter of the collective guilt of the militarists" must be closed once and for all.<sup>64</sup> As demonstrated earlier, Adenauer expressed understanding for *Mitläufer* on many occasions. He duly sided with the "decent German soldier" whose memory and reputation needed to be defended against maculation and condemnation.<sup>65</sup>

This was the core of the official memory of the Eastern Front as Adenauer articulated it during his Moscow visit. Already on the first day of negotiations, September 9, 1955, the conversation between Soviet Prime Minister Nikolai A. Bulganin (1895-1975) and Adenauer turned towards the subject of the last war. Bulganin recalled the extraordinary suffering of the Soviet peoples and, while admitting that Germans too had suffered greatly, reminded the chancellor that it was Germany who had started the war. In response, Adenauer expressed understanding for the need to "speak from one's heart," and drew a picture of German society under Nazism which was plainly incorrect:

If one seeks to establish a normalization of the relations after all that has happened, one must as a start speak with each other openly in order to vent one's heart. You have, Mister Prime Minister, described the sufferings of the Soviet people during the last war at the beginning of your considerations. I honestly concede to you that the Soviet people have suffered extraordinarily as a result of this war. But if you say, the German people have been in a different situation [because Germany had started the war] then I may turn your attention to the fact that one must not equate Hitler and his followers with the German people. There is a very large percentage of the German people which out of innermost

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<sup>63</sup> Such was his comment in one of the earliest *Bundestag* debates on remilitarization on April 5, 1951. Quoted in Reichel, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, 100.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 113. He made this comment during the *Bundestag* debate about article 131 of the Basic Law (on the rehabilitation and pensions of persons who had been employed as public servants in the Third Reich including former career soldiers, Gestapo and Waffen-SS members).

<sup>65</sup> See above Chapter 3. II.

conviction has condemned Hitler, who has condemned this entire war, and who has condemned all cruelties committed by Hitlerism.<sup>66</sup>

Downplaying the extent of popular support for much of Hitler's agenda, Adenauer implied that even though a majority of Germans had not opposed Hitler, they had condemned "all cruelties." It remains unclear who had committed these cruelties – "Hitlerism" is hardly a historical agent. Yet, shortly thereafter he spoke of the "German troops" who had "invaded Russia:"

It is true: *much bad* has happened. Yet it is also true that the Russian armies then – in defense, I admit that offhand – intruded into Germany and that then in Germany as well many *terrible things* happened in the war. I think that if we enter a new era in our relations – and that is our sincere will – that then we should not look into the past too deeply, because then we will only build up obstacles before us. The beginning of a new era also requires a psychological cleansing.<sup>67</sup>

The peculiar wording in the passage underlines Adenauer's reluctance to acknowledge the difference in kind between Hitler's war of annihilation waged against "Jewish Bolshevism" and the Red Army's invasion of Eastern Europe and Germany in the wake thereof. That "bad" or "evil" things have happened in Russia, he admitted; yet, in comparison, one is tempted to conclude, much worse, namely "terrible" crimes were committed by the Red Army.<sup>68</sup> It was reported that Khrushchev "exploded" after hearing the above-quoted comment about the "psychological cleansing" and "shook his fist on Adenauer." The Chancellor is said to have responded by also jumping up and raising his

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<sup>66</sup> Konrad Adenauer, *Erinnerungen II: 1953-1955* (Stuttgart: dva, 1984), 508.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 509. [Emphasis added]. The emphasized wording reflects an (unconscious?) bias which reminds me of Hillgruber's word choice in the title of his controversial book *Zweierlei Untergang*: It dealt with the "the destruction of the German Reich and the end of the European Jewry" (Berlin: Corso, 1986). During the "Historians Debate" in 1986/87 this semantic detail was critically discussed.

<sup>68</sup> In a contemporary poll conducted after Adenauer's return, 68 percent of the interviewed West Germans approved of the fact that Adenauer had raised the issue of Soviet crimes in the former German territories and the Soviet zone. See Schwarz, *Adenauer*, vol. II, 212.



fists.<sup>69</sup> What outraged Khrushchev so much is further illustrated by a comment by Adenauer pertaining the emotional legacy of the war. In a meeting with the CDU executive committee in late September back in Germany, he reported that, predictably, “in the first encounter after the war all the anger, rage and mourning broke out about all that has happened in this war between the two nations, about what one nation had done to the other.”<sup>70</sup>

Adenauer indeed displayed a propensity to relegate the “war thing”<sup>71</sup> to the realm of psychology, namely as something that can be dealt with as a matter of course and of will. Memories of war, such was the implication, would have to and could be overcome one day; the sooner, the better. In a press conference held upon his return to Germany on September 20, 1955, Adenauer summed up his trip with the following assessment of the state of memory affairs:

All in all, the reestablishment of diplomatic relations between Soviet Russia and the Federal Republic is a step of a certain meaning because with it, this war thing is disposed of once and for all [*diese Kriegssache mal aus der Welt geschafft*]. The war memories played indeed a great role on the other side; they were still very strong and very alive.<sup>72</sup>

In a similar way Adenauer had summed up his impressions during a meeting with President Theodor Heuss on 16 September 1955. He recalled that the “reception was outwardly cordial” yet “behind these testimonies of friendship shivers still the psychosis of war, indeed the respect but also the fear of the Germans.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>71</sup> Rudolf Morsey, Hans-Peter Schwarz, eds., *Konrad Adenauer. Teegespräche 1955-1958* (Berlin: Siedler, 1986), 10.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Rudolf Morsey, Hans-Peter Schwarz, eds., *Konrad Adenauer, Theodor Heuss. Unter vier Augen. Gespräche aus den Gründerjahren, 1949-1959* (Berlin: Siedler, 1997), 178.

Adenauer nonetheless drew a balanced conclusion for his foreign policy conduct from this trip, albeit not in public. In the same CDU meeting cited above, he cautioned that the past kept hanging over the present and, in a way, was a third party sitting at the negotiation table. Unfortunately, the following evenhanded and perceptive comments on the legacies of the Eastern Front war never reached the West German public:

Looking back on the negotiations [Adenauer] also sought to avoid one-sidedness: 'As atrocious as the Russians have raged here ... I believe the Germans have committed no less grandiose crimes in Russia. The number of Russian POWs one has left to starve, in the truest sense of the word, goes in the millions.' And, the Hitler-Stalin-pact though it was 'mean in its goals and bad in its motives' – it was a contract after all. Indeed, 'many years have passed since 1939' but one should keep the facts and numbers before one's eyes 'if one sits down on a table with representatives of the Soviet Union to talk about issues which stem from those years....'<sup>74</sup>

Adenauer might have been aware of history's role in diplomacy, yet his political character, instinct and world view left just as little room for maneuvering within this space as did the demands of day-to-day politics at the height of the Cold War. His public, less differentiating anticommunist stand might thus well have contributed to the popular perception that those last POWs returning after his Moscow visit to West Germany were "Hitler's sturdiest soldiers," as the magazine *Stern* titled in October 1955. Their war had lasted another ten years behind barbed wire, the story went, and now they emerged as the final victors in the fight against "Soviet inhumanity and Bolshevist propaganda" – an enemy against which already Hitler had stood.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> This is Hans-Peter Schwarz' quote from the minutes of this meeting, Schwarz, *Adenauer*, vol. II, 212.

<sup>75</sup> Quoted in Robert G. Moeller, „Heimkehr ins Vaterland,“ 419.

### III. Beyond the Rhetoric of Militant Pacifism: The “Anti-Imperialist Protection Wall” and the Prevention of another “Barbarossa”

While an ambiguous Eastern Front memory burdened relations between West Germany and the Soviet Union throughout the 1950s and much of the 1960s, the GDR depended on the material and ideological support which flowed from the German-Soviet friendship pact with Moscow. In the East, the SED converted its declared lessons into political practice. It was not only Ulbricht, and the inner circle of SED leaders, but a number of other men who partook in this conversion of history into politics. Namely, former Wehrmacht officers sharing with Ulbricht the Eastern Front experience contributed to the canonization and political instrumentalization of the Eastern Front memory in East Germany. These veterans found a political home in the National Democratic Party of Germany (NDPD) after their personal transformation from Hitler's officers to members of the anti-Hitler movement – the NKFD – on the Eastern Front. At the SED's initiative they also formed the “Working Group of former Officers” (*Arbeitsgemeinschaft ehemaliger Offiziere* or AeO) in 1958. That way Ulbricht assured that prominent members of the “front generation” joined in the struggle against “Western imperialism” – a struggle which the SED declared decided on August 13, 1961 with the building of the “anti-imperialist protection wall.” The SED enlisted these veterans in a concerted fear-and-threat-campaign leading up to the building of the wall.

Towards the end of the 1950s, several organizational reforms tuned the propaganda apparatus towards the more effective propagation of “Barbarossa's” lessons not only inside the GDR, but also their dissemination among the West German public. A

concerted effort to bundle the “information” about the continuing “threat” and to disseminate them among the East German population was made in 1957 when the SED ZK’s Division of Agitation and Propaganda headed by Horst Sindermann (1915-1990) – an experienced KPD veteran who had spent ten years in various Nazi prisons before 1945 – launched an internal circular entitled “Information Service” (*Informationsdienst*). Its foremost purpose was to intensify the work against “the enemy” and it was distributed among the first secretaries of the SED *Bezirks- und Kreisleitungen*, to SED leaders in selected factories, to the editors-in-chief of the SED’s regional print-media and to all heads of division in the SED central committee. The first issue of spring 1957 was introduced with the following words:

Dear Comrades,  
This Information Service shall arm you with facts and arguments as well as with internal information beyond what is possible through the press so that you can argue and stand against the enemy independently and offensively.<sup>76</sup>

The material was confidential. It constitutes an excellent source for the reconstruction of the propaganda production in the GDR. As a rule, the “Information Service” included original statements by GDR officials and institutions, statements by West German politicians, excerpts from the West German press as well as counter-arguments and directions for group discussions with ordinary citizens. For example, a lengthy issue was circled in February 1957 in reaction to a major foreign policy debate in the *Bundestag* during which “the speakers of German militarism” detailed their “program” – in reality, the debate addressed the prospects for German unification in view of the divided alliance system and unsolved security situation in Europe. The SED ZK’s thirtieth meeting dealt

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<sup>76</sup> BA/SAPMO, DY 30 IV 2/9.02/43, f. 1, 1.

with the Bonn debate and formulated a “clear assessment of West German militarism.” The “Information Service” provided its selected audience with a collection of suitable citations from both sides. West German Foreign Minister Clemens von Brentano (1886-1965) was quoted saying that “any demand for West Germany’s withdrawal from NATO is absurd,” and clarifying that “the phrase ‘reunification in freedom’ is about absolute values which need no qualification ... it is the goal of the federal government, to reunite the German nation in peace and unity, to provide the entire nation with the blessings of a state order based on the rule of law.”<sup>77</sup> These statements were juxtaposed with SED ZK proclamations deemed appropriate and effective to “unmask” the “aggressive plans” that “German imperialism” and “American finance capital” harboured: “German militarism is the greatest danger in Europe ... German imperialism has plunged Germany twice into the abyss” and now sought to go down this path a third time in its incessant “drive towards the East.”<sup>78</sup> West German hopes for a future democratization of Eastern Europe, and thus the demise of Soviet power as a result of the “politics of strength,” were denounced as “new edition of Hitler’s goals” and, moreover, interpreted as the “no longer concealed preparation of a war.”<sup>79</sup> History was employed whenever it seemed useful to claim that it was about to be repeated.

In addition to these improvements in the propaganda apparatus, the SED searched for alternative ways to optimize the campaign against a new “Barbarossa” which reached its climax in August 1961 with the party declaring that the erection of the Berlin wall was

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<sup>77</sup> BA/SAPMO, DY 30 IV 2/9.02/48, f. 1, 9.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 13.

the necessary “measure for the securing of peace in Europe.”<sup>80</sup> A brief look into the timely beginnings of the “Working Group of former Officers” in 1958, a group of veteran Wehrmacht officers glued together by the shared Eastern Front experience and by the commitment to the “defense of socialism,” illustrates the centrality of the Eastern Front memory for the SED’s anti-Western fear-and-threat-campaign.

#### PROFESSIONALIZING THE RHETORIC OF MILITANT PACIFISM: THE “WORKING GROUP OF FORMER OFFICERS” IN THE GDR

By the mid-1950s the SED reconsidered its 1948 decision to prohibit veteran organizations in East Germany<sup>81</sup> and came to realize the potential value of a loyal association of former Wehrmacht officers in the GDR. In 1954, when the FRG’s formal integration into the Western alliance system had become only a matter of time, the SED made an orchestrated effort to hinder this process by gathering former Wehrmacht officers from East and West Germany for an “all-German conversation” about the future of Germany. General Field Marshall Friedrich Paulus,<sup>82</sup> the former commander-in-chief

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<sup>80</sup> *Neues Deutschland*, August 13, 1961, 1.

<sup>81</sup> Paul Merker then had reasoned that the SED was “principally against such special organizations [Sonderorganisationen]” and that all that counted was “strengthen the party, the trade unions and the other existing mass organizations and to improve their work methods.” As long as these would see no real improvement it was “completely impossible” to think about the foundation of a new mass organization. See Paul Merker and Peter Peterson, „Massenorganisation ehemaliger Kriegsgefangener,“ 9 December 1948. BA/SAPMO DY30/IV 2/2027/35, 245.

<sup>82</sup> Paulus led the Sixth Army through the invasions of Poland, Belgium and France; he was involved with the plans for the invasion of Great Britain in 1940/41 and paid Hitler respect for his “successful” Western campaigns. In September 1940 he was appointed *Generalquartiermeister I im Generalstab des Heeres* (Carl-Heinrich von Stülpnagel’s successor) and was thus Generaloberst Franz Halder’s deputy. In Zossen he participated in the preparations for “Operation Barbarossa” although his relationship to Keitel and Jodl in the OKW was and remained strained. In January 1942 he became supreme commander of the Sixth Army who at this point stood near Charkov in the Ukraine. In May a second offensive of the Red Army against Charkov hinders the Sixth Army’s further advance, yet Paulus’ successful fight against the Soviet offensive earned him respect in the Nazi press at home. In the course of the German summer offensive of

of the Sixth Army in Stalingrad who had (initially reluctantly) joined NKFD and BDO after his surrender in February 1943, had returned to the GDR from Soviet captivity in 1953. The SED was eager to involve him in the campaign against the FRG's remilitarization and *Westbindung*. Ulbricht, in particular, had great hopes for the general as he was believed to exert some measure of influence on war veterans in both Germanys. He was the only former high-ranking general prominent enough to counter Erich von Manstein's apologetic "Lost Victories" campaign in West Germany. Both former generals had served as military leaders in Hitler's war on the Eastern Front and their opposing postwar careers – Manstein as unrepentant convicted war criminal, Paulus as transformed Hitler-opponent who had even testified for the Soviet prosecution against Hitler's generals before the Nuremberg Tribunal in 1945<sup>83</sup> – exemplify the divided veteran memory of the Eastern Front in postwar Germany.

On the initiative of the SED and the paramilitary so-called Quartered People's Police (KVP), and with the logistic assistance of the NDPD, Paulus invited a few dozen former Wehrmacht officers to the "First All-German Congress of Officers" scheduled to take place in January 1955 in Berlin. This and the following two meetings fulfilled none of the

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1942, the Sixth Army advanced towards the Volga River, in August Paulus ordered the attack of Stalingrad. By November 29, 1942, the Sixth Army was encircled in the city. Hitler denied Paulus the permission to retreat, Göring promised relieve by air. On January 8, Paulus refused to accept an offer by the Red Army to capitulate and hope to contribute thus to the stabilization of the Wehrmacht faltering southern front. On 30 January he was appointed GFM by Hitler, a day later Paulus capitulated with some 90,000 troops in the southern part of the divided cauldron. On February 2, the remaining troops in the northern part under general Strecker surrendered at last. While in Soviet captivity Paulus joined the NKFD and BDO after the failed assassination attempt of July 20, 1944 and supported and co-signed several calls for capitulation of the Wehrmacht. In 1946, still a POW, he acted as witness to the Soviet prosecution in the Nuremberg trials. He was released to the GDR in the summer of 1953 and resided in Dresden until his death in 1957.

<sup>83</sup> On the details see Peter Steinkamp, *Generalfeldmarschal Friedrich Paulus: ein unpolitischer Soldat?* (Erfurt: Sutton, 2001), 94-98.

hopes the SED had harbored. Although the first meeting of “87 former generals and officers of all branches of the military service” – among them high-ranking Waffen-SS officers – caught some attention in the Western media, it produced nothing more than a joint resolution on the “burning problems of our fatherland.” The German fatherland’s very existence was said to be on the line because the Paris Treaties (regulating West Germany’s NATO-integration and its limited sovereignty) were “a deadly threat to the unity and existence of our nation.”<sup>84</sup> In view of the West German impending NATO-membership, the resolution called on the “German Nation” to “refuse to fight under foreign flags,” insisted on the primacy of a policy for a unified and neutral Germany, and warned that one could speak of German sovereignty only “once we are able to organize our state and political life free from any attempts at foreign infiltration (*Überfremdung*).”<sup>85</sup> In a report filed directly to Ulbricht after the meeting, Paulus admitted that the resolution reflected the maximum of a possible consensus between the East and West German officers, and hinted at prevailing Nazi sentiments among the latter.<sup>86</sup> A second “Congress” held in June 1955, demanded of the “millions of German soldiers of two world wars” to offer “national resistance” against the permanent division of Germany. This time, history was invoked, namely the “dead comrades” of Second World War. The meeting ended with an oath:

We solemnly swear not to rest and not to pause, to retreat from no danger, to work and to strive for the unity, freedom and independence of our German fatherland – anywhere and anytime!  
This is what we owe our dead comrades!  
This is what we owe our youth!

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<sup>84</sup> Printed in Lapp, *Ulbricht’s Helfer*, 104.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. The word *Überfremdung* has a racial, nationalist connotation in the German language.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 102.



May Germany live – our common fatherland!<sup>87</sup>

The Paris Treaties had just passed the Bundestag and became effective on May 5, 1955. Thus, the first “all-German” veteran organization was little more than a well-organized propaganda flop. When Paulus died on February 1, 1957, the idea of an East German elitist veteran association seemed to have lost its protagonist. During the same month, the SED Politburo decided to gradually remove all former Wehrmacht officers from the armed forces in reaction to continuing discussions within the party about the political “reliability” of Hitler’s former soldiers – irrespective of the fact that most of them had joined the antifascist resistance on the Eastern Front.<sup>88</sup> According to the Politburo, the remaining 452 former Wehrmacht officers were to be removed until 1960. The decision to establish the “Working Group of former Officers” was partly prompted by the need to “absorb” the retirees before they could form a less controllable network of their own.<sup>89</sup> A second impulse for the founding of AeO came from General Paulus’ funeral that February. Otto Korfes (1884-1964), a former division-commander of the Sixth Army, NKFD member and later the head of the AeO, recalled the reunion of several veteran Eastern Front fighters (all of them former NKFD members as well) on this occasion and reported later that the group realized the “urgent need to create a permanent, organized fighting community of former officers, a community for the

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>88</sup> Niemetz, „Besiegt, gebraucht, gelobt, gemieden,“ 386f.

<sup>89</sup> See a memo dated November 1, 1958 to Erich Honecker, then head of the SED’s Division for Security Matters, most likely written by Colonel Wolf Stern, head of the recently founded (1958) Institute for Military Historiography, BA/SAPMO, DY 30 IV 2/12/7, 146.

defense of peace.”<sup>90</sup> Regardless of the truthfulness of this claim, this was, in a sentence, indeed to become the mission of the organization.

The AeO was more than a „pension club”<sup>91</sup> for retired Wehrmacht officers in the GDR. This elite veteran organization (membership by invitation), along with the simultaneously founded Institute for Military History in Potsdam, was to play a key role in the SED’s *Westarbeit* before and after the wall, and it embodied the translation of the lessons learned from the Eastern Front war into the socialist reality of the “other Germany,” the better German state.<sup>92</sup> It existed as long as the SED could profit from the instrumentalization of this memory. As soon as a major shift in West Germany’s foreign policy under Willy Brandt brought about the over-due official acknowledgement of the Soviet Union’s losses on the Eastern Front, AeO was dissolved in 1971.

Between October 1957 and January 1958 an initiative group gathered around retired Colonel Wolf Stern (1897-1961) outlined agenda and outlook of the new organization. Stern was as staff member of the Ministry of National Defense the central figure in this process. He was a Jewish-born veteran communist and Red Army volunteer with extended fighting experience from the Spanish Civil War and World War II.<sup>93</sup> Under his

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<sup>90</sup> Quoted in Lapp, *Ulbrichts Helfer*, 132.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Just how timely the founding was is also demonstrated by the fact, that only a short time later about 1000 former Stalingrad fighters met in Nuremberg for the first time to found the “*Bund der ehemaligen Stalingradkämpfer*” in October 1958. See Jahn, *Stalingrad erinnern*, 65f. The “Bund” began as early as 1960 to include Soviet victims in commemoration ceremonies. For example, delegations visited memorial sites for perished Soviet POWs in Germany. This peculiar memorial culture resulted from the perception of the common suffering of ordinary German and Soviet soldiers in a war that had come over them almost like a natural disaster of as a matter of fate. This resonates with the major themes of literary fiction about the war widely read by veterans in the 1950s. See Schornstheimer, *Die leuchtenden Augen der Frontsoldaten*. See also Chapter 5.III.

<sup>93</sup> He was awarded Soviet citizenship at the height of the Stalinist purges in 1937, and was closely involved with German POWs on the Eastern Front as staff member of the NKVD/Interior Ministry’s (MVD) POW

direction and under close supervision of the SED ZK's Division for Security Questions headed by Erich Honecker, a group of Eastern Front veterans met three times in 1957/58 to discuss and decide the work basis of AeO.<sup>94</sup> Among them were the "Stalingraders" Otto Korfes, a retired division-commander of the Sixth Army, Heinrich Homann (1911-1994), a retired major captured in Stalingrad, deputy president of the *Volkskammer* and later head of the NDPD, Luitpold Steidle(1898-1984)<sup>95</sup>, a retired regiment-commander also captured in Stalingrad, and between 1950 and 1958 Minister of Health as well as Martin Lattmann (1896-1978), another former Wehrmacht officer and Stalingrad veteran, and since 1952 employed as military advisor in the GDR's People's Police (VP). Stern knew all of these men personally; during the war, he had interrogated and "worked them" as POWs for the Soviet MVD. Initially, his authority allowed him to act as the "unofficial head" of the AeO.<sup>96</sup>

The minutes of the two preparatory meetings in October 1957 document the ideological motives and strategic intentions behind the AeO's founding. Realizing the degree to which Wehrmacht veterans in West Germany had organized themselves in networks in the course of the 1950s, Stern noted that these organizations had become

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division between 1943 and 1950 (for example, he was assigned to convince Paulus to join NKFD and BDO). Returning to the GDR in 1956, reserve officer Stern first worked as head of the political division in the Ministry of National Defense, then headed the initiative to found the AeO. He became the first director of the Institute for Military Historiography (1958-1961).

<sup>94</sup> The first meeting took place on October 3-4, 1957 in Dresden, BA/SAPMO DY 30 IV 2/12/7, 133-136. The second one took place on October 27, 1957 in Berlin, in Steidle's Ministry, BA/MA Freiburg, DVW 20, VA 0-01/5945, 1-7. The third meeting was the founding meeting on January 11, 1958, in the Central House of German-Soviet Friendship in Berlin, BA/MA Freiburg, DVW 20, VA 0-01/5945, 8-17.

<sup>95</sup> Steidle was a learned farmer, joined the NSDAP in 1933, WWI veteran, in 1934 reactivated as Reichswehr officer, 1941 colonel on the Eastern Front, 1943 captured at Stalingrad, co-founder and vice-president of BDO; 1949-1984 leading CDU member.

<sup>96</sup> „Aktennotiz für Genossen Honecker“ by Werner Hübner [Hü/St.] head of section in the SED ZK's *Abteilung Sicherheitsfragen*, November 1, 1958. BA/SAPMO, DY 30 IV 2/12/7, 148.

“instruments of the ideological preparation of the *Bundeswehr* and the population of West Germany towards revanchist aggression.” On the other hand, he absurdly claimed that the federal elections of 1957 – at the end of which Adenauer’s CDU/CSU had gained an absolute majority – indicated that “a great part of the working class and the intelligentsia as well stood against the Adenauer regime.” It was thus necessary and useful to unite former Wehrmacht officers in the GDR to “effectively counter this process of the ideological preparation of a new war by the militarists in the West through adequate writings and tracts in the press.”<sup>97</sup> Beyond this propagandistic task, the AeO was to pursue “personal and other connections with former officers in West Germany for the purpose of their involvement in the fight against nuclear war and aggression.”<sup>98</sup> Steidle suggested that the working group should bear the phrase “all-German” in its title to stress its function as “collecting basin for all progressive former officers ready to fight against ... a nuclear war against the countries of the socialist camp” in both Germanys.<sup>99</sup> Although well-argued, Steidle’s suggestion was not realized.

The second meeting detailed the ideological objectives and also negotiated possible “theses” of the key-note speech to be delivered by Steidle at the founding meeting. Stern summarized the motives of the AeO by demanding that:

- an intensified and organized fight of the former officers must be executed against the increasing ideological preparation of the West German population for a third world war by the West German soldiers associations;

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<sup>97</sup> Wolf Stern, “Aktennotiz ... Beratung der Frage der Gründung einer Arbeitsgemeinschaft ehemaliger Offiziere“, October 4, 1957, BA/SAPMO, DY 30 IV 2/12/7, 133.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 134.

- through a transformation of hearts and minds of the former officers in West Germany and in the *Bundeswehr* the insight prevails, that, beyond everything that divides us, peace must be preserved most of all.<sup>100</sup>

It was further decided that a monthly “information paper” would be published and that its “main feature” was to be “pugnacious, militant confrontation.”<sup>101</sup> It was to put the central historical event of World War II, the “anticommunist” expansionist aggression against the Soviet Union, at the forefront of the contemporarily needed “threat” response. In light of their “own experience and new political insights,” the members saw themselves “obliged to speak out,” especially to “people in the West.” Their task was to contrast soldierdom in the “imperialist camp” with that in the “peace camp:” “There, spirit of attack [and] blind subjugation, here, holy readiness to protect the result of reconstruction, our state.” The AeO was also to demonstrate that anticommunism was the “great folly of our century” (citing Thomas Mann again), and that socialism was the system of the future. Thus, the agenda was to “reckon with the past,” to “engage in a consistent, tough and clean, historically correct reckoning with the West,” to promote the “national idea everywhere,” and to organize the union of all former officers.<sup>102</sup>

This set of goals aptly highlights the line of attack of the AeO’s main instrument, the monthly publication *Mitteilungsblatt der Arbeitsgemeinschaft ehemaliger Offiziere*. If World War II had taught lessons these were, firstly, not to repeat history and, secondly, that only as defenders of “socialism and peace” could soldiers in postwar Germany become “real soldiers.” Anticommunism, meaning in this view the rejection of

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<sup>100</sup> Hermann Lewerenz, “Bericht über die zweite Sitzung der Initiativgruppe“, BA/MA Freiburg, DVW 20, VA 0-01/5945, 1.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 2f.

everything Soviet, was at the root of all evil in the twentieth century and the AeO was to contribute to its eradication by not only praising socialism's worth ("we want socialism, we have the moral and technical superiority, as the Trabant shows"<sup>103</sup>) but also by reckoning the rights and wrongs of the recent German past and present.

Indeed, the founding meeting was filled with the spirit of reckoning with the past and present. It took place on January 11, 1958 in the Central House of German-Soviet Friendship in Berlin *Unter den Linden*. The invited 31 participants, among them not only former Wehrmacht officers, but also deputies of the NDPD, SED and CDU, the president of the GDR supreme court, several university professors and media representatives,<sup>104</sup> elected an executive committee (headed by Korfes, Homann and Steidle) and agreed to publish a monthly newsletter. It was also decided that AeO members were to appear regularly on selected radio and television shows.<sup>105</sup> The statute of the AeO contained a preamble which detailed the threat emerging from the West (NATO, *Bundeswehr*) and stressed the need to counter the "anti-Soviet hate campaign" of the "press organs of the numerous tradition clubs – the militaristic associations of former soldiers and officers in West Germany." This Western hate campaign aimed at "whitewashing the generals and Hitler's OKW of their responsibility for the Second World War" and the militarists thereby hoped to regain peoples' confidence so that they could be signed up once again

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>104</sup> The complete list is contained in BA/SAPMO, DY 30 IV/2/12/7, 121-123.

<sup>105</sup> See the report by Wolf Stern in BA/SAPMO, DY 30 IV/2/12/7, 139-141. Beginning in June 1958, the AeO had a regular appearance on the state radio: on every third Friday of the month, they could air their own ten-minute long show entitled "Militärwesen und Politik." See BA/MA Freiburg, DVW 20, VA 0-01/5945, 79.

for “the planned aggressive war.” Among the AeO’s primary tasks was thus to publish “truthful historical research” on the causes and events of World War II.<sup>106</sup>

As most speakers during the founding ceremony recalled the days of their collaboration as POWs in the NKFD, the experience of transformation from Hitler’s warrior to the Soviet Union’s soldier for peace was celebrated as *the* life-turning experience bonding the Eastern Front veterans in the GDR. Otto Korfes, soon-to-be-elected first president of the AeO, reminded his comrades that it was their “special obligation” to fight against a “third world war” by providing a “scientifically exact description of the first and the second world war” and by “unmasking those interested in a third world war.” Korfes recalled the “historical role” of the NKFD during World War II, a committee founded in a “comparably dangerous [*sic*] situation of the German nation.” He stressed that the AeO was no “tradition club” (*Traditionsverein*); it rather assembled “all those former officers who are able and ready to stand up against the war campaign of the West by word and writing.”<sup>107</sup> All of the present “Stalingraders” and NKFD veterans had “learned and already contributed for a decade and a half in outstanding positions to the societal life in the GDR.”<sup>108</sup> Steidle as well stressed the “positive fact, that after almost fifteen years such a considerable number of NKFD members ... gathered again to fight for the preservation of peace.”<sup>109</sup> The AeO was thus explicitly presented as the continuation of the war-time antifascist project on the Eastern

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<sup>106</sup> „Statut der Arbeitsgemeinschaft ehemaliger Offiziere“, BA/MA Freiburg, DVW 20, VA 0-01/5945, 59-63, quote on 59.

<sup>107</sup> BA/SAPMO, DY 30 IV/2/12/7, 139.

<sup>108</sup> Hermann Lewerenz, “Bericht über die zweite Sitzung der Initiativgruppe“, BA/MA Freiburg, DVW 20, VA 0-01/5945, 10.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 11.

Front. Although the rhetoric focused on the consequences of nuclear war for Germany and on the resultant need to advocate a “neutral and unified” Germany, the arguments were infused with ritualistic references to the “lessons of the past” learned by German communists during their fight on the side of the Red Army against Hitler’s Wehrmacht.

The key instrument for the transportation of this message was the *Mitteilungsblatt*. It was edited by a group of former Wehrmacht officers some of which had until recently served in the NVA and were now subsequently released based on the SED Politburo’s decree of February 15, 1957.<sup>110</sup> This group of believed military-historical experts also constituted the core of the newly founded Institute for Military History in Potsdam. According to a memorandum filed to Erich Honecker’s Division for Security Questions in November 1958, the Institute soon attained a central role in the AeO’s activities as it “dealt with problems of World War II and especially with current military-political themes.”<sup>111</sup> Most articles of the *Mitteilungsblatt* as well as manuscripts for radio and television appearances of AeO representatives were produced here. Already during the first few months, the members of the AeO gave several talks all over the GDR and appeared on television shows with “statements on current military-political events in West Germany,” for example on the supposed *Bundestag* decision to arm the *Bundeswehr* with nuclear weapons.<sup>112</sup> The activities “resonated in the West.”<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Cf. Niemetz, „Besiegt, gebraucht, gelobt, gemieden.“

<sup>111</sup> „Aktennotiz für den Genossen Honecker betr. Tätigkeit der Arbeitsgemeinschaft ehemaliger Offiziere“ by Werner Hübner [Hü./St.], 1 November 1958, BA/SAPMO, DY 30 IV/2/12/7, 146-149, quote on 147. „This institute thus fulfills all the central tasks of the AeO,“ the report concluded. Ibid., 147.

<sup>112</sup> See for example an AeO statement of 26 March 1958 in reaction to the *Bundestag* decision on 25 March 1958 to arm the *Bundeswehr* with nuclear weapons unless a global disarmament agreement was found. It never came to the nuclear armament of the *Bundeswehr* after the Kennedy-Khrushchev accords of 1963. The statement compared this decision to the Enabling Laws of the Reichstag for Hitler in 1933 which “led



From the very beginning of its existence, AeO advocated the “true story” of Stalingrad and followed the SED’s master narrative of “Operation Barbarossa” as the worst crime of Hitlerfascism. Between March and June 1958 alone, AeO members delivered six speeches on “Stalingrad – a historical lesson for the German nation.” The audiences varied; among them were railway-workers and NVA officers, students and members of the faculty of the university in Jena and “the intelligentsia of the town” in Schwerin.<sup>114</sup> The AeO also commemorated the seventeenth anniversary of June 22, 1941 in 1958 with a special radio show aired on the *Deutschlandsender* (the GDR’s official station for propaganda in the West). The program dealt with the “Hitler-Wehrmacht’s attack on the Soviet Union and detailed its provocative preparation.” It also analyzed “certain political parallels to the present which derive from the Bonn politics of atomic war.”<sup>115</sup> Aside from talks and radio shows, the AeO launched its monthly *Mitteilungsblatt* in May 1958. Five thousand issues were printed, 3,500 for readers in the GDR, and 1,500 for targeted postal delivery in the West.<sup>116</sup> By 1966, these numbers had changed drastically: now most issues were distributed in the West (an average of 37,000 per month) and only circa 2,500 were sold monthly in the GDR.<sup>117</sup> Additionally, it was mailed

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to war.” The “enabling of the Bonn *Bundestag* for nuclear armament gives Adenauer and the generals who have learned nothing from history much more dangerous weapons in the hands, which will render even worse consequences.” BA/MA Freiburg, DVW 20, VA 0-01/5945, 64.

<sup>113</sup> BA/SAPMO, DY 30 IV/2/12/7, 146.

<sup>114</sup> “Protokoll über die 5. Sitzung des Vorstandes der Arbeitsgemeinschaft ehemaliger Offiziere am 18.6.1958,” BA/MA Freiburg, DVW 20, VA 0-01/5945, 77.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>117</sup> „Bericht über die Arbeitsgemeinschaft ehemaliger Offiziere im Jahre 1966,” 15 December 1966. BA/MA Freiburg, DVW 20, VA 0-01/5951, 130.

to several Western newspapers and to all embassies in the GDR.<sup>118</sup> It appears that the *Mitteilungsblatt* received considerable attention in West Germany, particularly among veterans and military personnel. It was both respected and feared for the sophisticated style, professional appeal, and thematic diversity.<sup>119</sup>

In stark contrast to West German veteran publications, the *Mitteilungsblatt* stressed the illegal, aggressive nature of the past war.<sup>120</sup> Articles addressing historical events mainly focused on the Eastern Front and Stalingrad, and it was internally agreed that these texts “may not deal with mere memories, but such articles must grapple with the militaristic publications of West Germany.”<sup>121</sup> Thus, the *Mitteilungsblatt* was probably the most Western oriented publication in the GDR. Constant references to events, developments and persons in the West were to underline the all-German dimension of the inner-German conflicts over the Wehrmacht legacy, remilitarization and bloc integration. Until 1961, the year of the twentieth anniversary of “Barbarossa,” the battle of Stalingrad dominated this discourse. It was celebrated as the event which had opened the “Path to the Truth”<sup>122</sup> and stood as “Symbol for Life.”<sup>123</sup> Echoing SED propaganda, Stalingrad was

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<sup>118</sup> Among the newspapers and magazines were *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Die Welt*, *Der Spiegel*, *Deutsche Soldaten-Zeitung*, *Frau und Frieden* in West Germany, and *New York Herald Tribune*, *Daily Mail*, *The Times*, *Humanité*, *Le Monde* in the „capitalist world“ as well as all major press organs in the Soviet Union. It was further sent to „representatives of Western militarism,” e.g. Eugen Gerstenmaier (then president of the Bundestag), Franz-Josef Strauß (Minister of Defense). Several politicians, academics and writers in England, France, Austria, Sweden and Belgium received the *Mitteilungsblatt*, partly upon request. See the list in „Bericht über die Tätigkeit der Arbeitsgemeinschaft ehemaliger Offiziere im Jahre 1961,” BA/MA DVW 20, VA-0-01/5954, 56-58.

<sup>119</sup> „Thesen zum mündlich erstatteten Tätigkeitsbericht der Arbeitsgemeinschaft ehemaliger Offiziere für die Zeit von Oktober 1965 bis November 1966,” BA/MA Freiburg, DVW 20, VA 0-01/5945, 191.

<sup>120</sup> See the detailed discussion in Chapter 7. II.

<sup>121</sup> Memo „Betr. Mitteilungsblatt, eigentliches Organ der AeO,” [1960] DVW 20, VA 0-01/5945, 139.

<sup>122</sup> Heinrich Homann, „Der Weg in die Wahrheit,” in *Mitteilungsblatt der Arbeitsgemeinschaft ehemaliger Offiziere*, 3/1958, 1-3.

<sup>123</sup> Heinrich Homann, „Stalingrad – Symbol des Lebens,” in *Mitteilungsblatt*, 2/1959, 3f.

not only the central metaphor for the life-transforming experience of “reflection and return” but also the cataclysmic manifestation of socialism’s historical superiority. On the occasion of the fifteenth anniversary of the battle, retired major Homann, a leading AeO member, rhapsodized about the meaning of Stalingrad as a “symbol for life:”

On the battlefield of Stalingrad it was written in the book of history:  
 He who marches against socialism on the side of imperialism and militarism, marches into his own doom, he lost, looses and will always lose: his possessions, his honor, and his life.  
 Socialism is invincible, he who raises his hands against it, will perish.  
 Stalingrad is the symbol of this truth. And likewise it shall remain a warning symbol of tragedy for all those who don’t want to see the truth.  
 For our German country and its inhabitants, Stalingrad is this truth and that is why it became the symbol of life, the symbol of the victory over errors and blunders of one’s own past, symbol of the path into the new, really free, thus better and stronger German fatherland without monopolists and militarists.<sup>124</sup>

Homann recalled the “oath of Stalingrad” sworn by the founders of the NKFD in 1943: “Never again imperialist war.” In 1958, this oath meant the “fight of all good Germans against German militarism, against the Bonn preparations for nuclear war.” It symbolized the “fight of all good Germans for a peace treaty ... so that finally a wall [*sic*] may be erected against a new war.”<sup>125</sup> A “peace treaty” based on the Soviet proposal of a “neutral and united peaceful Germany,” would have formally ended the state of war between the allies and Germany. It dominated the SED’s anti-Western propaganda throughout the 1950s until 1961.<sup>126</sup> Yet, when in 1961 still no peace treaty was in sight as a “wall against new war,” the SED erected a concrete wall and found unlimited support for this measure

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<sup>124</sup> Heinrich Homann, „Stalingrad – Symbol des Lebens,“ in *Mitteilungsblatt*, 2/1959, 4.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> See in general Werner Maibaum, *Geschichte der Deutschlandpolitik* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, 1998), 31-39. The conflict over a peace-treaty culminated in the Berlin-Crises of 1958-1961. See for a detailed overview and analysis Hope Harrison, “Ulbricht and the Concrete ‘Rose’: New Archival Evidence on the Dynamics of Soviet-East German Relations and the Berlin Crisis, 1958-61” (*CWHP Working Paper no. 5*). And Hope Harrison, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall. Soviet-East German Relations 1953-1961* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003). And Vladislav Zubok, “Khrushchev and the Berlin Crisis (1958-62)” (=CWHP Working Paper no. 6).

among the AeO. To former Wehrmacht officers claiming to have “reflected and returned” from the wrongful path in the abyss of Stalingrad, the road from Stalingrad in 1943 to Berlin in 1961 was a continuum in history. In 1961, the building of the wall was perceived the last measure to secure the “Eastern Front” against a renewed attack from the West.

The AeO contributed significantly to the effectiveness of this argument by devoting much space and thought to the “right” interpretation of the battle of Stalingrad and the role of the German soldier in the war on the Eastern Front. This, again, took place in dialogue with Western (mis-)representations of the battle as the memoir and veteran literature there either blamed Hitler’s stubborn incompetence for the disaster or questioned Stalingrad’s strategic role as the decisive turning point of the war – all of which served ultimately only one purpose, namely to “make Stalingrad, the first and the second world war forgotten in order to launch a third.”<sup>127</sup>

It was thus not enough to publish suitable articles and commemoration pieces in the *Mitteilungsblatt*; it was also insufficient to deal with Stalingrad merely in terms of its military history. Rather, only “the most general lessons let us Germans understand Stalingrad correctly.”<sup>128</sup> For these reasons and certainly to the satisfaction of the SED, AeO chief Otto Korfes initiated a collectively authored book on the history of Stalingrad

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<sup>127</sup> Heinrich Homann, „Stalingrad – Symbol des Lebens,“ in *Mitteilungsblatt*, 2/1959, 3. See also Anonymus, „Memento Stalingrad,“ in *Mitteilungsblatt*, 1/1961, 12f., which further details the „falsification of history by the German general staff.“ The analysis of this anonymous author (from West Germany – all West German contributors remained anonymous) concluded that Western historiography sought to minimize the events at Stalingrad as “non-fateful German partial defeat” and instead celebrated the victories of the Western allies in Africa as decisive turning points of the war. Ibid., 12.

<sup>128</sup> Heinrich Homann, „Stalingrad – Symbol des Lebens,“ in *Mitteilungsblatt*, 2/1959, 3.

in February 1960.<sup>129</sup> In a lengthy memo, Korfes explained the necessity to write such a book and stressed the contemporary context in which such a work of history belonged:

On the History of Stalingrad: Reasons why it is necessary to write the history of Stalingrad  
The battle of Stalingrad has the greatest importance among the battles of World War II. It is not a battle like so many others, it is not just a military defeat on the one side and a victory on the other, it has rather marked the sustaining, historical decision against German imperialism. For the German-fascist Wehrmacht the battle meant a severe tactical failure as it ended with the loss of the city and the sixth army. It meant a consequential operative flop ... It was, most of all, a far-reaching strategic defeat because it threw overboard the military plans of the year 1942 and thereby the entire war plan of the general staff and the OKW; it wrested from the Germans once and for all the strategic initiative and inaugurated final defeat. As every major strategic decision bears a more or less noticeable political effect so the one at Stalingrad had particularly severe and decisive political consequences. Stalingrad numbed the willingness to fight among the fascist allies, shattered the belief in victory of the German people on the one hand, and incited the already long-lasting resistance fight within Germany and in the occupied territories to highest fervency. The battle proved to the world the superior powers of the Soviet army over the fascists ... and showed the world the politically so important fact that the Wehrmacht was vincible. The intrusion of the German-fascist troops to the Volga River and the Caucasus unmasked German imperialism with its rapacity and far-reaching plans for conquest. The battle of Stalingrad revealed the irrationality of the aims of German imperialism and militarism and became the symbol of the lawful [*gesetzmäßig*] victory of the fight for freedom over oppression, of progress over the political reaction. It taught the German nation the lesson that an aggressive policy of plunder leads inevitably to catastrophe.<sup>130</sup>

While the centrality of the battle of Stalingrad for the outcome of World War II was to become the central historiographical leitmotif of the book, the central propagandistic aim was to counter Western attempts to deprive the Soviet Union of its historic role as prime victim and victor of Hitler fascism.<sup>131</sup> Even more so since the sole purpose of this betrayal was to “prepare a new war against the Soviet Union.” If Western historiography claimed that Stalingrad was a military turning point of little relevance then it inferred “that the political consequences, too, were insignificant, and superficial, and only temporary.”

<sup>129</sup> Wolf Stern, Memorandum, November 12, 1958, BA/SAPMO, DY 30 IV 2/12/7, 165-167.

<sup>130</sup> Otto Korfes, “Zur Geschichte von Stalingrad,” BA/MA Freiburg DVW 20 VA 0-01/5945, 127f.

<sup>131</sup> The project also competed with a book in the making by Paulus’ son Ernst Alexander – residing in West Germany – who initially was approached as possible collaborator on the AeO Stalingrad project. See the 1 November 1958 memo to Erich Honecker BA/SAPMO DY 30 IV 2/12/7, 148. These attempts seem to have failed; Ernst Alexander Paulus published a biography of his father (together with Walter Görnitz) and his version of Stalingrad based on Paulus’ personal papers in 1964. See Walter Görnitz, Ernst Alexander Paulus, Friedrich Paulus, eds., *Paulus und Stalingrad. Lebensweg des Generalfeldmarschalls Friedrich Paulus. Mit den Aufzeichnungen aus dem Nachlaß, Briefen und Dokumenten* (Frankfurt/Main, Bonn: Athenäum, 1964).

These efforts thus “attacked the impression and image that Stalingrad has left in the memory of the world.”<sup>132</sup> Korfes might have been right about the popular memory but he erred with regards to military history. The battle of Stalingrad was not the decisive battle on the Eastern Front – the *military* “turn” of the war in the East had occurred already a year earlier before Moscow.<sup>133</sup> And still, in West Germany Stalingrad was remembered as the epiphany for the suffering of the German soldier in World War II, his fateful “*Opfergang*,” and as the “beginning of the end.”<sup>134</sup> Korfes was correct to realize that this Stalingrad memory was far from acknowledging the “leading role” of the Soviet Union in the fight against fascism. While the universal suffering of German *and* Soviet soldiers was a popular theme in the 1950s veteran literature, Korfes’ Western comrades were far from concluding that the Wehrmacht’s defeat at Stalingrad had “revealed the irrationality of the aims of German imperialism,” or even symbolized the historical superiority of socialism over the “political reaction.” This refusal to accept the Soviet Union’s role as prime victim and victor was ample evidence for Western plans to attack it once again:

All these attempts derive from the plan to make the peoples of the West and particularly of West Germany psychologically ripe for an armed attack against the Soviet Union and communism. A description of the real events which led the German troops to the Volga River and let them perish there, supports the fight against the hateful lies of anti-communism and becomes a worthy weapon against militarism and in the fight for peace.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Otto Korfes, “Zur Geschichte von Stalingrad,” BA/MA Freiburg DVW 20 VA 0-01/5945, 128f.

<sup>133</sup> Gerd R. Ueberschär, „Das Scheitern des ‚Unternehmens Barbarossa.‘ Der deutsch-sowjetische Krieg vom Überfall bis zur Wende vor Moskau im Winter 1941/42,“ in Ueberschär, Wette, eds., *Der deutsche Überfall auf die Sowjetunion*. On the historiography see Gerd R. Ueberschär, „Die Schlacht von Stalingrad in der deutschen Historiographie,“ in: Wette, Ueberschär, eds., *Stalingrad*, 192-204. Soviet historiography claimed all along that Stalingrad was the „decisive battle“ of World War II, see for example Nikolai I. Krylov, *Stalingrad. Die entscheidende Schlacht des zweiten Weltkriegs* [transl. Lew Gurwitsch] (Moskau: Verlag Progreß, 1981). Wassilij I. Tschuikow, ed., *Stalingrad. Lehren der Geschichte* (Moskau: Verlag Progreß, 1979). And Andrej Eremenko, *Tage der Entscheidung* (Berlin: Deutscher Militärverlag, 1964).

<sup>134</sup> Norbert Frei, “Stalingrad im Gedächtnis der (West-) Deutschen,“ in Jahn, ed., *Stalingrad erinnern*, 10.

<sup>135</sup> Otto Korfes, “Zur Geschichte von Stalingrad,” BA/MA Freiburg DVW 20 VA 0-01/5945, 129.

Thus, the book was to become a “weapon against imperialism and militarism.”<sup>136</sup> Despite detailed plans for structure and contents of the work as well as participating authors,<sup>137</sup> the Stalingrad project did not materialize for unknown reasons.<sup>138</sup> Instead, Heinz Bergschicker’s illustrated and widely read history of *Stalingrad* fulfilled the essence of Korfes’ demands and appeared in 1960.<sup>139</sup> Korfes’ considerations and priorities were all but irrelevant because they set the tone for several accordant reports, essays and commentaries on the history of Stalingrad published in the AeO’s *Mitteilungsblatt*.<sup>140</sup>

As their counterparts in West Germany, the “Stalingraders” in the GDR remembered the suffering and sacrifices of soldiers, but remained largely silent about their responsibility. In very general terms, all articles inferred that Wehrmacht soldiers had ventured a wrong path by participating in “Operation Barbarossa.” Yet, far from addressing the systematically executed “war of extermination” on the Eastern Front, the

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 132-136.

<sup>138</sup> The project was long in the making. A memo by Wolf Stern in the files of the SED Division for Security Questions reported that already in May of 1958, only a few months after the AeO’s founding, Stern met the East German emissary Ernst P. who in turn had met with former Wehrmacht lieutenant general Arthur Schmidt (the former chief of staff of the Sixth Army and the only surviving general who had led the operations in Stalingrad). Schmidt had kept a diary and was willing to cooperate on the book project anonymously in order to “denounce the untrue assertions in Manstein’s memoir ‘Lost Victories.’” Stern also reported to Honecker’s division that Schmidt turned down the offer to become head of the *Bund der Stalingradkämpfer* in the FRG because “he did not want participate in the abuse of Stalingrad fighters for a warmongering campaign.” Wolf Stern, Memorandum, 12 November 1958, BA/SAPMO, DY 30 IV 2/12/7, 165-167. It seems that in 1960, when the book project was picked up by Korfes, Schmidt was no longer on the list of possible authors. See the list of “collaborators” in Otto Korfes, “Zur Geschichte von Stalingrad,” BA/MA Freiburg DVW 20 VA 0-01/5945, 136..

<sup>139</sup> Heinz Bergschicker’s illustrated history of the battle of Stalingrad, first published in 1960 (10,000 copies), was republished in a second edition in 1960/61, in a third in 1967. Heinz Bergschicker, *Stalingrad. Eine Chronik in Bildern* (Berlin (Ost): Verlag der Nation, 1960).

<sup>140</sup> Besides the articles by Homann mentioned above, fn. 190/191, see also Anonymus, „Memento Stalingrad,“ in *Mitteilungsblatt*, 1/1961, 12f.; Otto Korfes, „Feldmarschall Paulus und die Tragödie von Stalingrad,“ *ibid.*, 5-7; Helmut Welz, „Stalingrad – Ende und Wende,“ *ibid.*, 8-9. Egbert von Frankenberg, „General Foertsch und die Wahrheit über die große Schlacht an der Wolga,“ *Mitteilungsblatt*, 3/1963, 14f.

texts held up the “red version”<sup>141</sup> of the “Wehrmacht myth” in the GDR: crimes were committed, but it remained unclear who was responsible for them. In some cases, the *Mitteilungsblatt* carried photographs of crime scenes: “Fuhrer’s soldiers” humiliating Polish Jews, suffering Soviet partisans, murdering SS men, starving Soviet POWs, the murderers of Lidice, shootings in Lodz.<sup>142</sup> Still, if texts dealt with the responsibility of ordinary Wehrmacht soldiers – the guilt of OKW and General Staff was undisputed and repeatedly addressed<sup>143</sup> – personal guilt was found to have been the result of passive partaking, not active deeds.

It was in fact the “subjective innocence of many” and the “objective guilt of all” which represented the “tragedy of the Wehrmacht,” as Luitpold Steidle, Minister of Health and himself a Stalingrad veteran, had put it in his key note address at the AeO’s founding meeting. The text was reproduced prominently in the first issue of the *Mitteilungsblatt*. According to Steidle, the first lesson of World War II was therefore that soldiers must learn to “think politically:”

If the political development in Germany led from one military adventure to the next in this century then also because the German officer was never conscientious of the fact that with the decision to become a professional soldiers he had made a political decision of great consequences. ... This is what makes the path of the Wehrmacht so tragic: the subjective innocence of the many cannot outweigh the objective guilt of all. Thus the path of the former German Wehrmacht led inescapably to the dishonor and shame to having fought under Hitler’s flag in spite of all bravery and comradeship of many; it led

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<sup>141</sup> See Hartewig, „Militarismus und Antifaschismus,“ 251.

<sup>142</sup> *Mitteilungsblatt*, 11/1963, 12; 3/1965, 2f. The captions are: „SS while murdering hostages,“ „That is how Soviet POWs were abused in German camps,“ „the murderers of Lidice: some of the “heros” [ordinary Wehrmacht soldiers] of the past, where are they today?“ 6/1966, 6. Here the caption under a photo of a Jew and two Wehrmacht soldiers standing behind him: “A Jew had to dig his own grave and is now waiting for his execution.”

<sup>143</sup> See for example Rudolf Bamler, “Die Kriegsschuld des deutschen Generalstabs,” in *Mitteilungsblatt*, 8/1958, 3f. Anonymus, „Das Pestlaboratorium des deutschen Generalstabs,“ in *Mitteilungsblatt*, 7-9. Gerhard Kehrenscherper, „Dieselbe Grundhaltung: Nationalsozialistische Gewaltverbrechen damals – Vorbereitung eines Atomwaffenkrieges heute!“ in *Mitteilungsblatt* 2/1965, 9-12. These and other texts stressed in particular the personal continuities from the Wehrmacht to the *Bundeswehr*.



into national catastrophe in 1945 whose causes – and one must finally see that – lay much deeper and farther back than the crime of the German attack.<sup>144</sup>

This was a comfortable confession of – collective – responsibility for it made it possible to fully escape the question of a soldier's personal conduct. Not that a soldier's individual experience didn't matter; it did to a great extent when it came to illustrating the transformation from Hitler's soldier to antifascist fighter on the Eastern Front, as Steidle further elaborated. Moreover, his romanticized image of this transformation extended this experience to "every German soldier." Yet, even when specific events were said to have initiated an individual "reflection-and-return"- process, these recollections contained no concrete confrontations with concrete crimes. At most, "one" remembered the experience as bystander if not exclusively as victim:

At one point in time, every German soldier certainly experienced a deeply unsettling moment: next to the dying comrade or during an air-raid while on furlough, facing starving and begging children in a conquered town, behind the barbed wire of a POW camp or at the first sight of the completely burned down and ruined homeland. In such moments it spoke with a clarity to us that was probably decisive for the rest of our live: 'That is *not* how it should have come, I did *not* want this, such a war is madness and a crime.' And from that moment the deeper insight might have derived and, resulting from it, the torturous question: 'was my soldierly behaviour correct?'<sup>145</sup>

Assuming that many soldiers must have experienced such a life-altering moment, Steidle warned that "one must not brush aside these memories today," even if living life might become easier by forgetting. Rather, they must seek to understand the "political context." The call for the political, i.e. biased, soldier was the fundament of the AeO's commitment to the socialist homeland. When it came to "defending and protecting" this land, the "Stalingraders" remained faithful to the official party line, even and especially so when the SED decided to wall in the "state of the workers and farmers" in August 1961. Just as

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<sup>144</sup> Luitpold Steidle, "Die Aufgaben der Arbeitsgemeinschaft," in *Mitteilungsblatt*, 1/1958, 3.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

*Neues Deutschland* inaugurated an orchestrated campaign aimed at directly linking June 22, 1941 to the necessity of building the “antifascist protection wall,” the AeO contributed with its military-historical expertise and political commitment to the ideological justification of the August 1961 measures.

#### OPERATION „CONCRETE ROSE:” THE BUILDING OF THE BERLIN WALL

It was certainly historical coincidence that the SED decided it was time to “protect” the GDR against the “enemies of socialism and peace” just in the summer of 1961, exactly twenty years after the beginning of “Operation Barbarossa.” Yet, its propaganda apparatus knew how to exquisitely instrumentalize this coincidence in order to justify its own people’s immurement. We know today that the factual reasons for the decision to build the wall – cynically code-named “Operation Rose” by SED and the Ministry for State Security (MfS) – lay in a series of severe economic problems, in the wide-spread resistance against the renewed collectivization drive kicked off in 1958 and, most of all, in the resultant massive flight of East Germans to the West.<sup>146</sup>

In the early summer of 1961, in a plethora of articles, reports and memoir texts, the official print media dutifully transported the events of June 22, 1941 and the horrors it had entailed into the living rooms of every East German family and drew – always alert – the appropriate parallels to the present. The fact that Moscow’s various “proposals for a

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<sup>146</sup> Since 1949, over three million East Germans had fled the GDR, the numbers oscillated between 170,000 and 400,000 per year and peaked in 1953 (408,100), 1956 (396,300), 1961 (233,500 only until August). Numbers based on Helge Heidemeyer, *Flucht und Zuwanderung aus der SBZ/DDR 1945/49-1961. Die Flüchtlingspolitik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland bis zum Bau der Mauer* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1994), 44. See in general, Bernd Eisenfeld, Roger Engelmann, *13. August 1961: Mauerbau. Fluchtbewegung und Machtsicherung* (Bremen: Edition Temmen, 2001). For a thorough discussion of Ulbricht’s initiative and motives to erect a wall and the Soviet response, see Harrison, *Driving the Soviets up the Wall*.

peace-treaty with Germany” had been rejected by the West ever since 1952 (because their realization would not have resulted in the “neutralization of a unified Germany” but in the abolition of the West German democracy) was interpreted by the SED as the product of Bonn’s alleged aggressive policy towards the East, showing no interest to end the state of war with the Soviet Union. June 22, however, taught that enmity with the Soviet Union meant “national disaster,” and that only German-Soviet friendship meant “peace and fortune.”<sup>147</sup> Consequently, the SED’s calculated invocation of the war on the Eastern Front reached its peak between June and August 1961. It did not take much in the heads of the SED propagandists to connect the call for German-Soviet friendship – the “pledge for Germany’s bright future” – with the claim that only the “conclusion of a peace-treaty makes a new June 22 impossible.”<sup>148</sup>

The central message of this campaign was that in the GDR the lessons of history had been learned. In following these lessons, the SED acted in the “national interests” of Germany while Adenauer’s policy was anti-national. Here the use of history for the political legitimization of the wall was merged with the campaign to forge a *national* identity for East Germans in reaction and response to the permanent division of Germany.<sup>149</sup> A “historical documentation” in the June 20, 1961 edition of *Neues Deutschland* contrasted the events in West and East Germany between 1918 and 1961

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<sup>147</sup> “Was uns der 22. Juni 1941 lehrt. Eine historische Dokumentation zum 20. Jahrestag des faschistischen Überfalls auf die Sowjetunion,” in *Neues Deutschland*, June 20, 1961, 3.

<sup>148</sup> “Der Abschluß eines Friedensvertrages macht einen neuen 22. Juni unmöglich. Rede des Ministers für Nationale Verteidigung, Armneegeneral Heinz Hoffman, anläßlich des 20. Jahrestages des Überfalls auf die Sowjetunion,” in *Neues Deutschland*, June 22, 1961, 5. A long version of this article (60 pages) was published the same year: Heinrich Hoffmann, Evgenij A. Boltin, Waldemar Verner, *Abschluß eines Friedensvertrages macht neuen 22. Juni unmöglich* (Berlin (Ost): Deutscher Militärverlag, 1961).

<sup>149</sup> Cf. Joanna McKay, *The Official Concept of the Nation in the Former GDR. Theory, Pragmatism and the Search for Legitimacy* (Brookfield: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1998).

and demonstrated what “history has taught us.” The Western enmity with the Soviet Union – in 1945 the Western allies supposedly negotiated with the Wehrmacht whether to “continue the war on the Eastern Front” to topple the Soviet regime in Moscow, in 1949 Adenauer “sold out the West of Germany as imperialistic military build-up territory for a third crusade against the Soviet Union,” and so on – reached its highpoint in 1961. That year Bonn allegedly responded to repeated “offers for a peace-treaty” with the

call for nuclear weapons, for their stationing on the GDR border, for further strengthening NATO, for revanch instead of peace, for insecurity instead of security. And the *Bundeswehr* is singing:

*Bright is our smile,  
merry is our courage,  
red is our blade,  
from the Bolsheviks' blood.*

Do the twenty-year-olds who are singing this know where songs like these have brought their fathers? Do they know that the birch crosses [on the graves] of new ‘Barbarossa’-adventurers will not stand in Stalingrad but in Cologne?

*History teaches us: enmity with the Soviet Union was always a national catastrophe for Germany. It brought our nation to the brink of its physical existence. In Bonn, however, this suicidal policy of anti-Sovietism is still being advocated. Because of their revanchist dreams Adenauer's unteachable generals of defeat are ready to burn West Germany in a nuclear war. In the name of the nation: It must finally be done with this policy and with these ill-fated plans of the militaristic clique!*<sup>150</sup>

In contrast, the GDR was the “first true peaceful state of German history” and once again Stalin is quoted with an obscure remark on the equal suffering and fighting will of Germans and Russians in World War II.<sup>151</sup> While in the West, the anti-Soviet campaign had reached its peak in the eyes of the SED in 1961, in the GDR the efforts to “secure

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<sup>150</sup> “Was uns der 22. Juni 1941 lehrt. Eine historische Dokumentation zum 20. Jahrestag des faschistischen Überfalls auf die Sowjetunion,” in *Neues Deutschland*, June 20, 1961, 3. [Emphasis in original]. The text reads in German: Hell ist unser Lachen, Froh ist unser Mut, Rot ist unsere Klinge vom Bolschewistenblut.“ It was impossible to determine whether this song really circulated among *Bundeswehr* soldiers and where it originated.

<sup>151</sup> In a telegram congratulating the SED to the founding of the GDR, Stalin proclaimed on October 13, 1949: the founding of the GDR was a “turning point in European history,” and he stressed that of the German and the Russian peoples would afford the same determination with which they had fought each other in World War II, for the fight for peace, peace in Europe would be secured.” Printed in *Dokumente zur Deutschlandpolitik der Sowjetunion*, vol. 1, 239.

peace” were intensified. Ulbricht is quoted with a statement made on June 15, 1961 before the “world press:”

‘The proposal of the Soviet government gives the German people a great opportunity to come to a peaceful life and to the national rebirth of Germany as peace-loving and democratic state.’  
*History teaches us: friendship with the Soviet Union always brought the German people fortune and peace. Even in the darkest times the Soviet Union [in fighting Hitler] acted in the interest of our nation as well. In the GDR, the lessons of the past were drawn consequentially. The German-Soviet friendship became a matter of heart to all our people. The roots of the predatory anti-national wars against the Soviet Union and other nations in Europe are extinguished once and for all. In the name of the nation: This policy must become the policy of all of Germany! That is why we need a peace-treaty.*<sup>152</sup>

Any anti-Soviet agitation and action was directed against German national interests too, the SED claimed in 1961, as it had claimed it ever since the end of the war. It was thus prudent and opportune to connect the campaign against another “Barbarossa” with the propaganda for the socialist SED-state as “example” for all of Germany.

A series of articles published on and around June 22, 1961 dealt with the reasons for the defeat of the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front. Apart from the various military-strategic (Hitler the incompetent commander, failed Blitzkrieg-calculations), technical (underestimation of the Red Army’s capacities) and ideological arguments (unjust wars are always doomed, socialism’s historical superiority, victory historically predetermined), the principle intention of these texts was to prove and predict that another such “crusade” was doomed as well.<sup>153</sup> A commemoration speech by Nikita Khrushchev appeared under the title “Every new aggressor would share Hitler’s fate” on June 22, 1961.<sup>154</sup> The Soviet leader reiterated that those who hated communism must be aware that “1961 is not 1941”

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<sup>152</sup> “Was uns der 22. Juni 1941 lehrt. Eine historische Dokumentation zum 20. Jahrestag des faschistischen Überfalls auf die Sowjetunion,” in *Neues Deutschland*, June 20, 1961, 3. [Emphasis in original].

<sup>153</sup> See for example A.I. Jeremenko, „Weshalb die Wehrmacht besiegt wurde,“ in *Neues Deutschland*, June 21, 1961, 5f. Günter Kertzsch, „Noch immer aktuelle Lehren des 22. Juni,“ *Neues Deutschland*, June 22, 1961, 4.

<sup>154</sup> *Neues Deutschland*, June 22, 1961, 3.

in so far as “we have now all necessary means of defense.”<sup>155</sup> It is indeed noticeable that the propaganda served not only the “defense” against a Western threat but reached threatening degrees itself. A caricature published on June 22, 1961 on the front page of the *Neues Deutschland* showed Hitler running away from a giant pair of pincers with the Soviet red star on it as it is crushing a much thinner pair of pincers marked with the swastika. The caption read: “the first acquaintance with the Soviet pincer.”<sup>156</sup>



Fig. 4. Hitler and the “Lesson of the Soviet Pincer” (*Neues Deutschland*, June 22, 1961, 1).

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 1.

The Wehrmacht veterans organized in the AeO supported this campaign enthusiastically. The May 1961 issue of the *Mitteilungsblatt* carried a detailed gripping eye-witness account of the beginning of the invasion on June 22, 1941 in which the gruesome scenes of “the first day,” of murdered Soviet civilians and forlornly fighting Red Army soldiers, signaled the brutality of the “entire war.”<sup>157</sup> The September and October issues carried pictures of Ulbricht visiting the soldiers “on the border of democratic Berlin,” and citizens giving flowers and gifts to the troops “protecting” the reinforced border. Commentaries reiterated the threat scenario and the necessity and legitimacy to respond with the “protection” measures in 1961.<sup>158</sup>

The mix of sustaining a feeling of threat and of boldly threatening the West with an “appropriate response” continued to dominate the national East German press until the historic days of August 1961.<sup>159</sup> On the eve of August 13, 1961, the GDR’s puppet parliament *Volkskammer* announced that “the time has come for decisive measures for the securing of peace.” In this reading of contemporary events, West Germany refused to sign a peace-treaty with the Soviet Union because “for them World War II was still not

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<sup>157</sup> Bernt von Kügelen, „Der erste Tag und der ganze Krieg. Eine Erinnerung 20 Jahre nach dem Überfall auf die Sowjetunion,“ in *Mitteilungsblatt*, 5/1961, 5-7.

<sup>158</sup> See for example Martin Lattmann, “Offizier und Weltfriedenstag 1961,” in *Mitteilungsblatt*, 8/1961, 5-7. And Herbert Stösslein, „Zwei deutsche Staaten – zwei Wahlen,“ which addressed the question „What was August, 13?“ in context of the fall elections in both Germanys. In *Mitteilungsblatt*, 10/1961, 6-9. See also the editorial „Bilanz 1961“ by Volkskammer president Christoph Dieckmann, in *Mitteilungsblatt*, 1/1962, 1-4.

<sup>159</sup> Another example in the SED’s theoretical organ: Hartmut Schilling, „Der Bonner Neokolonialismus. Feind der Völker,“ in *Einheit*, vol. 16, 1 (1961), 135-153. Much to the dismay of the SED central offices, local newspapers seemed to follow this propaganda campaign only reluctantly, or at least not with sufficient fervor. In June 1961, the SED Propaganda Division criticized the local press for a lack of “political-ideological preparation.” It urged the editors to intensify the efforts to denounce the aggressive Western camp and to better connect the past to the present. See the *Argumentationshinweise der Kommission für Agitation*, no. 38. BA/SAPMO, DY 30 IV/2/9.03/10, fiche 2. See also the earlier issue *Argumentationshinweise der Kommission für Agitation*, no. 36, on the “Vorbereitung des 20. Jahrestages des Überfalls auf die Sowjetunion,“ June 6, 1961. BA/SAPMO, DY 30 IV/2/9.03/10, fiche 2

over.”<sup>160</sup> For the SED regime, the lessons of June 22, 1941 which had been recalled and detailed in a prayer-wheel-like manner during the preceeding months, materialized on August 13, 1961 with the building of the wall. The respective Decree of the Council of Ministers of August 12, 1961 elucidated this historic nexus in order to convince the East German people of the need to fence in their country:

The preservation of peace requires to put an end to the activities of the West German revanchists and militarists and to open the path for the securing of peace and the rebirth of Germany as peace-loving, anti-imperialist, neutral state by concluding a peace-treaty. The position of the Bonn government, the Second World War is not over yet, amounts to inciting a militarist provocation and civil war. This imperialist policy which is being carried out behind the mask of anti-communism is the continuation of the aggressive goals of the fascist German imperialism of the Third Reich. The Bonn government has concluded from the defeat of Hitler-Germany in the Second World War that the predatory policy of the German monopoly capital and his Hitler-Generals must be implemented once again.

By permanently closing the inner-German and Berlin borders to “secure peace in Europe,” the SED claimed to have thwarted these aggressive plans once and for all.

The fact that much of this pathos about “peace in Europe” and another crusade against Soviet communism was mere agitation is confirmed by a (then) secret letter from Ulbricht to Khrushchev in which the SED leader summarized the actual practical and political results of August 13, 1961. Ulbricht indeed believed that he had protected the GDR against some kind of war, namely “a civil war and military provocations from West Berlin,” and, more importantly, admitted that he had stopped the political “undermining” of the GDR and the SED’s factual power.<sup>161</sup> This letter to Khrushchev, the representative

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<sup>160</sup> “Beschuß des Ministerrates der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik,” in *Neues Deutschland*, August 13, 1961, 1. Indeed, the Adenauer administration was of the opinion that the Second World War had not yet ended in the sense that no *self-determined* collective security system had been found which settled all relevant security concerns of the European nations.

<sup>161</sup> Letter from Ulbricht to Khrushchev, September 15, 1961:

“Now that the first part of the task of preparing the peace treaty has been carried out, I would like to inform the CPSU ZK Presidium about the situation. The implementation of the resolution on the closing of the border around West Berlin went according to plan. The tactic of gradually carrying out the measures made



of Hitler's actual and Adenauer's potential primary victim, contained no reference to the lessons of history or to the danger of history being repeated whatsoever. The prevention of another "Barbarossa" was a fictional propaganda motif with the help of which the factual incarceration of the East German population was legitimized, justified and executed – a "measure" not for the "securing of peace in Europe" but to assure the continual existence of the SED regime against popular will for almost three more decades to come.

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it more difficult for the adversary to orient himself with regard to the extent of our measures and made it easier for us to find the weak places in the border. I must say that the adversary undertook fewer counter-measures than was expected. The dispatch of 1500 American bandits would bother the West Berliners more than we do. The drawing-up of the Soviet troops into a position of readiness as well as the employment of units of the National People's Army in Berlin had a very sobering effect on the adversary. It was of decisive significance that the Warsaw Pact states acted unanimously under Soviet leadership and that the Soviet press reported comprehensively after August 13 and took a position supporting the GDR measures. We achieved the following things by closing the border around West Berlin:

- 1.) The protection of the GDR against the organization of a civil war and military provocations from West Berlin.
- 2.) The cessation of the economic and cultural undermining of the capital of the GDR by the West Berlin swamp.
- 3.) A change in the political situation will occur. The Bonn government has understood that the policy of revanch and the plan to roll back the GDR by the organization of a civil war and a small war has been destroyed for all time. This will later have great effects on the tactics of the Western powers regarding Poland and Czechoslovakia.
- 4.) The authority of the GDR state, which was weakened by its tolerance towards the subversive measures from West Berlin, was strengthened and a revolution in the thinking of the population of the capital and the GDR has occurred.

The experiences of the last years have proven that it is not possible for a socialist country such as the GDR to carry out peaceful competition with an imperialist country such as West Germany with open borders. Such opportunities first appear when the socialist world system has surpassed the capitalist countries in per-capita production." See the entire document in Harrison, "Ulbricht and the Concrete 'Rose,' 126.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Lessons of the Eastern Front: The Wehrmacht Legacy and the Remilitarization of Germany in the 1950s**

“We don’t want war, and we will do everything to prevent it. But precisely in order to seize the imperialists’ lust for war adventures in the heart of Europe we have to create our own strong national armed forces. ... If the imperialists instigated the Third World War, then this war must and will become the grave of not only several Western European capitalist countries but of world imperialism.”

Walter Ulbricht (1952)

## I. New Soldiers, Old Histories: Rearmament in East and West

The controversial issue of Germany's remilitarization(s) dominated the inner-German debates of the 1950s like no other political topic. Hardly half a decade after the end of the war, the recreation of German armed forces was back on the agenda on either side of the Iron Curtain. The legacy of the Wehrmacht cast contrasting shadows on these debates as the following paragraphs demonstrate. Hitler's army had suffered the greatest and most costly defeats in the war against the USSR, but simultaneously it had facilitated and participated in the Nazi mass murder on the Eastern Front. Yet, the way the two Germanys faced this past in the course of the remilitarization debates could not have been more diverse: while in the GDR, the war against the Soviet Union became a constant theme, in fact an obsession in the political propaganda and military indoctrination, it was almost entirely absent from the official discourses over rearmament in the Federal Republic.

In what follows I analyze the arguments used to legitimize – politically and historically – the reestablishment of German armed forces in the 1950s. After a brief overview of the events and debates leading up to the creation of the National People's Army (NVA) in the GDR and the Federal Army (*Bundeswehr*) in the Federal Republic, an analysis of official announcements (speeches, parliamentary debates, national security documents) dealing with Germany's bloc integration into EDC/NATO and Warsaw Pact as well as with the introduction of voluntary service and draft, will shed light on the multiple uses of and references to the Eastern Front memory in the quest for legitimate military rearmament. Exemplarily, the discussions about the soldier as "citizen in

uniform” serve to illustrate how political and military elites in both countries sought to incorporate the difficult heritage of the Wehrmacht into a new military doctrine.

One crucial factor shaped the political cultures in either country and infused the debates under consideration, namely fear of a new war. In the East, the SED nurtured and sustained fear of another “Barbarossa,” a third world war, with a relentless campaign aimed at proving that the West had treaded into Hitler’s footsteps. This campaign culminated in the building of the Berlin wall in August 1961, a “measure” which allegedly had saved Europe from the brink of war. On the other side, West German political culture was permeated with a consistent fear of “Bolshevism,” and Soviet expansionism was believed to aspire the spreading of the communist revolution around the world. Mutual *Angst* derived from both, rational security concerns in light of historical experience on either side – German aggression against the Soviet Union, Soviet repression of East Germany and East-Central Europe – and from irrationally hyped hostilities generated in the Cold War spiral of verbal and actual violence.<sup>1</sup>

The question of the future military potential of the two German states entered the public debates soon after dual statehood materialized in 1949. The GDR had already begun to rearm in 1948: on the initiative of the Soviet occupation authority, the German People’s Police was expanded by 10,000 paramilitary so-called *Kasernierte Bereitschaftspolizisten* who served two to three years and were stationed, fully armed, in

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<sup>1</sup> On the Soviet fear and its implications for foreign policy see Michael MccGwire, “National Security and Soviet Foreign Policy,” in David S. Painter, Melvyn P. Leffler, eds., *Origins of the Cold War. An International History* (London, New York: Routledge, 1994), 53-76. On “Cold War Angst” and the remilitarization debates in West Germany, see Michael Geyer, “Cold War Angst” in Schissler, ed., *Miracle Years*, 376-408.

barracks as riot police for immediate response in cases of popular unrest. By 1951, their number had risen to 52,000, by 1952 to 80,000.<sup>2</sup> This clandestine rearmament of East Germany was initiated, fostered and closely monitored by the Soviets.<sup>3</sup> Despite the constant claims that the socialist camp was the “peace camp,” the SED officially announced in July 1952 that the time had come for the creation of a “National People’s Army” (NVA). This was a direct consequence of a conversation between Stalin and the SED leadership in the spring of 1952. According to Prime Minister Otto Grotewohl’s minutes of this meeting, the Soviet leader had come to believe that West Germany would soon be fully integrated into the Western military alliance.<sup>4</sup> In a conversation with Ulbricht, Pieck and Grotewohl on 7 April 1952, Stalin declared that

Adenauer is in the American’s pocket. All the former fascists and generals are there as well. In reality an independent state is being created in Germany. And you need to organize an independent state. The demarcation line between East and West Germany should be considered a border—and not just a border, but a dangerous one. We need to strengthen the defense of this border.<sup>5</sup>

Since Stalin saw “all former fascists and generals” working for a new attack against the East, measures of defense had to be taken. While the rearmament was publicly legitimized with the alleged threat from the West, it was to be carried out rather discreetly. After a similar conversation with Stalin earlier that year (March 1952), GDR

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<sup>2</sup> Helmut Müller-Enbergs, „Garanten äußerer und innerer Sicherheit,“ in Matthias Judt, ed., *DDR-Geschichte in Dokumenten. Beschlüsse, Berichte, interne Materialien und Alltagszeugnisse* (Bonn, 1998), 434. During the June uprising these troops were employed but had order not to shoot; as a result, demonstrators attacked the KVP and even disarmed some of them. Thousands of paramilitary men were fired for their unreliability in the months to follow. Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Thoß, ed., „*Volksarmee schaffen – ohne Geschrei!*“ Torsten Diedrich, Rüdiger Wenzke, *Die getarnte Armee. Geschichte der Kasernierten Volkspolizei 1952-1956* (Berlin: Ch. Links, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Curiously, Stalin’s considerations coincide with his “peace offensive” of the March 1952 note, presumably offering to exchange Germany’s reunification for neutrality. It is worth pointing out that Stalin aggressively approached East Berlin with the issue of rearmament at exactly the time when he suggested publicly Germany’s neutralization in which case its military power would have to be extremely reduced.

<sup>5</sup> Documented in Ostermann, ed., *Uprising in East Germany, 1953*, pp. 34f.

president Pieck had noted in his personal files: “create People’s Army without clamor.”<sup>6</sup> By 1954/1955, the KVP was fully indoctrinated with the official ideology, 80 percent of the officers were SED members and the then 100,000 troops received a full military and ideological training. In April 1955, after the Federal Republic had joined NATO, the KVP was renamed NVA. In May 1955, the GDR joined the Warsaw Pact.<sup>7</sup> The law which officially regulated the creation of the NVA and the Ministry for National Defense was passed in January 1956.<sup>8</sup> Until 1962, service was voluntary; the draft was introduced only then and the basic military service lasted 18 months. Although military matters were routinely overseen by a defense minister, the SED functioned as the actual leader of the armed forces represented by the head of the “National Defense Council” founded in 1960 (Ulbricht until 1971, his successor Erich Honecker until 1989). According to the GDR constitution, it was the NVA’s primary task to “protect the socialist achievements of the people against all attacks from the outside.”<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to the early, clandestine and efficient rearmament of East Germany the Bundeswehr was founded in November 1955 after a yearlong public conflict over Adenauer’s policy of remilitarization and NATO integration.<sup>10</sup> Yet, from the beginning, West German rearmament was an ambiguous undertaking: Adenauer, clandestinely as

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<sup>6</sup> In German: „Volksarmee schaffen ohne Geschrei.” Quoted in Rüdiger Wenzke, „Auf dem Weg zur Kaderarmee,” in: Thoß, ed., „*Volksarmee schaffen - ohne Geschrei*,” 261.

<sup>7</sup> Helmut Müller-Enbergs, „Garanten äußerer und innerer Sicherheit,” 434.

<sup>8</sup> Text printed in Judt, ed., *DDR-Geschichte in Dokumenten*, 450f.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Walter Jablonsky, „Die NVA im Staat der SED,” in Klaus Naumann, ed., *Die NVA: Anspruch und Wirklichkeit* (Berlin: Mittler, 1993), 15.

<sup>10</sup> A good overview of this process with a focus on the personal continuities between Wehrmacht and Bundeswehr and on the question of tradition gives Jens Scholten, “Offiziere: Im Geiste unbesiegt,” in Norbert Frei, ed., *Karrieren im Zwielficht. Hitlers Eliten nach 1945* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2001), 131-177.

well and beginning in 1950, encouraged a number of former Wehrmacht generals to contribute their experience and expertise to the creation of armed forces in the Federal Republic. The famous albeit at the time secret “Himmeroder Memorandum”<sup>11</sup> – drafted by the “operative experts of the Wehrmacht’s Eastern campaign” – outlined the character of a new German army by utilizing the “lessons” learned in the war against the Soviet Union. The founding fathers of the *Bundeswehr* thus created and adhered in their thinking to a “symbiotic” nexus between the war on the Eastern Front and the Cold War: the new army was to become a “Wehrmacht optimized by the analysis of World War II, more modern, namely more mobile and equipped with higher military technology.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Published in Hans-Jürgen Rautenberg, Norbert Wiggershausen, Die „Himmeroder Denkschrift“ vom Oktober 1950. Politische und militärische Überlegungen für einen Beitrag der Bundesrepublik Deutschland zur westeuropäischen Verteidigung (Karlsruhe: Braun, 1977). This was the first time, the document reached the public. The edition was critically commented by the Bundeswehr’s Historical Division, MGFA, with the rather mild words “recommendations burdened with the past” (vergangenheitsbelastete Empfehlungen). See Detlev Bald, “Kämpfe um die Dominanz des Militärischen,” in: Detlev Bald, Johannes Klotz, Wolfram Wette, eds., *Mythos Wehrmacht. Nachkriegsdebatten und Traditionspflege* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2001), 32.

<sup>12</sup> Bald, “Kämpfe um die Dominanz des Militärischen,” 17-28, quote on 23. Parallel to the discussions in the Himmerod monastery (in the Eiffel), the US government assigned hundreds of former Wehrmacht officers with analyzing WWII in the German section of the US Army’s “Historical Division” in Königstein/Taunus und Karlsruhe. A main theme in the works produced in the Division was the tendency to idealize the fighting will, sense of duty and sacrifice generally connected to the war against the Soviet Union and to stress the efficiency of the troop. “Barbarossa” was related to the Cold War by dwelling on the traditional fight of the occident against the “eternal” threat from the East. Ibid., 21. See Bernd Wegner, “Erschriebene Siege. Franz Halder, die ‘Historical Division’ und die Rekonstruktion des Zweiten Weltkrieges im Geist des deutschen Generalstabs,” in Ernst W. Hansen et. al., eds., *Politischer Wandel, organisierte Gewalt und nationale Sicherheit* (München: Oldenbourg, 1995), 285ff. The Division was led by Franz Halder, formerly General Chief of Staff in Hitler’s army (1938-1942). After leading the military campaigns against Poland, France, the Balkans and the Soviet Union, Halder lost his post when Hitler took over the Wehrmacht command in 1942. For his contacts to the military resistance he was imprisoned after 20 July 1944 in KZ Flossenbürg and Dachau until April 1945, and after a brief period of American captivity, he was released the same summer. He was co-author of the Nuremberg *Denkschrift* in 1945 (see Chapter 4. I.). His best-selling book *Hitler als Feldherr* (1949) contributed to the myth of the “clean Wehrmacht” in so far as it portrayed Hitler as incompetent obsessive fanatic who deprived the German military leadership of its influence only to lead Germany into catastrophe.

The eventual founding compromise of the *Bundeswehr* contained nonetheless a few explicit remarks which clearly separated the new West German army from the Wehrmacht legacy. Thanks to the interventions of Wolf Graf von Baudissin (, a transformed former militarist who had spent the years between 1941 and 1946 in British captivity, the new army should bear no “reminiscence to the old Wehrmacht,” its members were obliged to “approve of the democratic system and life-style out of inner conviction,” and it should assured that it would not become another “state in the state.”<sup>13</sup> The planning process since 1950 was supervised by the so-called Blank Office (*Amt Blank*) founded in October 1950. It was headed by Theodor Blank (1905-1972), then “commissioner of the chancellor,” and in 1955 appointed first defense minister. The Paris Treaties of October 1954 ended the military occupation of West Germany, reinstated its full sovereignty and permitted the formation of 12 German divisions (with a maximum of 500,000 troops). With the same treaty, the Federal Republic became member of NATO. One year later, the legislative process was finalized after several heated parliamentary debates, and in November 1955 the *Bundeswehr* was officially founded. The draft was introduced in 1957, five years earlier than in the GDR. Two central concepts were to assure that the *Bundeswehr* would indeed become a democratic institution: the concept of “inner leadership,” and the idea of the soldier as “citizen in uniform.”<sup>14</sup>

The speeches and political debates addressing the nature of the armed forces in East and West Germany as well as the respective roles, rights and duties assigned to the “new

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<sup>13</sup> Bald, “Kämpfe um die Dominanz des Militärischen,” 29.

<sup>14</sup> On the debates and processes shaping the history of the *Bundeswehr* from its founding days to the late 1980s see Abenheim, *Reforging the Iron Cross*, on *Innere Führung* and the concept of “citizen in uniform” in particular, 44-63.



soldiers” circled around the above-mentioned objectives of defending socialism in the NVA, and defending democracy in the *Bundeswehr*. In the GDR, the creation of the NVA was accompanied by a bold propaganda offensive aimed at convincing the public of an immanent threat and the need to arm an otherwise pacifist, antifascist country. The memory of the Eastern Front war was the most important historical reference point in the SED’s rhetoric of militant pacifism. In the lively and captivating parliamentary debates on foreign policy and rearmament in the Bonn *Bundestag*, the war against Russia was rarely discussed explicitly, yet its implicit relevance and latent presence can be illustrated with many examples. The collective refusal of the political elites to problematize Soviet security concerns stemming from the all-too fresh memory of the Wehrmacht’s Eastern campaign was occasionally challenged by interventions of independent-minded or communist parliamentarians. Thus, while the SED propaganda on the NVA exemplifies the inflated instrumentalization of the Eastern Front memory in the Eastern part of Germany, the *Bundestag* debates provide ample evidence for the marginal role the same historical event played in West German political culture during the 1950s.

## **II. “Barbarossa” as Historical Lesson:**

### **The “Socialist” Soldier and Remilitarization in the GDR**

“The best cannot live in peace if the evil neighbour doesn’t like it.”<sup>15</sup> This is one of Ulbricht’s catchy statements which encapsulates the crux of his military philosophy: that the GDR, at heart a “good” nation, was forced to create armed forces in order to be

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<sup>15</sup> „Es kann der Beste nicht in Frieden leben, wenn es dem bösen Nachbarn nicht gefällt.“ Ulbricht quoted this, as he said, „old saying” during his already mentioned programmatic speech to the II. Party conference in July 1952. Ulbricht, *Zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*, vol. IV: 1950-1954, 423.

prepared for an attack by its “evil” neighbors, namely West Germany and its allies. Moreover, there was no alternative to rearmament because “he, who is not prepared to protect peace from the aggressor with weapons, encourages the aggressor and threatens peace.”<sup>16</sup> As demonstrated earlier, Ulbricht’s world was divided into two camps one of which planned to attack the Soviet Union sooner or later and thus sought to repeat, in fact to continue Hitler’s crusade against the East. In this scenario of immanent war, the Western powers were “preparing a new war, which they intend to wage primarily against the socialist Soviet Union” and Eastern Europe, and the “military coalitions” which they forged were masked “hypocritically with the flag of ‘defending’ the West” while in reality they sought to “follow in every respect the path of the war criminals Hitler and Mussolini.”<sup>17</sup>

Such a translation of the recent past into the present triggered two concrete political consequences: first, the SED systematically cultivated a climate of constant fear and immanent threat of war among the East German population. On numerous occasions political leaders would evoke the dangers looming from the “war-thirsty monopoly capital and the militarist Junkers”<sup>18</sup> in the West. Secondly, and in reaction to this propagated threat, the NVA was created, indoctrinated and trained as the necessary military response to it. What could be called the politics of fear in this context was mainly nurtured and sustained with historical references to the German-Soviet battlefield

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 379.

<sup>18</sup> Ulbricht in a discussion speech” following his speech to the II. party conference in 1952. Quoted in Militärgeschichtliches Institut der DDR, ed., *Die Militär- und Sicherheitspolitik der SED 1945-1988. Dokumente und Materialien* (Berlin: Militärverlag, 1989), 120.

during World War II. And in order to refute potential resistance among East Germans to rearmament – something the SED leadership soon had to realize – carefully drafted announcements explained the difference between “just war” and “unjust war,”<sup>19</sup> and between the “Western mercenary armies” and the “armed forces of the peace-camp.”<sup>20</sup> This seemed indeed necessary since the SED encountered little popular enthusiasm for its remilitarization campaign in 1952. The recruitment numbers for the new army were far lower than expected,<sup>21</sup> and Ulbricht urged in November 1952 to launch “a systematic enlightenment campaign against the pacifist sentiments which still are existent in some parts of the population.”<sup>22</sup>

At the core of this “enlightenment campaign” was the need to legitimize the militarization of a (declared) pacifist society. Under the motto “the defense of the achievements of our republic is the perceivably most just matter in the world,” the SED appealed to the collective socialist pride of its citizens in order to justify the need to bear arms again. It asked the nation of socialist citizens whether “there can be a more just cause than that the workers of our people-owned companies and factories defend the work of their hands against the greed of gain of the war-thirsty monopoly masters,” to

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<sup>19</sup> See for example Ulbricht’s argumentation in his speech to the II. Party conference. Ulbricht, *Zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*, vol. IV: 1950-1954, 423f. See further above Chapter 5. I.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted from a “Letter of the Central Committee of the SED to the members and candidates of the SED in the armed forces of the GDR,” January 1953. Printed in *ibid.*, 129.

<sup>21</sup> SED plans called for the recruitment of 37,000 men during the summer months of 1952. In early September the SED Politburo came to the realization that fewer young men were willing to join the KVP (*Kasernierte Volkspolizei*/Quartered People’s Police) than expected. Subsequently, Ulbricht urged the regional SED branches to intensify the recruitment of “cadres.” In a meeting on September 3, 1952, Ulbricht stated, “we need cadres of qualified tank drivers, pilots, artillerymen, pioneers, intelligence, contact men, marines, military engineers as well as officers for every branch, who will hold their service in the army as their lives’ work.” See Rüdiger Wenzke, „Auf dem Weg zur Kaderarmee,“ in Thoß, ed., *Volksarmee schaffen - ohne Geschrei*, 261f.

<sup>22</sup> Speech during the tenth meeting of the SED’s ZK, November 22, 1952, quoted in *ibid.*, 126.

“defend the farmers’ soil which they have fertilized with their on sweat against the greed of the militarist Junkers,” and to defend the “schools, academies, ... universities and institutes against those who want to deprive [the youth] of their right to education?” The answer was no, because it was the “perceivably most just matter in the world” to defend the achievements of socialism.<sup>23</sup> Still, the SED remilitarization campaign had to address the question why the “camp of peace” needed to be armed at all. Ulbricht explained this at the II. Party Conference in 1952 by assuring the public that the creation of armed forces meant “by no means that we have to go to war against anyone. That would be absolutely incorrect. Our banner remains invariably the banner of peace!” If, however, “the imperialists instigated the Third World War, then this war must and will become the grave of not only several Western European capitalist countries but of world imperialism.”

We don’t want war, and we will do everything to prevent it. But precisely in order to seize the imperialists’ lust for war adventures in the heart of Europe we have to create our own strong national armed forces which command all weapons of modern war technology on land, on the seas and in the air.<sup>24</sup>

The creation of armed forces in the GDR was presented as a military new beginning in German history. The SED-regime considered the question of the heritage of the Wehrmacht irrelevant since the NVA was to serve the “great idea of defending freedom and independence of our republic,” and its soldiers were to be educated in “the spirit of internationalism, in the spirit of respect for other nations, in the spirit of love and respect for the workers of all countries, in the spirit of keeping and strengthening peace between

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<sup>23</sup> Ulbricht in the discussion following his speech to the II. party conference in 1952. Quoted in Militärgeschichtliches Institut der DDR, ed. *Die Militär- und Sicherheitspolitik der SED 1945-1988*, 121.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

the nations.”<sup>25</sup> This programmatic peace rhetoric became henceforth a central element of SED propaganda and an ever-recurring theme – presented as the ultimate lesson learned from history – in the official commemoration of the Nazi war against the Soviet Union. In essence, the NVA was the embodiment of this lesson. On the one hand, it was to be the army of peace ready to confront and crush Western aggression. On the other hand, it was to be the socialist antidote to everything the Wehrmacht had stood for.

This, however, did not mean that the NVA was a-historic. The maintenance of tradition – *Traditionspflege* – was a central component of the political-ideological training aiming at establishing a counter-heritage to the Wehrmacht. Almost comparable to the attempts to morally ground the *Bundeswehr* on the legacy of July 20, 1944 in the West, the SED invoked the NKFD and BDO, the two wartime military antifascist organizations run by German and Soviet communists on the Eastern Front, as the historical reference points for the NVA’s self-image. A campaign for intensified military historiography kicked off in 1963, the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the NKFD, was to shed light on its exemplary “work on the front” and the roots of the “brotherhood in arms” between NVA and Red Army.<sup>26</sup> In March 1963, the “Institute for Military History” held a conference on recent research into the history of NKFD and BDO. Veterans and military historians recalled the attempts of both organizations to

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Note the personal continuities between NKFD and NVA: for example, Hans Gossens, propaganda chief in the NVA, had served as “front deputy” of the NKFD; Heinz Keßler, another former “front deputy” functioned first as Deputy Minister of National Defense (1957-1967) and became Minister in 1985 (until 1989). See Paul Heider, “Das Nationalkomitee ‘Freies Deutschland’ und der Bund deutscher Offiziere in der Historiographie der DDR und der Traditionspflege der NVA,” in Detlev Bald, Andreas Prüfert, eds., *Vom Krieg zur Militärreform: Zur Debatte um Leitbilder in Bundeswehr und Nationaler Volksarmee* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1997), 23ff.

convince the Wehrmacht of its erroneous mission in Hitler's name. NVA soldiers were to identify with this anti-Hitler segment of the German officer-corps. Moreover, major lessons for future warfare could be drawn from the NKFD's fight on the Eastern Front, because "the Bonn regime and its armies" were "in terms of class (*klassenmäßig*) the same dangerous enemy" as the Wehrmacht during World War II.<sup>27</sup> This necessitated the "deepening of the hatred against German militarism in order to be ready at any time to obliterate any aggressor together with the Red Army."<sup>28</sup> History's lessons, once again suited perfectly to explain current "threat scenarios" and to justify the means and measures required to deal with these scenarios.

The ideological foundation for the new military doctrine thus originated in a highly selective interpretation of the Eastern Front war. Although soldiers of the NVA were officially trained to defend the "achievements of socialism," their constant and effective indoctrination aimed at placing their service into a Manichean worldview and at fully merging the military with the political sphere. According to Ulbricht, the practical commander-in-chief, the "national armed forces shall be filled with the hatred of the American, English and French imperialists" and "with the unbreakable friendship with the Soviet Union."<sup>29</sup> Translated into the practice of military training and education, this

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>29</sup> Speech to the II. Party conference. Ulbricht, *Zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung*, vol. IV: 1950-1954, 424.

resulted in a doctrine of constant threat and the “repeated assertion of an immanent imperialist aggression.”<sup>30</sup>

In order to be prepared for such an aggression, the superior military forces of the Soviet Union and its allies in the Warsaw Pact were kept in a state of combat-readiness at all times. In case of war, the socialist camp’s immediate response was a counter-attack against the West aimed at its ultimate “annihilation.” The memory of the brutal reality under Nazi occupation in Eastern Europe heavily influenced the formulation of these doctrines, in particular the objective to center military actions on the aggressors’ homeland.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the next war was considered the “last of all wars,” the “last, decisive conflict with the class enemy.” The administrative and military leadership in the GDR expected one million civilian victims and 100,000 military casualties within the first nine days of this war and anticipated the “almost complete collapse of the civil infrastructure” in East Germany. For the West, five million civilian and 800,000 military casualties were expected in the same period.<sup>32</sup> The desirable outcome of the war was not the *status-quo-ante* but the destruction of capitalism. Hence, if it broke out, it was “worth every sacrifice.”<sup>33</sup>

In order to motivate East German men to enlist in a socialist army whose worst-case-scenario was a third world war, it was necessary to create a convincing narrative of why

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<sup>30</sup> Horst-Henning Basler, „Das operative Denken der NVA,“ in Naumann, ed., *NVA. Anspruch und Wirklichkeit*, 180. Although Basler’s conclusions are based on selected documents from the 1970s and 1980s – most relevant documents on the operative planning of the NVA were destroyed by the regime in 1989 – he suggests that from the early days of its creation, the NVA’s operative thinking centered on a strategy of defensive counter-attack aimed at the annihilation of the enemy.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 180.

the socialist camp – the “camp of peace” – needed armed forces and how militant pacifism could still be pacifist. Central to this narrative was the Red Army and its victorious role during World War II. In contrast to the remembered “war of conquest and extermination” of the “fascist Wehrmacht,” the Red Army’s fight was glorified as a “war of liberation.” It was *the* historical example for a “just war” and the history of the Red Army’s invasion of Eastern Europe and Germany was cleansed of its criminal record: of mass rape, robbery and pillage. Whenever VE Day was commemorated in East Germany, the “glorious” and “invincible” Red Army played the key role in speeches and announcements.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the SED remembered the founding of the Red Army on an annual basis. It regularly sent “greeting telegrams” to the CPSU congratulating and thanking the “Soviet peoples” for their “victory over Hitler fascism.”<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, the NVA was to be created as the Soviet Army’s little brother.

In an article for the KVP journal “*Hefte der Kasernierten Volkspolizei*,” the head of the KVP’s political division, Rudolf Dölling (1902-1975)<sup>36</sup>, celebrated the decision to remilitarize East Germany as „historical turning point“ and pointed out that the Soviet

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<sup>34</sup> It was referred to as the “Red Army” only for the wartime period, after the war, the SED spoke of the Soviet Army. On the commemoration of the Red/Soviet Army on VE Day see for example Pieck’s and Grotewohl’s Open Letter to „Comrade Stalin“ „Zur 5. Wiederkehr der Befreiung vom Joche des Hitlerfaschismus,” printed in *Dokumente der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, vol. III (Berlin (Ost): Dietz, 1948ff.), 25f.

<sup>35</sup> See for example „Telegramm führender Persönlichkeiten zum 20. Jahrestag des Sieges des Sowjetvolkes über den Hitlerfaschismus,” May 8, 1965, printed in ZK der SED, ed., *Dokumente der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands. Beschlüsse und Erklärungen des Zentralkomitees sowie seines Politbüros und seines Sekretariats*, vol. 10 (Berlin (Ost): Dietz, 1948ff.), 401-403. And „Gemeinsames Grußschreiben der DDR-Repräsentanten und die Partei- und Staatsführung der Union der Sozialistischen Sowjetrepubliken anlässlich des 25. Jahrestages des Sieges des Sowjetvolkes und seiner ruhmreichen Armee über den Hitlerfaschismus und die Befreiung des deutschen Volkes vom Hitlerfaschismus,” 8 May 1970, printed in ZK der SED, ed., *Dokumente der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, vol. 13, 22-25.

<sup>36</sup> Dölling served as deputy minister for defense and head of the political division of the NVA between 1957 and 1959.



Army was the “strongest factor in the peace camp.” It was exemplary, not only because the Soviet troops had “opened the path towards socialism to the German people” but because their interests coincided with those of the “future people’s army” in the GDR, namely the “securing and defense of peace.” These common interests would constitute the “firm basis of their fighting community (*Kampfgemeinschaft*).” Therefore, the political indoctrination was to be intensified and expanded so that every serviceman developed the necessary “socialist consciousness.”<sup>37</sup> Shortly thereafter, Dölling’s superior, Defense Minister Heinz Hoffmann (1910-1985, SED), gave a programmatic speech to the tenth SED ZK meeting in late 1952 in which he reemphasized the need to learn from the Soviet Army and stressed in particular the necessity to “educate the officers to [become] the educators of the soldiers.”<sup>38</sup> Referring to the fighting between Wehrmacht and Soviet forces on the Eastern Front, Hoffmann detailed what exactly German soldiers in the NVA could and should learn from their Soviet “brothers in fight:”

It is clear, that the Soviet Union has achieved its great successes in the fight for the liberation of the Soviet land ... only because every soldier, every battalion leader and every officer went into battle with the firm consciousness for the justness and insuperableness of his cause. Such a high degree of patriotism and socialist consciousness could only be achieved, because officers stood at the top of the Soviet Army, the army units and battalions who are not mere commanders of their units, but in the daily work are educators of every single of their subordinate soldiers. We have learned much already from the Soviet Army. But now it is necessary, that we not only learn from the Soviet Army technically but that we learn in the first place how the Soviet Army trained its officers to be educators of the soldiers.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Rudolf Dölling, „Ein historischer Wendepunkt,“ in *Hefte der kasernierten Volkspolizei*, 14 (1952), 4. Printed in *Die Militär- und Sicherheitspolitik der SED 1945-1988*, 123-125.

<sup>38</sup> „Aus der Diskussionsrede des Mitglieds des ZK der SED, des Stellvertretenden Ministers des Innern und Chefs der Kasernierten Volkspolizei, Generalleutnant H. Hoffmann, auf der 10. Tagung des ZK der SED,“ 22 November 1952, printed in *ibid.*, 127f. Hoffmann here picked up the phrase “*Offiziere als Erzieher*” used by Walter Ulbricht earlier during the same ZK meeting, see *ibid.*, 126.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

Hoffmann's call to "overcome the separation of political work and military-technical training" speaks to the NVA's complete indoctrination with socialist ideology. Far from just constituting the military arm of the SED state, the new East German army was to serve as a "people's army" fully permeated with the socialist worldview. It was thus, in ideological design and political instrumentalization, closer to the National Socialist Wehrmacht than the SED would ever have wanted to admit.

The rhetoric of militant pacifism intensified as the West German parliament passed legislation to form a federal army – the *Bundeswehr* – in the fall of 1955. In January 1956, Albert Norden once again contributed a tartly worded article to *Neues Deutschland* in which he attacked the "West German Wehrmacht" as a foreign army run by the neo-fascist imperialists and contrasted it with the truly "German people's army." While the Bonn government conspired with the Americans in "criminal furore" to launch a new attack against the "peoples East of the Elbe River," the NVA was a true German *Volksheer* because the government of the GDR assumed and acted only in accordance with "German interests."<sup>40</sup> Again, Norden effectively used the questionable reemployment of former Wehrmacht generals in the *Bundeswehr* to denounce the entire undertaking as the effort to revive Hitler's army:

Hitler's paladins who attacked Poland, Denmark, Norway, the Balkans, Western Europe and the Soviet Union – those Keitel, Jodl, Dönitz waded in the blood of millions and they were tried before the tribunal of mankind. Bonn, however, rehabilitates them and turns them into honourable men (by the way, not only the higher but also the lower positioned mass murderers of the Hitler-era; the not-to-be-amnestied war criminals like [Gustav] Sorge and [Wilhelm] Schubert who daily and nightly slew German antifascists and Jews in the concentration camp at Sachsenhausen and who killed personally thousands of Soviet POWs by shot in the neck were not imprisoned [upon their release to the West in 1956] but awarded ... with 6,000 Marks and let loose again on humankind!)

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<sup>40</sup> Albert Norden, „Die deutsche Armee des Friedens und der Demokratie,“ in *Neues Deutschland*, January 24, 1956. Printed in Norden, *Die Nation und wir*, 619-627.

He who accepts Hitler's high commanders and thus his annexation goals, he who puts Hitler's operational chiefs and other military exponents of his world war in all the crucial positions of the Bonn Wehrmacht, he who paves the way again for Hitler's murderous scoundrels [*Mordkanailen*], has evil in mind and seeks to continue the politics of dead Hitler with his living generals.<sup>41</sup>

Keitel and Jodl were both sentenced to death by the Nuremberg Tribunal and executed in 1946. Norden nonetheless used their names here to dramatize the personal continuities between the Nazi era and rearmament in the FRG. Former Admiral Karl Dönitz (1891-1980), Hitler's short-term successor, was sentenced to ten years in prison. After his release in 1956, he indeed assumed a respectable position in the West German public by publishing several autobiographical and military works until his death in 1980. The mentioned convicted war criminals Gustav Sorge and Wilhelm Schubert, two former SS guards of KZ Sachsenhausen, released by the Soviets in January 1956, were all but "let loose again on humankind." The state prosecutor in Bonn opened preliminary proceedings the same year and investigations led to the "Sachsenhausen trial" in 1959 at the end of which both defendants were sentenced to life in prison.<sup>42</sup>

Beyond this accumulation of untruths, the article is particularly noteworthy because it exemplifies a quiet but crucial shift in SED propaganda regarding Hitler's war against the Soviet Union. Instead of solely highlighting the gruesome details of the Wehrmacht's war of annihilation against the Soviet Union, Norden stressed the supposed fragility of

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 621.

<sup>42</sup> Brochhagen, *Nach Nürnberg*. 290. On February 6, 1959, both were found guilty of mass murder of about 10,000 Russian POWs in the execution barrack of KZ Sachsenhausen [*Genickschußbaracke*], attempted murder of numerous other prison inmates, and complicity of murder and manslaughter. See the online documentation <http://www1.jur.uva.nl/junsv/brd/Angeklengfr.htm> [June 2006]. Sorge was first put on trial before a Soviet Military Tribunal in the so-called "Berlin trial" in October 1947 where he along with Alfred Kaindl, the former commandant of KZ Sachsenhausen, and 14 other SS men were sentenced to life in prison for murder. The Soviet NKVD took over the prisoners thereafter and transported them to a camp in Workuta where six of the twelve men died with the next year (including Kaindl). The rest of them were released after Adenauer's Moscow visit in January 1956.

peace and security in East Germany and introduced an explicitly nationalist tone. The fear of war was no longer engendered and sustained by merely invoking past horrors on the Eastern Front in Russia, but by pointing increasingly to the immanent dangers of military conflict in Germany. Worse even, this conflict would play out as nuclear war.<sup>43</sup> In contrast to the NVA's secret operative planning which anticipated the next war to take place in Western Europe, Norden played with the fear of nuclear war on the territory of the GDR (the first people "East of the Elbe River"): "The murderers of the German people arm again, they are setting up their aggressive army."<sup>44</sup> It was thus an imperative to arm all "honest Germans" who said "no to the Wehrmacht of imperialism who stabs Germany in the heart," and "yes to the National People's Army that makes our families, territory and the plan victories (*Plansiege* [sic!]) untouchable."<sup>45</sup> Norden insisted that the NVA was a "real army of the people and of peace." And even though millions of German workers had served in Hitler's Wehrmacht, he claimed that "never have armies of workers and farmers undertaken an aggression" – ignoring also, for example, the Soviet Union's intrusions into Poland, Finland and the Baltic states in 1939/40 – and that it was not in the nature of a workers and farmers state to wage "unjust and exploitative wars."<sup>46</sup>

The radicalization and intensification of the militant rhetoric against the West continued unremittingly until August 1961 when the SED declared it vital to erect a "protection wall" against the immanent imperialist threat. I have already demonstrated

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<sup>43</sup> By the mid-1950s the global nuclear arms-race was in full swing. In 1954, the United States tested successfully its first deliverable thermonuclear weapon; the USSR responded by testing its first megaton device in 1955. Thus, by the end of 1955 both superpowers had "fully functional thermonuclear bombs as well as long-range bombers from which to drop them" at their disposal. Gaddis, *We now know*, 111.

<sup>44</sup> Norden, „Die deutsche Armee des Friedens und der Demokratie,“ 626.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 627.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 624.

how the SED created a direct link between the “lessons of 22 June 1941” and the events of the summer of 1961. The war against the Soviet Union continued to not just loom through the numerous official announcements, speeches and texts dealing with the “threat” of a new “Barbarossa.” By foreshadowing the potential outcome of socialism’s retaliation, it retained its prominent role also because it was the prime historical example of deterrence.

### **III. Citizens in Uniform: The Eastern Front in the Bonn Remilitarization Debates**

As in the GDR, West German political culture during those years was marked by global enmity, fear of nuclear war as well as a reluctant and selective rapprochement to the horrors of the past. During the remilitarization debates between 1949 and 1957 in the Bundestag the criminal legacy of the Wehrmacht’s fight on the Eastern Front was faded out and it was mostly left to a handful of radically agitating KPD representatives in the first Bundestag to recall the crimes committed during the war of extermination against the Soviet Union. The following paragraphs deal with the public debates in the German parliament during the 1950s which can be expected to have included references to the German-Soviet past. In particular, I am looking at the debates dealing with the remaining German POWs in Soviet captivity until 1955/56, and with the question of rearmament.

Both issues entailed addressing the legacies of the Eastern Front in one way or another. In context of the POW debates, the question of war crimes committed on the Eastern Front by some of the remaining German prisoners remained marginal throughout the years except for a few effectual rhetorical interventions by KPD representatives

whose faction held 15 seats (or 5.7 percent) in the first legislative period.<sup>47</sup> With regards to the remilitarization and integration of West Germany into a Western security alliance, the debates between 1950 – when the *Wehrbeitrag* was discussed for the first time – and 1956 – when the *Bundeswehr* legislation was passed – focused on present-day security concerns in view of the Soviet position and policies in Eastern Europe and the GDR. Occasionally speakers from various parties reflected on the historically rooted and thus to a certain extent understandable security concerns of the Soviet Union. Yet, no explicit reference was ever made to the German invasion in 1941 and the unprecedented brutality of the German-Soviet war which it ensued. If the Wehrmacht was occasionally a topic of discussion, deputies raised their voices to save the German soldiers’ “honor” from the unfair verdict of history and to advocate the amnesty and rehabilitation of the “still” imprisoned “so-called war criminals” (such as Karl Dönitz, Erich von Manstein or Albert Kesselring). The almost complete absence of the Eastern Front in the West German parliamentary debates during the 1950s is a good example for what Hermann Lübke once described as “communicative silence:” the “*public* reluctance” to address the issues of individual and institutional responsibility for Nazi crimes during the early years of the Federal Republic.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> In the 1953 federal elections the KPD won only 2.2 percent of the votes and were no longer represented in the Bundestag. In 1956 the KPD was outlawed by the Supreme Court.

<sup>48</sup> Which in Lübke’s view was a major precondition for the later sincere and thus successful process of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*; moreover, this “certain silence” (*gewisse Stille*) was „the necessary medium for the transformation of postwar Germans into citizens of the Federal Republic of Germany.” Hermann Lübke, “Der Nationalsozialismus im deutschen Nachkriegsbewußtsein,” *Historische Zeitschrift*, vol. 236, 1983, 579-599, quote on 585, 587, 594. [Emphasis added.] Lübke’s often rejected argument nonetheless offers a sophisticated explanation for the remarkable democratic transformation of postwar West German society: Lübke contended that Germans’ “accommodation into the statehood of the second German democracy [Einrichtung in die Staatlichkeit der zweiten deutschen Demokratie] took place in the “public

During those years, the popular memory of “Operation Barbarossa” was largely shaped by personal recollections and mass media publications. In 1951, the press paid little attention to the tenth anniversary of the attack, and even quality papers such as *Die Zeit* commented the invasion from a contemporary perspective stressing the danger of a new war with Russia.<sup>49</sup> Even ten years later, the then much greater media attention focused on the Hitler-Stalin pact, Soviet interpretations of the war, or Stalin’s role. Readers learned very little about Nazi occupation plans or war crimes in the Soviet Union.<sup>50</sup> Similarly to the press, school books at that time largely avoided the question of war crimes on the Eastern Front. The Holocaust was still a marginal event in German memory of the Nazi period, the occupation of the Soviet Union and its consequences received even less attention.<sup>51</sup> In the Bundestag, the crimes committed by the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front were explicitly mentioned in only two instances, namely in 1949 and 1950 in context of the repeated protest of the Bonn government against the continuing incarceration of German POWs in the Soviet Union. Already in his first government statement (*Regierungserklärung*) on September 20, 1949, chancellor Adenauer lamented the fate of “millions of POWs” still being detained by the Soviet government and called this a “serious and important chapter” of his political agenda:

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protection of publicly unquestioned normative principles” – the official acknowledgment of the political and moral defeat of Nazism as one of the central legitimating elements of the young FRG, and the resumption of those “cultural traditions” liquidated by the Nazi movement in 1933. Ibid., 585.

<sup>49</sup> Gerhard Schreiber, „Zur Perzeption des Unternehmens ‚Barbarossa‘ in der deutschen Presse,“ in Ueberschär, Wette, eds., „*Unternehmen Barbarossa*,“ 27-42.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 29-38.

<sup>51</sup> See the meticulously researched, depressing analysis by Bodo von Borries, „The Third Reich in German History Textbooks since 1945,“ *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2003, 45-62.

The fate of these millions of Germans, who have now suffered as a result of this bitter destiny for years, is so hard, the sorrow of their relatives in Germany so great, that all nations must help to return these prisoners and deported persons to their homeland and their families.<sup>52</sup>

Adenauer's strong emphasis on the suffering of these former soldiers and the dramatic numbers he stated reflected the concerns of a majority of the German population.

Nevertheless, he robustly exaggerated the numbers by reiterating that there are "millions" still being held in Soviet prison camps.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, he made no reference as to why these men were held prisoners, and thus simply factored out the possibility that real war criminals were likely to be amongst them.<sup>54</sup> Adenauer instead condemned in a statement on the same issue a few months later the "crimes against humanity" committed against "our German brothers" in the Soviet Union and deplored "the world public" to express

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<sup>52</sup> *Verhandlungen des deutschen Bundestages: Plenarprotokolle. Stenographische Berichte* (Bonn: Heger, 1950ff.) (Hereafter abbreviated *VDB*), vol. I, 5th Session, September 20, 1959, 27f.

<sup>53</sup> Since 1945 Soviet statistics accounted for only 1.9 million German POWs in Soviet captivity. (See *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1950, vol. II: The United Nations; The Western Hemisphere* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1976), 554). Throughout the postwar years there was an ongoing argument about the exact numbers on the international diplomatic stage and Western governments frequently accused Soviet officials of presenting flawed statistics. With the partial opening of Soviet Archives since the end of the Cold War it is possible to verify that GUPV (Soviet Administration for Prison Camps) registered 2,388,443 German soldiers as prisoners of war. According to these records, about 360,000 German POWs died in captivity. However, Overmans estimates that indeed one million died overall, these additional 700,000 include mostly MIAs from the years 1941-1943. Cf. Overmans, *Deutsche militärische Verluste*, 292. See also Andreas Hilger, "Deutsche Kriegsgefangene im Wiederaufbau der Sowjetunion. Arbeitsorganisation und -leistung im Licht deutscher und russischer Quellen," in Rüdiger Overmans, *In der Hand des Feindes. Kriegsgefangenschaft von der Antike bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 1999), 44, fn. 18). The controversy was addressed in a secret "position paper" prepared by the United States Department of State in September 1950 for the United Nation's General Assembly. The State Department claimed that Soviet official numbers were "far short of the actual number of prisoners of war in Soviet custody." Backing German Chancellor Adenauer's position, it cited "German sources" which indicated that "between 1,000,000 and 1,500,000 prisoners of war who were in Soviet custody remain unaccounted for today." This seems to be confirmed by Hilger's and Overmans' research. Cf. *FRUS, 1950, vol. II: "The United Nations; The Western Hemisphere,"* 554.

<sup>54</sup> On this issue see Andreas Hilger, 'Faustpfand im Kalten Krieg? Massenverurteilungen deutscher Kriegsgefangener 1949/50 und die Repatriierung Verurteilter 1950 bis 1956,' in Andreas Hilger, Ute Schmidt, Günther Wagenlehner, eds., *Sowjetische Militärtribunale*, vol. 1: „Die Verurteilung deutscher Kriegsgefangener 1941-1953“ (Köln: Böhlau, 2001), 211-271. And Ute Schmidt, „Spätheimkehrer oder ‚Schwerstkriegsverbrecher‘? Die Gruppe der 749 ‚Nichtamnestierten,‘“ in Andreas Hilger, Ute Schmidt, Günther Wagenlehner, eds., *Sowjetische Militärtribunale*, vol. 2: „Die Verurteilung deutscher Zivilisten, 1945-1955“ (Köln: Böhlau, 2003), 273-350.



“outrage” about this injustice.<sup>55</sup> Expectedly, the KPD protested this version of the story, contested the numbers of remaining prisoners given by the federal government and recalled the historical context. Heinz Renner (1892-1964), deputy head of the KDP faction, lamented that Adenauer misused the issue for a “hate campaign against ... the Soviet Union” and questioned the Chancellor’s honest commitment to helping the POWs. Renner then recalled in a lengthy speech the high casualty numbers incurred as a result of an irresponsible Wehrmacht command since 1941, and called for a historical contextualization of these undisputedly high casualties:

The POW problem must be removed from the atmosphere of hate and needs to be treated with soberness. ...A few weeks ago, the chancellor has spoken very sensitively about the desire for security among the Western nations. If we would only have heard similar sensitive words addressed to the peoples of the Soviet Union from Mr. Adenauer in recent years, ... then this would have done much good. ... A few weeks ago, [Justice Minister] Dehler has spoken about the ‘shame of Oradour’... I am of the opinion that the people of Czechoslovakia in their Lidice, in their Auschwitz [*sic!*], the people of Poland in their Lublin, in their Warsaw Ghetto, that the peoples of the Soviet Union have lived through and suffered many thousand Oradours ... and that one has to approach matters at some point with a little bit of psychological empathy and with a sense of tact instead of engaging in an unrestrained hate campaign.<sup>56</sup>

Renner further recalled the verdict in the Manstein Trial which found the defendant guilty of “the inhumane treatment of POWs, of shooting partisans without trial, of employing POWs for forbidden and dangerous work, of the commissar order, which ordered the shooting of prisoners and commissars, of condoning the mass annihilation of Jews, of shooting hostages, of unlawful employment of civilians for fortification work, of deportation and of scorched earth policy during the retreat.” This was the only time the crimes were called by their names in the *Bundestag* during those years. Renner warned deputies interrupting his speech from the ranks of the right-wing parties *Deutsche*

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<sup>55</sup> *VDB*, vol. II, 32nd Session, January 27, 1950, 1013.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 1015f.

*Konservative Partei/Deutsche Reichsparty* that they should keep quiet when it came to the POW issue, for “you bear a great part of the responsibility for the fact that there are German POWs at all.”<sup>57</sup> Renner’s speech culminated in turmoil after he continuously accused the Adenauer administration of exploiting the POW issue for a “hate campaign” against the Soviet Union, of campaigning for “a new war” and of acting “according to the will of the USA monopoly capitalists and warmongers.” He was repeatedly interrupted by fuming deputies and the president of the Bundestag sought to pacify the renitent speaker by a call to order.<sup>58</sup>

Speaking with more calm, Renner concluded that Germans had indeed the right to know the whereabouts of their POWs, yet they had a “much greater right to learn how many dead this total, criminal war” has cost the German nation, the war “whose aim was explicitly and admittedly the physical extermination of the peoples of Poland and the Soviet Union.”<sup>59</sup> This direct reference to Hitler’s war of extermination in the East was a statement which positioned its speaker clearly outside the mainstream rhetoric of the day. Yet, Renner’s KPD remained an assembly of political outcasts because often they themselves acted as mere ideological agitators campaigning aggressively on their part for the “peace-loving Soviet Union” and against the Bonn “warmongers.”<sup>60</sup> Renner

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 1016.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 1016f.

<sup>60</sup> Already in December, KPD-deputy Max Reimann (1898-1977) had caused a scandal in the Bundestag when he compared Adenauer to Hitler and denounced his administration as *Marionettenregierung*. He also claimed that little over five years after the end of the war Bonn was harboring “new war plans ... against the peace-loving peoples of the Soviet Union.” Recalling in Stalin’s words, that Russians and Germans had suffered the most in World War Two, Reimann warned that a third world war would largely take place on German soil and lead to the physical annihilation of the German nations. *VDB*, vol. 1, 24th Session, December 12, 1949, 738-740. On the West German communists in the early Federal Republic see most

stubbornly ignored interjections from the floor that denounced the Soviets' oppressive regime in East Germany, and he refused to even acknowledge Soviet injustices done against Germans in the wake of the Wehrmacht's total defeat on the Eastern Front. This was not a time of balancing out historical guilt and weighing the amount of responsibility and suffering on both sides. The insurmountable enmity of the early Cold War ruled these debates. Ideology, i.e. anti-communism and anti-totalitarianism, as well as a deep-seated mutual distrust dominated not only the global confrontation but also the internal political conflicts. It relegated historical facts to the sphere of irrelevance.

During a debate on the POW question, Wehrmacht crimes on the Eastern Front were touched on in passing a second time. In May 1950, the Soviet News Agency TASS announced the official end to repatriation and declared that "overall, since the capitulation of Germany 1,939,063 German prisoners of war were repatriated from the Soviet Union to Germany." Beyond that, 9,717 "convicted war criminals," and 3,815 persons still under investigation for war crimes would remain in Soviet custody.<sup>61</sup> In reaction to this announcement, the *Bundestag* convened and Adenauer claimed that the fate of 1.5 million German soldiers remained uncertain and appealed to the "humanity" of the Soviet government to account for these "gruesome numbers."<sup>62</sup> The chancellor recalled crimes committed in the territories occupied by the Red Army and questioned – with good reason – the fairness and validity of Soviet war crimes tribunals. Again,

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recently Thomas Kroll, "Kommunistische Intellektuelle im westlichen Deutschland (1945-1956): Eine glaubensgeschicht-liche Untersuchung in vergleichender Perspektive," in *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 33, vol. 2 (2007), 258-288.

<sup>61</sup> Ihme-Tuchel, "Die SED und die deutschen Kriegsgefangenen," 494.

<sup>62</sup> *VDB*, vol. 3, 62nd Session, May 5, 1950, 2282.

Adenauer made no mention of the historical pre- and context. After the routine attacks from the KPD benches – Bonn used the POW issue for “preparing psychologically a new war”<sup>63</sup> – the session ended once again in turmoil and was soon closed. A few weeks later, the CDU representative Eugen Gerstenmaier (1906-1986) informed the Bundestag about the results of a government investigation into the Soviet repatriation policies and in this connection a singular reference was made to the treatment of Soviet POWs in the Third Reich, albeit without losing a word on the scale of the crimes and the role of the Wehrmacht therein: “We deeply bemoan that the rulers of the Third Reich in many ways violated international law with regards to the treatment of Soviet prisoners of war.” With his next sentence Gerstenmaier already qualified this statement: “But also with regards to the treatment of German POWs all captors have violated international law to a more or less large extent.” He criticized in particular, that the USSR refused to provide name lists of German POWs, that the prisoners were not permitted to contact relatives and denounced the proceedings and harsh sentences of Soviet war crimes tribunals.<sup>64</sup>

While the first two legislative periods of the *Bundestag* were dominated by the question of rearmament and integration into a Western security alliance, the primacy of foreign policy did not entail a consistent reflection on the causes and roots of the Cold War enmity between Germany and Russia. To the contrary, the Cold War literally prohibited a sincere reckoning of past traumata and present distrust, and the likely nexus between the two. Throughout the *Bundestag* debates dealing with rearmament and the international security situation, West German politicians hardly gave a (public) thought

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 2284.

<sup>64</sup> VDB, vol. 4, 79th Session, July 27, 1950, 2840.

on the roots, reasons and consequences of the Soviet suspicion of German rearmament deriving from the very fresh memories of “Barbarossa.” The war on the Eastern Front was mostly not even implicit in the various speeches referring to the security concerns of the Soviet Union. Only in a few instances detailed below did deputies recall certain aspects of the Wehrmacht’s invasion and occupation. Overall, the Soviet Union was exclusively viewed and addressed as aggressor – in present and past terms.

On the first anniversary of the *Bundestag*’s convention officially labeled the “Day of Commemoration of the German People,” president Theodor Heuss addressed the parliament during a formal ceremony. Speaking at first, chancellor Adenauer condoned Germany’s division and the threat looming from the East, and stressed the need to solve conflicts peacefully. Heuss’ then following speech was in one sense extraordinary. In his historical reflections he included an explicit acknowledgment of Soviet suffering during World War II – something entirely inopportune at a time during which, as he himself had stressed earlier in the same speech, the East witnessed once again a totalitarian “ideological terror (*Gesinnungsterror*)” reminiscent of the time after 1933. Heuss appealed to the need to remember the unprecedented suffering “of all” as well as to the “ability to forget” in order to prevent another war. Remilitarization was to him an unthinkable and unacceptable political endeavor. With the Wehrmacht crimes in mind, he could not imagine German soldiers bearing arms again, because “the *miles gloriosus* ... has perished after his hubris has made him the gravedigger of the fate of a nation.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> VDB, vol. 5, „Feier des Nationalen Gedenktages des Deutschen Volkes im Plenarsaal des Deutschen Bundestages,“ September 7, 1950, 3087f.

German foreign policy makers, he warned, had thus to reflect and administer this horrible legacy with “responsibility and prudence.”

It is not about fame and not about revenge but about being able to live. We have seen death striding over our home land, we have carried it ourselves to many countries. There is no one amongst us in this assembly there is no family in Germany who does not have to bemoan its dead. And it is not much different in most of the countries on the continent. One used to speak of the ‘knightly war.’ It may still exist in folk songs and school text books. Yet in reality, war has become a technical, factory-like great enterprise for the annihilation of humans and values, a force raging in anonymity [and] searching planlessly for its victims. That shall, that must be in the conscience of the decision-making men. The mothers in Russia think no different about this than the mothers in America.<sup>66</sup>

Heuss concluded his thoughts on the unacceptability of war with an implicit call to the Soviet leaders to overcome a *Deutschlandpolitik* based on “their war psychosis and war experience, because they know and sense themselves how shortsighted and erroneous this approach is.”<sup>67</sup>

If Heuss’ rhetoric was probing the limits of opportune memory in this speech, Adenauer stuck to *Realpolitik* and to his Cold War foreign policy paradigm. His analysis of the Soviet threat focused on this threat only. Until his earlier discussed remarks on the legacy of the German-Soviet war made in Moscow in 1955, the chancellor made no public reference to the years of the German occupation of Soviet territory before 1945. During the first debate on the German *Wehrbeitrag*, Adenauer started his historical remarks about the “totalitarian” Soviet Union in 1944, not in 1939 or 1941:

After the experiences which the Germans had made with the totalitarian regime of the Nazi period, after the experiences which the world has made with the totalitarian Soviet Russia since 1944 ... one thing should be the common conviction of all Germans: totalitarian states, particularly Soviet Russia don’t know law and liberty as the principal factors in the coexistence of peoples and nations; they only know one decisive factor: power. Thus, with a totalitarian state potentially successful negotiations about the solution of international questions can only be conducted if he who leads these negotiations – with Soviet Russia – is equally powerful if not more powerful than Soviet Russia.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 3088f.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 3089.

<sup>68</sup> VDB, vol. 5, 98th Session, November 8, 1950, 3564ff.

This is the quintessence of Adenauer's stand towards the Soviet Union throughout the 1950s. He – realistically – perceived the Soviet Union as the other totalitarianism of the twentieth century and in its declared expansionist aspirations as threat to Western democracy. The concept of the “policy of strength” which he deduced from these perceptions simply forbade any reference to a time when the Soviet Union was primarily the victim of aggression, namely between 1941 and 1944. The Soviet threat was not surprisingly a constant theme in the foreign policy debates of the Bundestag. Even before 1954, when Adenauer declared in the Bundestag that the ultimate goal of Soviet foreign policy was the “takeover” of Western Europe from the United States and thus the domination of the European continent,<sup>69</sup> the Soviet threat was a recurring point of more or less balanced discussion.

During a debate on the EDC and NATO in February 1952, Franz-Josef Strauss (1915-1988) of the Christian-Social Union (CSU), the later minister of defense (1956-1962), connected the current Soviet power aspirations to the Red Army's victory over Hitler: since 1945, Moscow had used the triumph over the Nazis as “steppingstone for an expansion of the Bolshevist sphere of influence.” He also reminded the parliament that the Soviet Union had started the war in 1939 along with the Nazis and that its sphere of influence has “immensely expanded” ever since.<sup>70</sup> Its long-term goal was the “shattering of Europe” and the “Bolshevization of Europe.”<sup>71</sup> Once history entered the debate, also other deputies felt prompted to comment on the aggressiveness of the Soviet Union and

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<sup>69</sup> *VDB*, vol. 19, 26th Session, April 29, 1954, 1068.

<sup>70</sup> *VDB*, vol. 10, 190th Session, February 7, 1952, 8118f.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 8123.

the brutality of the Red Army. August-Martin Euler (1908-1966, FDP) underlined Strauss' threat analysis adding that on the road to independence and equality among all nations, Germany needed to get back its prisoners from foreign countries. Specifically, Euler referred to the German POWs in the Soviet Union. It was "unjustifiable that German soldiers remain imprisoned who [had done] nothing else but to protect their lives and those of their comrades against the perfidious warfare of civilians."<sup>72</sup> This refers to the Soviet partisan war on the Eastern Front which the Wehrmacht used as pretext to hunt down and kill civilians deemed "partisan fighters" or their alleged supporters and sympathizers. Moreover, Euler sided with convicted war criminals such as Manstein and Kesselring and conditioned the rearmament of Germany with their release:

I cannot imagine that new German troops march under the windows of the [Allied] prison in Werl as long as there are sitting many deserved officers and ordinary folks next to the General Field Marshals Manstein and Kesselring, who can be blamed for nothing but to have made use of all possibilities of warfare ... in order to simply secure one's own life against a brutal and perfidious warfare. Eventually, even the American troops in Korea could not defend themselves in any another way [caught] in a conflict with perfidious, brutal bandits. These things must be plainly spoken out.<sup>73</sup>

Euler was thus well aware of the critique of the Wehrmacht's criminal warfare but declared the excessively violent conduct of war on the Eastern Front a matter of self-defense. The Korean War served as an additional welcome vehicle for the justification and retrospective absolution of Wehrmacht crimes committed in recourse to the "partisan war."

It was the SPD under Schumacher's successor Erich Ollenhauer (1901-1963) who occasionally cautioned that the Adenauer administration should take Soviet security concerns more serious. For "the Soviet Union is and remains a neighbor of the German

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 8132.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.



people.” it was occupier and a major global player, Ollenhauer noted in a debate scheduled after the West German ratification of the EDC treaty in the spring of 1954. Further, despite the Social Democrats’ continuous anticommunist stand, Soviet security concerns should be granted some validity since these were “certainly the result of realistic and interest-directed considerations” on the part of the Soviet Union. Moscow’s suggestions for a consensual security system should be taken seriously, and not all suggestions should be dismissed as “communist agitation or Bolshevik manoeuvring.”<sup>74</sup>

In spite of the SPD’s opposition to Adenauer’s „policy of strength“ and the remilitarization of West Germany, the conservative majority in the parliament deliberated and passed legislation on the establishment of the *Bundeswehr* and its integration into the Western alliance system between 1950 and 1956. The creation of armed forces inevitably placed the Wehrmacht heritage and German military tradition on the political agenda. Yet, only one aspect of the Wehrmacht’s war of extermination in the East was discussed in this context – and not particularly intensely. The question of obedience and disobedience to military orders in the new army entailed addressing the legacy of the infamous “Criminal Orders” based on which Wehrmacht units committed countless criminal acts in the course of “Operation Barbarossa.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> VDB, vol. 19, 26th Session, April 29, 1954, 1080f. Ollenhauer reiterated this view during the following months. See for example his speech in response to Adenauer’s report on his Moscow trip in September 1955. Ibid., 102nd Session, 5658. Here he declared that Adenauer’s policy of strength had failed, while the establishment of diplomatic relations between the USSE and the FRG confirmed the SPD’s stand on the normalization of relations.

<sup>75</sup> Those are “Order No. 21 Concerning Jurisdiction of Military, SS, and Police Forces During ‘Barbarossa’” (13 March 1941), “Fuehrer Decree on Regulation of Conduct of Troops in District ‘Barbarossa’ and Handling of Opposition” (13 May 1941), the “Commissar Order” (6 June 1941), and several orders Concerning the Treatment of Soviet POWs (July – December 1941). The documents are reprinted in Ueberschär, Wette, eds., “*Unternehmen Barbarossa*“, 298ff. Most recently, Jochen Böhrer,

Before looking at these considerations in connection with the *Soldatengesetz* in 1954, some remarks should be made on the general character of the *Bundeswehr* and its soldiers as the Adenauer administration envisioned it. The principle of integrating the armed forces into a democratic system was formulated early on, and it was done so by implying that an overall honorable Wehrmacht tradition could be resumed. After all, the number of “truly guilty higher officers” was so “extraordinary small,” so that Adenauer saw “the honor of the Wehrmacht ... not derogated by that.”<sup>76</sup> In a second explicit reference to the “honorable fight of the Wehrmacht,” the chancellor envisioned the “amalgamation of the moral values of the German soldierdom with democracy.” In a speech to the Bundestag on December 3, 1952, Adenauer stressed the – in his view – historical achievements of the German military tradition and its lasting value for a future West German army:

I want to declare today before this High House [and] in the name of the federal government that we respect all weapon-bearers of our nation, who have fought honorably in the name of the noble soldierly tradition on land, on the seas and in the air. We are convinced that the good reputation and the great achievements of the German soldier are and remain alive in our people in spite of all defamations of the past years. It must be our joined task – and I am certain we will solve it – to amalgamate the moral values of the German soldierdom with democracy.<sup>77</sup>

The fusion of the “honorable” military tradition with democracy was not a mere rhetorical set phrase but constituted the legal and political foundation of the *Bundeswehr*. Such declarations of honor for the old Wehrmacht were repeated in other statements by *Bundestag* deputies in reference to the character of the new army. Eugen Gerstenmaier of

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*Auftakt zum Vernichtungskrieg. Die Wehrmacht in Polen 1939* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 2006), shows that the first criminal order of the Wehrmacht were issued and executed already during the invasion of Poland not only in the spring of 1941. The war against Poland was thus quasi the “prelude” to the war of annihilation waged against the USSR two years later.

<sup>76</sup> Adenauer made this comment during a parliamentary debate in 1951. Quoted in Reichel, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung in Deutschland*, 100. See also my discussion in Chapter 2. III.

<sup>77</sup> *VDB*, vol. 14, 24th Session, December 3, 1952, 11141.

the CDU made it clear during a debate on the EDC in July of 1952 that “from the very beginning we deemed the idea of a German national army unrealistic, and that is not ... because we would capitulate before the world’s suspicion of a German army or because the German soldierdom as such has become suspicious to ourselves. Not at all!” Rather, Gerstenmaier continued, a future army would indeed “be worthy of the great tradition of the real German soldierdom” albeit inspired by the ideal of a European federation and integrated into European armed forces.<sup>78</sup> History, namely the story of the criminal culmination of the German military tradition on the Eastern Front during World War II, remained irrelevant when it came to justifying the resumption of this more than ambivalent tradition. A clear break, a distancing from the Wehrmacht’s criminal legacy of World War II, was not deemed appropriate or necessary in the Adenauer administration. Neither was it demanded on the opposition benches in the *Bundestag*.

A similar pattern of strictly eluding and selectively invoking history surfaced during the discussions over the question whether to keep the name Wehrmacht for the new army. In the spring of 1956, when the *Bundestag* deliberated the *Soldatengesetz* in a second and third reading several speakers addressed this issue. Smaller parties such as the FDP or the DP (German Party) demanded to stick to the name “Wehrmacht” for this was after all no “Nazi invention.” Besides, Germans had no reason at all “to be ashamed of this expression, neither at home nor ... abroad.”<sup>79</sup> Yet, Richard Jaeger (1913-1998), speaking for the CDU, clarified that his faction did not favor a new name because “we Germans must feel ashamed of the name ‘Wehrmacht,’” but because it would signal “a new

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<sup>78</sup> *VDB*, vol. 12, 221st Session, July 9, 1952, 9803.

<sup>79</sup> *VDB*, vol. 28, 132nd Session, March 6, 1956, 6828f..

beginning” and the name “*Bundeswehr*” (literally translating as Federal Defense Force) also stressed the “defensive character” of the army.<sup>80</sup> Jaeger also admitted that “for the man on the street in the territories formerly occupied by the Wehrmacht a shadow lays on this name.” He quickly added though that “the soldiers of the old Wehrmacht could not be blamed for that.” They simply had been members of an army under that name. This remark apparently paid only respect to the war memories of the Western allies; the Soviet Union or Poland, or the Baltic States were not on Jaeger’s mind as he concluded that “in view of these shadows it seems functional to us to avoid resentments in the allied countries.”<sup>81</sup>

Never in these debates was a precise and explicit connection made between the persisting “resentments” abroad and the Wehrmacht’s role in the former occupied territories. During the first reading of the *Soldatengesetz* in 1955, the parliament briefly discussed the question of the soldier’s duty to obey and his right to disobey (criminal) orders. Theodor Blank, Adenauer’s deputy for rearmament and first Minister of Defense (1955-1957), gave the key speech on what he called the “basic law [*Grundgesetz*] for soldierdom” and emphasized that the rule of law was the central principle of the new army. Thus, the democratic soldier was “exempt from obeying criminal orders:”

In a constitutional state it must be a commonly accepted principle that freedom will be curbed and that soldiers are subject to superior orders only so far as the special purpose and the duties of the soldier make it necessary. ... If the soldier is exempt from following criminal orders then this basic principle shines through. The question of how far [civil rights] can be curtailed, of how much the soldier’s freedom of opinion can be restricted must be decided in view of the general assessment of the soldier’s nature and tasks [and] from a current point of view. A view back – that is what I want to say explicitly

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 6830.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. Jaeger also mentioned an interesting contemporary poll according to which indeed 35 percent of the population favored the name “Wehrmacht,” but 20 percent opted for “*Bundeswehr*” although the administration had not even started to popularize the latter name.

– is of little help here. Today we want and we must set up a Wehrmacht of the whole nation based on the draft, and this Wehrmacht must live in and with democracy.<sup>82</sup>

Blank implicitly addressed the complex legacy of the Wehrmacht in the Third Reich and – specifically without being specific – referred to the infamous criminal orders which regulated the military conduct on the Eastern Front and as a result of which thousands of German soldiers committed worst atrocities. To him this question was nonetheless a question of calculating current objectives, not of reckoning with past crimes. In the few instances where the debate touched on the complex problem of differentiating between soldierly obedience and individual accountability, the speakers gave the former Wehrmacht soldiers the benefit of the doubt. Hans Merten (1908-1967), speaking for the SPD, argued that the *Soldatengesetz* solved the problem only insufficiently and that it failed to “protect subordinates” against unfair prosecution because it “ultimately burdens the subordinate with all the risk connected to the execution of a criminal order.” He added that apparently no lessons had been learned from “the last war and the trials that were held against former German soldiers by foreign powers.” In the end, those had been punished who “had feared losing their life for disobeying an order.”<sup>83</sup> This had been the “tragedy of many soldiers in the past war,” concluded Hasso von Manteuffel (1897-1978), a FDP deputy and decorated retired Wehrmacht general.<sup>84</sup> Less apologetic, but equally nebulous was a general remark made by Blank’s colleague Georg Kliesing (1911-1992, CDU). Kliesing’s statement encapsulated both, the parliament’s meek stand on the

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<sup>82</sup> VDB, vol. 26, 105th Session, October 12, 1955, 5781.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 5787.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 5794. On numerous occasions, Manteuffel demurred the „fate“ of the imprisoned Nazi war criminals, denounced the military resistance against Hitler as act of treason and cowardice, and advocated the introduction of a military oath comparable to the Führer oath.

criminal Wehrmacht legacy as well as a sincere commitment to a democratic *Bundeswehr* and the ideal of soldiers as “citizens in uniform.” Kliesing warned in the course of the debate that only if “state and Wehrmacht stood united and ready to vouch for one another” it was possible to “avoid evoking the dark shadows of a fateful *unselige* past.” Only then, the future German soldier would become “a democratic citizen in uniform” – not a “burden hindering the democratic development of our nation, but a force cultivating it.”<sup>85</sup>

There is no doubt that the Eastern Front memory had a significant impact on the political culture in both Germanys even though this chapter has demonstrated that the past was in hiding in West remilitarization, and that it was ubiquitous in the official propaganda in the East. It was only in context of the thaw in German-Soviet relations, that West German memory of the Eastern Front gradually eroded. The success of *Ostpolitik* was intricately tied to a change in the political memory of the West German political establishment, a change initiated by chancellor Ludwig Erhard (1897-1977, CDU) and fully brought out by Willy Brandt (1913-1992, SPD) during the later 1960s. Contrasting Adenauer’s position and conduct in Moscow in 1955, and the *Bundestag*’s treatment of the Eastern Front legacy in the remilitarization debates with Brandt’s political speech in 1970, demonstrates how memory formed the “cultural parameters” of West German foreign policy: while the basic parameters of Bonn’s foreign policy – Western integration, a defensive military, and the pursuit of “conciliatory policies towards its

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 5784.

neighbors” – remained unaltered for five decades, the open confrontation and integration of the Nazi past since the 1960s testifies to the profound transformation of German foreign policy which until 1945 had been dominated by notions of nationalism and power politics.<sup>86</sup> The gradually changing memory of the Eastern Front war in West Germany was a crucial part of this transformation. Without it, *Ostpolitik* would have been unthinkable, and the Bonn Republic would not have risen to the position of a widely respected player for peace and security since the 1970s.

For the moment, however, I will leave the political sphere and shift focus to the no less complex relationship between history and individual memory. Unlike after World War I, there was no “myth of the war experience” after 1945. The soldier did not come out of this war as hero; fighting and dying for one’s fatherland did not become a way of life in postwar Europe as it did after 1918.<sup>87</sup> “The Second World War was a different kind of war that would blur the distinction between the front line and the home front ... and where defeat and victory were destined to be unconditional.”<sup>88</sup> To former soldiers, American, Soviet, or German war veterans alike, it embodied the ultimate sacrifice and suffering a soldier could endure while serving his country. To German intellectuals, World War II was a “non-redemptive apocalypse” in which the image of war was fundamentally changed, and the monstrosity of the crimes ultimately marked what

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<sup>86</sup> Cf. Thomas Berger, „The power of memory and the memories of power: the cultural parameters of German foreign policy-making since 1945,” in Müller, ed., *Memory and Power*, 76-99, esp. 76f.

<sup>87</sup> George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers. Reshaping the Memories of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). And idem, “Two World Wars and the Myth of War Experience”, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 21, 4 (1986), 491-513.

<sup>88</sup> Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 201.

Hannah Arendt has called a “rupture with civilization.”<sup>89</sup> That the collectively shared experience of individually endured, witnessed and/or caused extreme violence would make it incomparably harder to come to terms with one’s own and others’ sufferings is quite obvious. Stalingrad and the brutal warfare on the Eastern Front were the central historical reference points around which such a discourse circled, often dodging, lurching and manoeuvring. The facts unearthed in the course of the war crimes trials as described above were thus heard but not comprehended in their full meaning of being “evil.” As *New York Times* correspondent Raymond Daniell phrased it in one of his comments on German reactions to the Nuremberg trial in 1946, there was an “ethical lacuna” which made it possible to accept the historical reality of certain crimes “without recognizing the concept of evil ... which is implicit in [these deeds].”<sup>90</sup> Apart from the political arena in which the truly shocking evidence for the magnitude of German war crimes should have received permanent and prominent attention, individual memories and narratives were dominated by the question of suffering. Often the question of guilt therefore could more or less comfortably be blended out. Yet, during the first postwar decade, as the following chapter demonstrates, the moral premises of these narratives did not necessarily collide with the respective official political discourse about the war on the Eastern Front as long as they fit into the demands of every-day Cold War politics.

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<sup>89</sup> See Anson Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe. German Intellectuals between Apocalypse and Catastrophe* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>90</sup> Raymond Daniell, „‘So what?’ say the Germans of Nuremberg,” *New York Times*, 2 December 1945, 5.



## **Chapter 7**

### **Peacetime Wars: Official Memory and the Integration of Individual Wartime Experiences in Postwar Germany**

“Escape and escape again – only that is the future: conversion and forgetting.”

From Stephan Hermlin's *Lieutenant Yorck of Wartenburg*

## **I. Soldiers as Perpetrators and Victims: Historical Truth, Personal Realities and the Memory of the Eastern Front**

### FORGING “LEGITIMATE NARRATIVES” OF WAR

This chapter analyses the narratives crafted in the veteran communities of East and West Germany in the 1950s about the war on the Eastern Front. The first part deals with the higher echelons of the Wehrmacht, with the historical memory of Stalingrad and the Eastern Front among the former military elites, generals and officers. A particular focus rests on the political aspects of this memory, its potential for instrumentalization in Cold War politics along the lines of the respective official narratives, and its usefulness for the integration of former Wehrmacht officers into the two opposing political systems. The second part is concerned with the political and societal roles attained by former rank-and-file soldiers – including returning prisoners of war from the Soviet Union – as they decided to become involved with veteran and party politics throughout the 1950s. In East Germany, returnees were channeled into the National Democratic Party where they were to lead the “German front generation” towards a peaceful future in a socialist Germany, or into the DSF where their experiences endowed the SED’s German-Soviet Friendship project with additional credibility. This Germany was said to have learned its lessons from the past, and its citizens pledged and practiced eternal friendship with the Soviet Union. Veterans in the West, in contrast, successfully integrated into the new pluralistic society and profited greatly from the core principles of democracy – freedom of speech and the guarantee of political and civil rights. The interest groups and lobby associations of Wehrmacht veterans participated most lively in public debates during the 1950s, and thanks to free speech, were able to interpret the legacies of “Barbarossa” as a grandiose

albeit failed military undertaking without much moral regret. The analysis of a sample of veteran publications in the FRG will illustrate how the Eastern Front war came to serve as blueprint for a future – ultimately inevitable – confrontation with Soviet Bolshevism. The lessons drawn were exclusively debated in terms of how an incompetent leadership, strategic miscalculations and tactical mistakes led to total defeat in 1945. The criminal nature of “Operation Barbarossa” was practically absent from this discourse and it thus closely resembled the contemporary political memory of the Eastern Front in West Germany.

Individual memory often collides with historical facts. This is not only a natural consequence of the limitedness of human experience but also the result of a subjective interpretation of what happened to someone or with someone.<sup>1</sup> Yet, this is not to say that individual memories *per se* are potentially false or flawed just because they represent a personal, subjective view of the past. After all, remembering is a form of coping with experience. The ability to remember and thereby to integrate personal recollections into one’s self-image and world-view is essential for the emotional and physical well-being of human beings in a society.<sup>2</sup> In times of extreme crises such as war, violence, hunger or natural disaster, this ability becomes even more crucial for the individual and also collective survival in and as a community. However, individual memories tend to cleanse the past off the unpleasant, uncomfortable or even unbearable puzzle pieces, the more so

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<sup>1</sup> See Johannes Fried, *Der Schleier der Erinnerung. Grundzüge einer historischen Memorik* (München: C.H. Beck, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Some argue that the ability to forget is of equal importance, cf. e. g. Gary Stark, Henderk M. Emrich, eds., *Vom Nutzen des Vergessens* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1996).

if these pieces contain memories of one's wrongdoings, failures, violent deeds or inability to prevent "evil."<sup>3</sup>

For soldiers, remembering war means just that: coming to terms with an experience of extreme violence and with an experience of possibly having crossed boundaries of previously held moral standards – given such a sense of right and wrong has prevailed, or reemerged after the event.<sup>4</sup> In war, participants can be both, executors of violence and victims thereof. The war on the Eastern Front saw the total brutalization of warfare climaxed by the explosion of the atomic bomb at the end of this war. Military traditions with regards to the conduct of warfare, of strategy and tactics were reduced to a mere technical status. A battle for pure survival threw conventional notions of a natural boundary between the military and civilian spheres over board and ultimately called for the physical destruction of anyone deemed an enemy.

Modern aggressive war as waged by Nazi Germany on Europe and beyond had changed the meaning of war for it no longer "just" constituted the "continuation of politics by other means" – a dictum cynical enough in itself. World War II was the continuation of Nazi policy and ideology. Yet, with the execution as "war of extermination" in the East, it also became a substitute for politics and law altogether, a way of reorganizing society according to the principle "survival of the fittest," a way of

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<sup>3</sup> For an introduction on the problem of individual vs. collective memory cf. Joanna Bourke, "Introduction 'Remembering War'," *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, 4 (2004), 473-485. Rainer Schulz, "Memory in German History: Fragmented Noises or Meaningful Voices of the Past?," *ibid.*, 637-648. Also instructive and with a focus on the correlation of memory and power is Müller, "Introduction," in Müller, ed., *Memory and Power*, 1-35.

<sup>4</sup> On the problem of NS morality and traditional morality and the subsequent lack of such as sense of right and wrong among many Germans after 1945 see Schwan, *Politik und Schuld*, 69-123.

life, an end in itself.<sup>5</sup> Many men fighting and *surviving* such a war, returned home filled with the need “to ‘bear witness’” in peacetime and a desire to make sense of what they had experienced.<sup>6</sup> Attempts at mastering the past on a personal level were manifold and ranged from sincere reckoning with one’s own role and responsibilities, to romanticizing the front experience as a tale of comradeship, suffering and heroism, to whitewashing it from any criminal acts, and to suppressing the war experience all together, never speaking of it to anyone. I call these personal struggles with memory “peacetime wars” because they challenged both, individual conceptions of the self, of past and present values and belief systems as well as the officially crafted and communicated memories of the Second World War.

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<sup>5</sup> This originates in the aestheticized war experience of World War One and its appropriation in European societies during the interwar period. See George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, esp. 53-106, 201ff.

<sup>6</sup> Joanna Bourke, “Introduction ‘Remembering’ War,” 480. Psychological research on individual trauma point to the “tyranny of the past” which befalls those who seek but fail to achieve a permanent settlement with their past experiences and remind us that coming to terms with the past is both a human desire and psychological necessity. The consequences of un-mastered memories can be severely damaging to a person’s mental and physical health: “Despite the human capacity to survive and adapt, traumatic experiences can alter people’s psychological, biological, and social equilibrium to such a degree that the memory of one particular event comes to taint all other experiences, spoiling appreciation of the present. This tyranny of the past interferes with the ability to pay attention to both new and familiar situations. When people come to concentrate selectively on reminders of their past, life tends to become colorless, and contemporary experience ceases to be a teacher.” See Bessel A. van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane, “The Black Hole of Trauma,” in van der Kolk, McFarlane, Weiseth, eds., *Traumatic Stress*, 4. Having said that, I explicitly reject recent attempts to apply the term “trauma” undifferentiated to the “perpetrators” of WWII, particularly as suggested recently by Bernhard Giesen. Giesen’s approach suggests that not the experience of brutality alone contributed to the “traumatization” of many Germans during the war – implying that experiencing violence as perpetrator can cause traumatic stress similar to that of his victims – but that it was the experience of losing power and dominance in the moment of total defeat and destruction which caused a collective trauma among many Germans at the end of the war. Ultimately, this line of argument dissociates the psychological term “trauma” from the fundamental experience of being both powerless and victimized as *the* central emotions in a traumatic situation, and, moreover, places the responsibility for an alleged “perpetrators’ trauma” on the victory of the Allies. See Bernhard Giesen, Christoph Schneider, eds., *Tätertrauma. Nationale Erinnerungen im öffentlichen Diskurs* (Konstanz: UVK Verlag, 2004), particularly Giesen’s introduction therein. And Bernhard Giesen, *Triumph and Trauma* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2004).

As German veterans of the Eastern Front returned to an occupied and soon divided country, the conditions for these mastering attempts became increasingly diverse. Yet, what returnees to the Eastern and Western parts shared was the need to rebuild a country and to integrate former combatants into a peaceful society that was soon believed to be threatened by a new conflict, only that this time a conflict could culminate in nuclear war. The demands of every-day-life and the political-ideological battles that loomed along with the daunting Cold War constituted the material, social and political context for the process of remembering war. This was the case in most European countries after 1945. What made the situation special and more complex in postwar Germany was the fact that German veterans had fought on the aggressor's side and had lost the war. For them the question of guilt was and remained a crucial issue notwithstanding whether it was dealt with by actually addressing it or by purposefully avoiding it. Memory to someone who had survived being a (potential) perpetrator was indeed not a matter of either 'forgetting' or 'remembering' but of "finding a legitimate narrative that can 'place' the self in a way that is both coherent and convincing."<sup>7</sup>

Legitimate narratives do not necessarily involve historical truth; they rather reflect the individual desire to make sense of the past, and add up to a collective memory of groups such as the veteran community. These agglomerations of legitimate, indeed *legitimizing*, narratives can also generate collectively nurtured historical legends and "myths." In general, West German society is said to have subscribed to the "myth of the clean Wehrmacht" which held that overall German troops fought within the rules and

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<sup>7</sup> Bourke, "Introduction 'Remembering War'," 480.

regulations of conventional warfare, dutifully and patriotically executing the nation's call to arms (and here, of course, "myth" is used in its popular meaning, namely that the core of it is false and historically incorrect). In this "abbreviated story of National Socialism" a few fanatic Nazis were responsible for violent excesses, if they had occurred at all. Hitler was to blame for the war and its loss: "all Germans – [including former soldiers] – were ultimately victims of a war that Hitler started but everyone lost."<sup>8</sup> In the East German case, not the Wehrmacht itself was the source for the primary "political myth" – the foundation narrative of the GDR – but the antifascist resistance.<sup>9</sup> Yet, an integral part of the "antifascist myth" was to claim that while crimes admittedly took place on the Eastern Front a transformation experience in Soviet prison camps enabled former soldiers and officers to balance out the guilt of the past. By subscribing to Soviet-style socialism, these former Wehrmacht soldiers turned around on the wrongful path and manifested this "inner reversal" (*innere Umkehr*) by reorienting their lives towards socialist antifascism. In other words, what might be called the "red version"<sup>10</sup> of the "Wehrmacht myth"

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<sup>8</sup> Robert G. Moeller, „War Stories. The Search for a Usable Past in the Federal Republic of Germany,“ *American Historical Review* 101, no. 4 (October 1996), 1013. See also Hannes Heer, „The Difficulty of Ending a War: Reactions to the Exhibition ‚War of Extermination: Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941-1944,‘“ *History Workshop Journal* 46 (1998), 187-203. Klaus Naumann, „Nachkrieg. Vernichtungskrieg, Wehrmacht und Militär in der deutschen Wahrnehmung nach 1945,“ *Mittelweg* 36 (1997), 11-25. Gabriele Rosenthal, „Vom Kriege erzählen, von den Verbrechen schweigen,“ in Heer, Naumann, eds., *Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944*, 651-663.

<sup>9</sup> For the political aspects of this myth and the attempts to establish a doctrinal reading of the (communist-centered) antifascist resistance see Simone Barck, „Widerstands-Geschichten und Helden-Berichte. Momentaufnahmen antifaschistischer Diskurse in den fünfziger Jahren,“ in Martin Sabrow, ed., *Geschichte als Herrschaftsdiskurs. Der Umgang mit der Vergangenheit in der DDR*. (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2000), 119-173. Another important work contextualizing the antifascist myth into the overall analysis of political myths in the GDR is Raina Zimmering, *Mythen in der Politik der DDR. Ein Beitrag zur Erforschung politischer Mythen* (Opladen: Leske und Budrich, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> The apt phrase "rote Lesart des Wehrmacht-Mythos" was introduced by Karen Hartewig, „Militarismus und Antifaschismus. Die Wehrmacht im kollektiven Gedächtnis der DDR“ in Greven, Wrochem, eds., *Der Krieg in der Nachkriegszeit*, 237-254, quote on 251. See also Jens Hüttmann, „Das Gedächtnis der

represented a similar eagerness to settle once and for all the question of crimes of the past by confessing to them ostentatiously, and at the same time writing off this responsibility by professing a more or less sincere affiliation with the “new Germany.”

#### REMEMBERING WAR: OF “LOST VICTORIES” AND “WON DEFEATS” IN GENERALS’

##### MEMOIRS

The group which most strongly advocated such diffuse readings of Wehrmacht and German military history was the group of former generals and officers in both, in East and West Germany. The following paragraphs examine the motives and themes in the narratives of former high-ranking military men addressing the legacy of the Wehrmacht during the early 1950s. These narratives, it may be recalled, were bordered chronologically and thematically by the findings of the Nuremburg Tribunal and its successor trials of the late 1940s and the issue of rearmament and remilitarization of Germany in the mid-1950s. The division of Germany in 1949 serves as the vantage point for my analysis because discourses on either side of the Iron Curtain were by now overshadowed, even determined by the Cold War. And for generals and officers in East and West alike, the division of Germany served as “cover-up memory” <sup>11</sup> (*Deckerinnerung*) for respectively unwelcome realities of the past: in the West, “Bolshevist aggression” posed a new threat to a world divided into the “free” and the “oppressed” nations. Therefore, recalling crimes committed against the Soviet Union

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Generäle. Zum Frontwechsel deutscher Soldaten auf die ‚Siegerseite der Geschichte,‘“ in Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, ed., *Gedächtnispolitik. Eine kritische Zwischenbilanz* (Berlin: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2003), 57-93.

<sup>11</sup> Naumann, „Nachkrieg,“ 16.



during World War II was not on the political and popular agendas. In the East, the perceived division of the world into the imperialist camp led by the United States and the community of “peace-willing countries” led by the Soviet Union called for an opportune, well-dosed invocation and commemoration of crimes committed during the war on the Eastern Front. Here too, identifying who was responsible for what crimes and in which way, was less relevant than the potential to use “anti-Soviet” crimes of the “fascists” in order to denounce the West for plotting a new aggressive war against the Soviet Union.

One of the earliest postwar documents auguring a “legitimate narrative” of the war as drafted by former high-ranking Wehrmacht generals was the so-called *Denkschrift der Generäle* (“Affidavit of the Generals”). It was prepared by former Field Marshal Walther von Brauchitsch (1881-1948),<sup>12</sup> and submitted to the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg on November 19, 1945 in order to “bear witness in the name of the entire German army.” The five signatories were the prominent generals Erich von Manstein, Franz Halder (1884-1972), Walter Warlimont (1894-1976) and Siegfried Westphal (1902-1982).<sup>13</sup> The declared goal of the pamphlet was to demonstrate that the German Wehrmacht had stood in firm opposition against the Nazi Party and the SS throughout the existence of the Third Reich. It also argued that the Wehrmacht leadership had

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<sup>12</sup> 1938 after Blomberg Affaire army supreme commander, leading General in invasions of Poland, France and Russia, various disagreements with Hitler, who dismissed and succeeded him in 1941; Brauchitsch served as witness in the Nuremberg Trial and died during his own trial before a British military court in 1948.

<sup>13</sup> The following citations are borrowed from Manfred Messerschmidt’s discussion of the *Denkschrift* excerpts in his article “Vorwärtsverteidigung. Die ‘Denkschrift der Generäle’ für den Nürnberger Gerichtshof,” in Heer, Naumann, *Vernichtungskrieg*, 531-550. The document has the archival signatory PS 3798 in the Staatsarchiv Nürnberg. It is printed in its entirety in Siegfried Westphal, *Der deutsche Generalstab auf der Anklagebank. Nürnberg 1945 – 1946. Mit einer Denkschrift von Walther von Brauchitsch, Erich von Manstein, Franz Halder, Walter Warlimont, Siegfried Westphal* (Mainz: v. Hase & Köhler, 1978), 29-87.

disapproved of nearly all of Hitler's central decisions and that they had protested war crimes.

Defensive in tone and providing no written evidence for these claims, the *Denkschrift* did little or nothing to establish the innocence of the generals accused of the thoroughly-documented charges the Allied prosecution argued before the Nuremberg Tribunal. It reflected a "cleansed memory" of the war.<sup>14</sup> Beginning with the Nazi seizure of power the document stated that the army leadership was uninvolved in and largely unsuspecting of Hitler's domestic policy agenda, and full of qualms with regards to his aggressive foreign policy. The ideological and factual proximity between National Socialism and the German military remained unmentioned. No word was said about the degree of political indoctrination and Nazi infiltration of the German armed forces between 1933 and 1939. The *Denkschrift* explained the road to war by exculpating the military leadership from any responsibility, ultimately arguing that the army was taken by surprise when Hitler decided to wage war. With regards to the war against the Soviet Union, the text initiated the "premature birth of the preventive war theory for use in postwar society."<sup>15</sup> Hitler, the argument went, realized in July 1940 that Russia might enter the war so Germany was forced to prevent such an attack by going into the offensive. These claims contradicted historical reality as the Allied prosecution had discussed it in their indictment. The evidence for a conspiracy to wage aggressive war was overwhelming and the Wehrmacht leadership's active involvement was undeniable.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Messerschmidt, "Vorwärtsverteidigung," 532.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 537.

<sup>16</sup> See my discussion in Chapter 3. I., II.

More than just the birth certificate of the preventive war theory, the *Denkschrift* was a complete distortion of the past.

For those adhering to the theory of preventive war, the innocence of the Wehrmacht was not only a necessary and logic conclusion but a natural, self-evident fact. Even though the Red Army fought an extremely brutal war and the partisan war disregarded conventional military tactics and strategy, the generals argued, Wehrmacht commanders undertook no measures that “stood in contrast to German views of discipline.” Although the infamous criminal orders for warfare on the Eastern Front were drafted under Halder’s auspices in the General Staff, the *Denkschrift* denied any share of responsibility for the ensuing war of extermination. It is thus one of the most important documents for the history of the diminishment of the Wehrmacht’s role in the Second World War. It is just as sad as it is shocking how completely remorseless and morally detached German military leaders emerged from this war – a war marked by crimes which in their dimension, radicalism and brutality could simply not have been committed without the Wehrmacht’s active involvement.

Manstein himself emerged as the strongest defender of this position. His trial in 1949 and the subsequent publication of his memoirs contributed to the popularization of the “Wehrmacht myth.” Manstein’s argumentation was a prime example of the amalgamation of prevailing anti-Russian sentiments and new Cold War necessities. Already during his trial before a British military court in Hamburg in late 1949, Manstein

had invoked the “Asiatic face of the war in the East” which the enemy could not escape.<sup>17</sup> In his view, the Soviet Union never was and never would be part of Europe: “the shadow of Asiatic despotism” lay over land and people.<sup>18</sup> It was one important lesson of the (very recent) past that this country was at once demonic and threatening to the West. Erich von Manstein, who as former commander of Army Group South under Hitler had been one of the most important military leaders of the Nazi campaign on the Eastern Front,<sup>19</sup> managed to portray himself as the victim of a misled sense of justice: not those fighting the “threat” from the East should be held accountable but Russia itself. Moreover, in fighting so unremittingly against the “barbarian Russians” on the Eastern Front, Manstein claimed in his memoirs “Lost Victories” to have acted out of “responsibility for his own soldiers.” This had been his first priority as military leader and thus also more important than fighting the National Socialist regime.<sup>20</sup> Now, four years after the end of the war and with the Cold War reaching its first peak, Manstein further claimed during his trial that all

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<sup>17</sup> Oliver von Wrochem, „Rehabilitation oder Strafverfolgung. Kriegsverbrecherprozeß gegen Generalfeldmarschall Erich von Manstein im Widerstreit britischer Interessen,“ *Mittelweg* 36, 3 (1997), 26-36, quote 32f.

<sup>18</sup> Erich von Manstein, *Aus einem Soldatenleben, 1887-1939* (Bonn: Athenäum, 1958), 159. Quoted in Michael Schröders, „Erich von Manstein - ein unpolitischer Soldat?“ in „*Unternehmen Barbarossa. Edition geschichtswissenschaftlicher Beiträge zum Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion*, ed. Wigbert Benz, 4 (2004), <http://www.historisches-centrum.de/forum/schroeders04-2.html> [08-06-2005].)

<sup>19</sup> This remains true regardless of the fact that Manstein was dismissed by Hitler in March 1943 after he had repeatedly questioned the Führer’s capacities as military leader and – convinced that the war against the USSR could be won – called for the installation of a supreme commander for the Eastern Front war theater.

<sup>20</sup> Erich von Manstein, *Verlorene Siege* (Bonn: Athenäum, 1955). Manstein implies herewith that he would have taken action against Hitler himself if only the military situation had allowed it – yet his entire career under Hitler suggests that this was a most unlikely scenario. See Oliver von Wrochem, “Keine Helden mehr. Die Wehrmachtseelite in der öffentlichen Auseinandersetzung,” in Greven, von Wrochem, *Der Krieg in der Nachkriegszeit*, 155. Wrochem also points out that thirty years later the famous German military historian Andreas Hillgruber – himself borrowing from Max Weber – adopted the responsibility argument by characterizing Manstein’s position and action as an act inspired by the ethics of responsibility (*Verantwortungsethik*) and those of the military resistance against Hitler as acts inspired by the ethics of intention (*Gesinnungsethik*). Hillgruber’s argumentation caused much resistance among historians and contributed to the outbreak of the *Historikerstreit* in 1985.

energies were to be concentrated on resuming the quasi-interrupted, unfinished fight against a familiar enemy: the Asiatic hordes, the Bolshevik menace in the East. Even as late as in 1983, when Manstein's autobiography was republished ten years after his death, these reflections of a "soldier in the twentieth century" were nothing more than a self-referential and exculpatory narrative carefully re-edited by Manstein's son Rüdiger. The fact that Manstein as the head of Army Group South had knowledge of and actively participated in war crimes against Jews, Soviet civilians, and POWs in the USSR remained something to be documented by later historians.<sup>21</sup>

But Manstein was only one of several former Wehrmacht generals and officers who enjoyed public attention and sympathy in the 1950s for writing down and publicizing their "strategic memories" and thereby creating their own genre in early West German literature.<sup>22</sup> Next to Manstein, the memoirs of Franz Halder entitled "Hitler as Commander: The Former Chief of General Staff Reports the Truth" (1949) and the "Memories of a Soldier" (1950) by Halder's later successor as Chief of Staff of the Army, Heinz Guderian (1888-1954), are two other examples of this rehabilitation literature. While Halder's and Guderian's military careers were over with the end of the war, others such as Hans Speidel (1897-1984), the former military commander in occupied France and Eastern Front veteran,) and Adolf Heusinger (1897-1982), between 1940 and 1944 chief of the operational division of the Army General Staff, actively

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<sup>21</sup> See recently the detailed account in Marcel Stein, *Generalfeldmarschall Erich von Manstein*, esp. chapter 7 „Manstein und der Holocaust,“ 212-299.

<sup>22</sup> Friedrich Gerstenberger, „Strategische Erinnerungen. Die Memoiren der deutschen Offiziere,“ in: Heer/Naumann, eds., *Vernichtungskrieg*, 620-633.

participated in the creation of the new West German army, the *Bundeswehr*.<sup>23</sup> These men's memoirs denied any criminal acts by the German Wehrmacht. War crimes either did not occur, or if so on rare occasions, not under the generals' watch, and were scattered outbursts of violence among a few brutalized soldiers.<sup>24</sup> From the perspective of military leaders who were responsible for the strategic, tactical and logistic planning and execution of war plans, these former Wehrmacht generals limited their recollections to the narrow worlds of their desks, military maps and planning tables. Lamenting the incompetence of Hitler as commander-in-chief, they mourned "lost victories" and "betrayed battles." It was not on the authors' agenda to reflect on the victims, the tremendous human costs caused by the war on the Eastern Front. They were too "preoccupied with the humiliation of defeat."<sup>25</sup>

Just as former high-ranking officers and generals created their legitimizing versions of the Second World War in West Germany, their former colleagues now residing in East Germany designed equally elaborate narratives of their own. If the strategic memoirs and memories of Manstein & co. can be subsumed under the slogan "lost victories," those former generals who opted for the path towards socialism in the GDR turned their historical experience into "won defeats." The defeat at Stalingrad functioned as the central turning point in these generals' military careers and personal biographies. It were

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<sup>23</sup> Their memoirs include Adolf Heusinger, *Befehl im Widerstreit. Schicksalsstunden der deutschen Armee. 1923-1945* (Tübingen: R. Wunderlich, 1950). And Hans Speidel, *Invasion 1944* (Tübingen: R. Wunderlich, 1949). Both served as military advisers to Adenauer and attained important position in the newly-found *Bundeswehr* in the mid-1950s: Heusinger became the first Chief of Staff of the *Bundeswehr* in 1957, retired from this post in 1964. Speidel was supreme commander of the Allied Armies in Central Europe in 1957-1963.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 626f.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 627.

Stalingrad veterans like those organized in the AeO in particular who became actively involved with the SED regime. Their ambivalent pasts as high-ranking officers in Hitler's army were not much of a burden for this ballast was simply transformed into ideological capital: by confessing wholeheartedly to having been misled under Hitler, by citing the experience of Soviet imprisonment and by claiming a complete antifascist turn-around following the defeat at Stalingrad the generals managed to smoothly integrate into the new socialist state in East Germany. Moreover, their biographies seemed not even to suffer a deep eruption at the end of the war; instead, the "Stalingraders" were able to swiftly change sides and emerged untainted on the victor's side of history.<sup>26</sup>

Most prominent among them were former generals Wilhelm Adam, Heinrich Homann, Otto Korfes, Arno von Lenski (1893-1986) and Vincenz Müller – a group of men who after war and imprisonment were politically socialized in the National Democratic Party of Germany (NDPD) and with careers in the GDR military and police forces. The fact that the SED created a special political party to appeal to former soldiers, officers and NSDAP members allowed the SED to contain and channel the political aspirations of Wehrmacht veterans in the GDR. In the East German one-party state, a "national front" of "bloc parties" underlined the SED's understanding of "democracy." The NDPD, as all other bloc parties, became an inseparable part of the "antifascist-democratic front." It was established during a time when the SED's efforts to gain control over all parties and to press them into an antifascist bloc underwent a deep crisis. In 1947

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<sup>26</sup> Jens Hüttmann, „Das Gedächtnis der Generäle: Zum Frontwechsel deutscher Soldaten auf die ‚Siegerseite‘ der Geschichte,“ Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, ed., *Gedächtnispolitik. Eine kritische Zwischenbilanz* (Berlin: Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, 2003), 57-93.

two other bloc-parties, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Liberal Democratic Party of Germany (LDP), had resisted the SED's gradual attempts to centralize economic and social policy decisions, thus refusing to accept the SED's claim to leadership in East Germany. The SED's response to this resistance was to include mass organizations, labor unions and newly founded parties into the "antifascist-democratic bloc" in order to "stabilize the cooperation between the parties."<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, in February of 1948, SVAG order No. 35 announced the formal end of denazification in the Soviet occupation zone. With this order former *unbelastete* Nazi members (so-called *Parteigenossen (Pgs)*, former NSDAP members not accused of severe crimes) and Nazi followers received the chance to "honestly participate in the securing and democratic development of Germany together with all democratic forces in society."<sup>28</sup> The NDPD was officially founded soon after with a license from SVAG dated June 16, 1948. There were about 500,000 former NSDAP members, in addition to 700,000 former *Wehrmacht* soldiers and officers residing in the Soviet zone. The primary motivation of SED and SVAG to establish a national-democratic party was to secure a smooth as possible integration of these groups into East German society. The NDPD was to serve as a "collecting basin" for denazified Nazis.<sup>29</sup>

Vincenz Müller, first head of the NDPD between 1948 and 1952, also became the first chief of staff of the GDR's paramilitary People's Police (KVP) and the National

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<sup>27</sup> Dietrich Staritz, „National-Demokratische Partei Deutschlands (NDPD),“ in Martin Broszat, Hermann Weber, eds., *SBZ-Handbuch. Staatliche Verwaltungen, Parteien, gesellschaftliche Organisationen und ihre Führungskräfte in der Sowjetischen Besatzungszone Deutschlands 1945-1949* (München: Oldenbourg, 1993), 574-583, here 574.

<sup>28</sup> Andreas Herbst, Winfried Ranke, Jürgen Winkler, eds., *So funktionierte die DDR. Lexikon der Organisationen und Institutionen*, vol. 2 (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1994), pp. 713f.

<sup>29</sup> Staritz, „National-Demokratische Partei Deutschlands (NDPD),“ pp. 574f.



People's Army (NVA).<sup>30</sup> Heinrich Homann served as deputy head of the NDPD between 1952 and 1972 and thereafter as the party's head until the end of the GDR in 1989.

Wilhelm Adam became commander in the military academy in Dresden. Otto Korfes and Homann also belonged to the "initiative group" put together by the SED politburo to prepare the founding of the AeO in 1958. As a previous chapter has demonstrated, their monthly publication *Mitteilungsblatt* discussed a wide range of military and historical topics throughout the next decade or so, and thus constitutes an important source for the semi-official discourse about the Eastern Front and Stalingrad in the GDR. Many activists in the AeO who willingly lent their biographies, expertise and voices to the SED-regime even when it walled in the country in 1961 and permanently sealed the division of their fatherland, were politically socialized in the circle around Müller and Adam in the early 1950s – a circle in which the former Wehrmacht officers' narrative of Stalingrad and the Eastern Front war was rooted.

Wilhelm Adam was one of the leading figures among former Wehrmacht generals in the young GDR. He exerted great influence on the interpretative and ideological appropriation of the memory of Stalingrad in East Germany. As a "Stalingrader," as he would call himself, he claimed to speak for all those former soldiers for whom the "hell of Stalingrad" had been *the* life-altering experience. Adam, a learned math teacher in civilian life and veteran of two world wars, had – long before his "conversion" at Stalingrad – been an early member of the Nazi Party and had even been actively involved

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<sup>30</sup> Born a craftsman's son, professional soldier since 1913, fought actively in both World Wars, since 1943 Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the 4<sup>th</sup> Army, 1944-1948 POW in the Soviet Union, BDO-member, student at the Antifa-school in Krasnogorsk.

in the Hitler Putsch in Munich in 1923. In World War II, Adam had witnessed the war on the Eastern Front and the battle at Stalingrad from within the central command of the Sixth Army. As Paulus' personal adjutant he was confronted not only with the miserable conditions under which the Sixth Army perished, but he had detailed knowledge of the Wehrmacht's criminal conduct of war on the road to Stalingrad. The Sixth Army was just as complicit in the war of extermination as other parts of Hitler's Wehrmacht – a fact rarely ever mentioned in accounts of the Sixth Army's ordeal: on its way towards Stalingrad, it followed orders to shoot “all Asians, whether soldiers or civilians” in order to take revenge for the “atrocities against our soldiers;” routinely, “political commissars” and “sectarians,” i.e. civilians, were reported captured and “dealt with” in accordance with the infamous “criminal orders” on warfare on Soviet territory.<sup>31</sup> According to the *Sonderkommando* (special command) 4a of the SS-*Einsatzgruppe C*, which followed the Sixth Army behind the front lines, the execution of 55 432 “political commissars, active communists, saboteurs, and most of all Jews of which most were captured and handed over by the Wehrmacht as Jewish POWs” could be reported in October 1941, just over three months after the invasion had begun.<sup>32</sup> Just as Wehrmacht soldiers stuck in Stalingrad in the winter of 1942/43 wrote letters to their loved ones about their torment, they had written letters home during the previous year and a half in which they approvingly detailed the “measures of revenge” taken against Jews and other civilians

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<sup>31</sup> Bernd Boll, Hans Safrian, “Auf dem Weg nach Stalingrad. Die 6. Armee 1941/42,” in Heer, Naumann, eds., *Vernichtungskrieg*, 260-296, quotes on 263, 266.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 269.

deemed enemies.<sup>33</sup> By August 1941, the killing of Jewish women and children was routinely accepted and actively supported by Sixth Army units who thus “knowingly became accomplices of genocide.”<sup>34</sup> Not surprisingly the later letters from Stalingrad rarely made mention of this brutal prehistory of the battle.<sup>35</sup>

It is important at this point to realize these historical realities for despite the SED’s eagerness to “come to terms” with German – or rather “fascist” – war crimes committed in the Soviet Union, statements of potential perpetrators were vague, recollections fuzzy and crimes hardly called by their names. Former adjutant Wilhelm Adam, by 1950 one of the leading activists in the NDPD with a military biography, exemplifies this strategy: on the one hand he capitalized greatly from the fact that he had once been on an erroneous path – and not just as a soldier, but as member of the command structure – and from the fact that he had transformed and returned from this path by devoting the remainder of this life to the new German-Soviet alliance. On the other hand, however, he was never confronted by the SED with the extent of his personal knowledge of and involvement in such “crimes.” He repeatedly referred to them exclusively as the starting point of his

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<sup>33</sup> See for example the letter by one “Franz” quoted in *ibid.*, 271f: “Dear parents! Just now I am returning from the funeral service for some of our comrades who were captured by the Russians. ... I find no words to explain. Our comrades are shackled, ears, tongues, noses and genitals are cut off, that’s how we found them. That is Russia and Jewry, the paradise of the worker. ... Revenge followed immediately. Yesterday we were merciful with the SS because every Jew we caught was shot on the spot. Today things are different. Again we found sixty mutilated comrades. Now the Jews have to bring out the dead from the cellars, arrange them nicely, and then the atrocities are shown to them. After having seen the victims they are beaten to death with clubs and spades. Until now we sent circa 1000 Jews to kingdom come, but this is way too little for what they have done.”

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas A. Kohut, Jürgen Reulecke, „‘Sterben wie eine Ratte, die der Bauer ertappt.’ Letzte Briefe aus Stalingrad,“ in Förster, ed., *Stalingrad*, 456-471. Worse, recent research has shown that once the Sixth Army had reached Stalingrad, Hitler had planned the physical extermination of the civilian population. Cf. Gert C. Lübbes, “Die 6. Armee und die Zivilbevölkerung von Stalingrad,“ *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, vol. 54, no. 1 (2006), 87-124.

inner return, but not for the sake of identifying and acknowledging the victims thereof.

This subtle dialectic of admitting and erasing guilt in one stroke was a characteristic feature of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in the GDR.<sup>36</sup>

As head of the NDPD, Adam delivered a speech to the “*Volkskammer*” – the puppet “people’s parliament” in the GDR – in January 1951 on the occasion of a joint declaration calling on the West German *Bundestag* to establish an “All-German Constitution Assembly” in order to settle the “German question” once and for all. In his role as a war veteran, Adam invoked his ambiguous past to appeal to “millions of unknown officers and soldiers who – led by us elder officers – went down a wrong path in error and guilt as a result of a false understanding of comradeship and faith.”<sup>37</sup> This *Volkskammer* session took place on January 30 and Adam used the date to recall recent German history according to the official East German view of history. World War II was retrospectively transformed into a war against the Soviet Union, against “the Soviet system and Slavs [*Slawentum*].” The more ideologically necessary and politically opportune the invocation of the German-Soviet friendship born in the ashes of a deadly arch-enmity became, the more one-dimensional evolved the history of World War II in the GDR. Just as this view of history marginalized the genocidal character of the mass murder of six million Jews, it marginalized other theaters of war, other victims of Hitler’s aggression. In turn, the Eastern Front in the Soviet Union with the battle of Stalingrad as

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<sup>36</sup> This refers to Norbert Frei’s definition of the politics of the past (*Vergangenheitspolitik*) which is often erroneously used as meaning “politics with the past.” Frei, however, employed this term in reference to the process of amnesty, rehabilitation and integration of convicted war criminals and millions of former members of the NSDAP in Adenauer’s West Germany. See for his definition, Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik*, 13f.

<sup>37</sup> Wilhelm Adam, *Heilig ist uns Deutschlands Einheit* (Berlin: Nationales Druckhaus Berlin, 1951), 4.

its legendary climax emerged as central historical reference point for any recollection of the entire war. It became the linchpin of remembering war in East Germany altogether. In Adam's words, January 30, 1951 offered the appropriate starting point to observe history's lessons as well as striking parallels to the present:

Today is the anniversary of this shameful day on which power in our fatherland was handed over to Hitler. It is the anniversary of that January 30, 1933, the day which millions of Germans saw as the beginning of the road towards military sovereignty and emancipation, as the beginning of a decisive fight to defend German customs and culture against the Soviet system and Slavdom [*Slawentum*], and precisely for that reason, they greeted it in their delusion with exultation.<sup>38</sup>

Hitler's crusade against Europe was first and foremost interpreted as a crusade against the Soviet Union and the Slavs, not as a race war against the Jews and "Jewish Bolshevism." Just as the German nation had yawned for military dominance in the 1930s – ultimately turning their aggression mainly against the Soviet Union – Adam implied that this was to happen again if the "other Germany," the GDR, was unable to stop the aggressive plans of Adenauer and Truman against the USSR. But he also recalled a second anniversary – Stalingrad:

Today is also the anniversary of January 30, 1943, the tenth anniversary of the Hitler regime, the day on which Hitler himself did not dare anymore to open his mouth, the day on which on his behalf Göring held the funeral eulogy to us Stalingraders [*uns Stalingrader die Grabrede hielt*]. I say "us Stalingraders" because I experienced the battle of Stalingrad from the first to the last day, and today eight years ago, I also listened to Göring's speech coming out of the loudspeakers, I as the former colonel in Hitler's Wehrmacht and adjutant of Field Marshal Paulus.<sup>39</sup>

Adam then set out to illustrate what being a "Stalingrader" meant in his times, and he applied this title not only to those who had actually participated in the battle in 1942/43, to those who "survived the hell of Stalingrad," and those who had perished, but also to all those "millions of Germans who went down a wrong path" and for whom Stalingrad

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

“must be a memorial and a call to reflection and return [*Einkehr und Umkehr*].”

Ultimately, Adam declared every German soldier, dead or alive, a “Stalingrader.”

In this sense, every German who wore the uniform in the first and second world war is a Stalingrader. In this sense, millions of dead Germans on the battlefields of two world wars are Stalingraders, millions who survived in lingering misery and horror – a grey army of Germans that in its size exceeds any social class and stratum, any party, any professional organization.<sup>40</sup>

Directly attacking former generals Halder, Guderian, Speidel and Heusinger who allegedly continued their anti-Soviet militarism under Adenauer’s command in the West, Adam explained why remembering Stalingrad could only lead to total inner transformation. Stalingrad was not only “the turning point of the war but it was the turning point for each and every one of us.” Recalling the misery of the German soldiers at Stalingrad – “privation,” “hunger”, “cold” and “total decay of all physical powers” in this “battle of extermination” – it was this very suffering which according to Adam has prompted his antifascist turn, not the realization and acceptance of guilt for the suffering of others. In contrast to the numerous claims after the war, that East German citizens had learned their lessons from the great crimes committed against the Soviet Union, this narrative illustrates a much narrower understanding of “learning lessons:” “The realization [*Erkenntnis*] of the senselessness of our fight ... led to the realization of a new meaning in our lives.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, the antifascist turn might well not have occurred or deemed necessary if the fight had not been senseless and doomed. Indeed, as long as the Wehrmacht was fighting on the offensive, none of the later antifascist activists in uniform found enough reason to question their participation in the war of extermination

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 4.

on the Eastern Front. Adam thus came to the conclusion, that “we former officers [have been] victims and tools” of this war, but not its motor.

Adam’s call for “civil courage” and a firm stand against “Truman’s army” – whose warfare (in Korea), he claimed parenthetically, was just as “bestial” as that of Hitler’s army – was deduced from personal experience and it had political consequences. On his side of the Iron Curtain, the only legitimate lesson to be learned from the past was that “there is nothing more devastating to peace, to the existence and future of our German people as the hate-propaganda against the Soviet Union, communism, and Slavs.”<sup>42</sup> Two years after the SED had succeeded in imposing the Soviet system on East Germany by depriving its population of the basic democratic rights and by inflicting on them an oppressive regime based on a security police network and political justice system, established bloc parties like the NDPD had fully absorbed their puppet function and backed the SED’s canting routine call for German unity and militant pacifism.

In the peculiar wording of the leader of the most nationalistic party legalized in the GDR, Adam’s National Democrats, this propaganda struggle for national unity went not without familiar chauvinistic undertones. Not only constant reference to Stalingrad but also the resumption of nationalistic sentiments characterized the NDPD’s political propaganda in the 1950s. It appealed to the “German front generation,” the party’s most important constituency. Adam explained why of all people former Wehrmacht officers were to lead the nation’s struggle for unity in the course of his above-mentioned speech to the *Volkskammer*:

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 6.

There is this beautiful and sacred word of Germany's unity. *We* must be the spokesmen of a new Germany, a beautiful and strong Germany; indeed, we are not ashamed to use this word, a beautiful and strong Germany, a Germany that is beautiful and strong because it lives in unbreakable unity and it serves peace unremittingly. ...

*Yes, we want to live in honor, we want to attain honor. ... We have done a lot that has not been beneficial to our people, its history and the German honor we all share. Now we want to do everything so that history once will write of us former officers and soldiers: they have erred a lot, but they have done even more good. They served war and consequently ended in defeat and catastrophe. But then they served peace, and here they participated to help peace prevail over war. They did it by participating in the creation of a united Germany. They participated by resiliently responding to those who sought to call them back on the old path "Without us," and by reaching out their hands to the German people in the hour when it called upon them "With us! Join in!" and they responded in the words of a holy commitment:*

*With our German people!  
For Germany and Peace!*<sup>43</sup>

This statement illustrates the self-image and self-stylization of former Wehrmacht officers in the GDR and demonstrates how it was possible that more than a few of Hitler's former soldiers were able to integrate quite well into a socialist Germany. The claimed settlement with the burdens of the past was the major precondition for these veterans' integration into GDR society and politics. Stalingrad functioned as the diachronic key metaphor in this "legitimate narrative" of the war. It encoded not only retrospectively the climax of the war against the Soviet Union but it was charged with a symbolism that included all things military in its meaning; it promised the future successful implementation of the war's supposed lessons, namely the creation of a socialist Germany founded on two corresponding *raisons d'être*: anti-fascism and alliance with the Soviet Union. This was thus a process of ostentatious personal transformation starting with the immersion in guilt and shame over participation in the

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 7f. [Emphasis in original].



war, and followed by redemption and salvation through membership in the new antifascist Germany.<sup>44</sup>

That “regretful” former Wehrmacht soldiers and officers including POWs returning from the Soviet Union were the most credible groups to represent and advocate this goal was widely believed among SED and NDPD officials. Adam’s comrade and deputy as head of the party, Heinrich Homann, also saw it as a priority to integrate former Wehrmacht soldiers into the socialist project by invoking the past as it suited. Homann confessed to having been a great believer of Hitler’s program himself who experienced his antifascist turn in Soviet imprisonment. He was one of the spiritual fathers of the NDPD’s appeal to former Wehrmacht soldiers. The way he sought to justify and legitimize the inclusion of former Nazis and soldiers exemplifies just as well how Wehrmacht officers viewed their own role in past and present. And again, the war on the Eastern Front served as legitimizing linchpin. Yet, what exactly there was to be regretted or made up for remained unspoken. In the “red version” of the “Wehrmacht myth” the ordinary soldier was misled but not criminal, guilty by association not by deed. As the NDPD’s party program of 1951 detailed: it must be differentiated between those former members of the NSDAP and former soldiers “who committed crimes” and those “who are not guilty of any crimes; between those who lied and those who erred.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> On the fashioning and refashioning of biographies to suit present political circumstances in East German communism in general, see Epstein, *The Last Revolutionaries*.

<sup>45</sup> Quote from Article 4 of the NDPD party program as passed by the III. Party Congress in June 1951. BA/SAPMO, DY 16/6340 (“Büro Bolz, Materialsammlung zur Ehemaligen-Eingliederung, 1949-1957”), pages not numbered.

What counted most for Homann was to prove one's commitment to the new system. Former officers and soldiers must demonstrate that they had "drawn the right conclusions" from the "realization" that they had given "their best to a bad cause" without ever having to spell out what exactly the deeds were from which to learn it was now their "duty." Yet, in working for peace with the "greatest energy" in 1949, it would be "forgotten, what they have done in the past, and they will be given credit for what they do in the present."<sup>46</sup> Willing veterans were ultimately given the opportunity to "erase [*sic*] the guilt and errors of the past by actively supporting the creation of a new Germany."<sup>47</sup> It remained unclear how this distinction should and could be determined.

Reflecting matters of crime and guilt with regards to the war on the Eastern Front was thus something also former Wehrmacht officers in East Germany did only in insinuations and vague recollections – despite the fact that they called this war the "greatest crime in history." How shallow this process of remembering war remained even though the Eastern Front war achieved so much attention in the official GDR propaganda is illustrated by one of Wilhelm Adam's rare detailed reference to his experience in the Eastern war. During a speech to the NDPD's IV. Party Congress in 1952, Adam explained why he had long remained indifferent to the war crimes committed against civilians in the name of his fatherland:

I believed the propaganda about the threat to our fatherland. Sure I saw that we brought misery and desolation, death and extermination to the people we attacked; but these were consequences of the aggressive war I deemed necessary. I too was intoxicated by success. One suppressed pangs of

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<sup>46</sup> Heinrich Homann, „Offizier ein Kainszeichen?“ in *Nationalzeitung*, April 3, 1949, 2. Here quoted from BA/SAPMO, DY 16/6340 ("Büro Bolz, Materialsammlung zur Ehemaligen-Eingliederung, 1949-1957"), pages not numbered.

<sup>47</sup> Heinrich Homann in *Nationalzeitung*, October 3, 1952. Here quoted from *ibid.*

conscience which emerged as a result of numerous witnessed incidents in the occupied territories. To think about them was in my view softness unworthy of an officer.<sup>48</sup>

These “numerous incidents” most likely included the shooting of women and children, the hunt and execution of Jews and the arbitrary killing and starvation of Soviet POWs. Adam and his comrades allowed no more of the true extent of German war crimes to surface in the political debate as deemed opportune to fulfill the ideological agenda. As historical analogy, Stalingrad and the Eastern Front war provided a suitable legitimizing narrative to these former officers and their political allies in the SED. As complex historical event, as historic crime scene, the war on the Eastern Front remained a blurry propaganda picture.

While on the one hand, the SED greatly profited from the officers’ commitment to “peace” and “socialism,” the regime also followed these activities with much suspicion. Despite their evident commitment to the “other Germany,” many of the former Wehrmacht officers were still believed to be “politically uncertain” and ideologically unreliable. The Ministry for State Security (MfS) ever since it was established in 1950, systematically observed the political and professional activities of these men and stood in close contact with the responsible cadres in the SED Central Committee, among them notably Erich Honecker’s Division for Security Matters.<sup>49</sup> Yet, because the SED deemed those former Wehrmacht leaders not only useful for the moral legitimization of its rule in East Germany but also indispensable for the creation and training of the GDR’s armed

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<sup>48</sup> Wilhelm Adam, Rede auf dem IV. Parteitag, 16.-19. Juni 1952. BA/SAPMO, DY16/654, pages not numbered.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Peter J. Lapp, *Ulbrichts Helfer. Wehrmachtschiffiziere im Dienste der DDR* (Bonn: Bernard & Graefe, 2000). Hüttmann, „Das Gedächtnis der Generäle,“ 82ff. And Daniel Niemetz, „Besiegt, gebraucht, gelobt, gemieden. Zum Umgang mit ehemaligen Wehrmachtschiffizieren im DDR-Militär,“ *Deutschland-Archiv*, 33 (1999), 384-386.

forces throughout the 1950s, Hitler's ex-officers were widely involved in matters of military and security policy.<sup>50</sup> Crucially, the SED used the unsettled question of personal responsibilities in Hitler's war against the Soviet Union as political pawn, as an always welcome means to put pressure on them.<sup>51</sup> Thus it was indeed in the interest of the SED to keep the details of these men's erroneous pasts undisclosed or at least not publicly debated in order to preserve a certain leverage on them in case their political reliability proved questionable. For now it is important to notice that the self-image of former Wehrmacht officers in the GDR greatly harmonized with the official reading of the war on the Eastern Front and the Wehrmacht's role in it. As with the individual "worker soldier," the SED was mostly uninterested in the officers' personal responsibilities for crimes committed there.<sup>52</sup> The declared culprits of the "fascist" Wehrmacht remained locked away in Soviet captivity – those already-mentioned 23,000 German POWs who did not return to Germany until 1955/56.

By turning attention to the issue of Eastern Front returnees repatriated by the Soviet Union and the question of guilt, the following paragraphs discuss the more or less

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<sup>50</sup> Rüdiger Wenzke, „Das unliebsame Erbe der Wehrmacht und der Aufbau der DDR-Volksarmee,“ in Müller, Volkmann, eds., *Die Wehrmacht. Mythos und Realität*, 1113-1138. Niemetz, „Besiegt, gebraucht...“, *Deutschland-Archiv*, 33 (1999), 379-384.

<sup>51</sup> Wenzke, „Das unliebsame Erbe der Wehrmacht,“ in Müller, Volkmann, eds., *Die Wehrmacht. Mythos und Realität*, 1119f.

<sup>52</sup> On the prosecution of NS crimes in the GDR see the recent comparative study by Weinke, *Die Verfolgung von NS-Tätern im geteilten Deutschland*, which also traces the many inner-German conflicts and propaganda battles over the „right dealing“ with criminal Nazis. See also the multi-volume edition of East German verdicts against persons convicted for homicidal crimes committed during the Nazi years and during the war: Laurenz Damps, ed., *DDR-Justiz und NS-Verbrechen: Sammlung ostdeutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen* (München: Saur, 2002-2004). This collection is online available at <http://www1.jur.uva.nl/junsv/ddr/DDRLfdNrfr.htm> [09/25/2005]. A conference dedicated to the comparison of East and West German prosecution of NS crimes took place in Berlin in October 2002. The conference report by Michael Greve includes a brief but extraordinary detailed and rich comparative analysis thereof, it is also online available at <http://www.michael-greve.de/rezensionen/berlin.htm> [09/25/2005].

successful integration of those thousands of POWs who returned to Germany until 1949 and who in both Germanys came to exert influence on public life and political agendas – albeit in very different ways. Joining the new political community one way or the other was one form of coping with individual memories of the Eastern Front. The extent to which these veterans’ personal recollections of the Eastern Front war shaped their political views and commitments will be the focus of the next section. Yet, getting involved is only *one* and not necessarily the most common form of “remembering war.” A majority of former soldiers, it can be said, withdrew from public life, hardly discussing their war experience at all beyond the private sphere. For them, as I will demonstrate in a subsequent chapter, literature offered both a refuge from and a haven for war memories. The comparative look at the war literature of the first postwar generation of writers in East and West Germany will thus complement this chapter’s digression into the tangled webs of individual and collective, private and public memory.

## **II. Soldiers as Citizens: Between Individual Memory and Political Integration**

### **BUILDING THE OTHER GERMANY: SOLDIERS AS CITIZENS IN THE GDR**

Of special and exemplary interest for the study of the political and social reintegration of former Wehrmacht soldiers into East German society are German POWs returning from the Soviet Union between 1945 and 1956.<sup>53</sup> These returnees all shared the Eastern Front experience and they had spent several months or years in Soviet prison

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<sup>53</sup> See my MA Thesis which covers the issue based on research in East German SED and State Security Archives: Mayer, “Friends or Enemies.” For a focused discussion of SED policy towards returning “war criminals” in the 1950s see Morina, “Instructed Silence, Constructed Memory.”

camps. In addition to the brutalized warfare, they had thus also suffered the humiliations and deprivations of imprisonment. Since veterans can be said to embody the living memory of a past war in a society, the successful reintegration of thousands of often-traumatized men poses an enormous challenge to any government seeking to implement a successful material and spiritual reconstruction process.

Out of about two million German prisoners of war repatriated from the Soviet Union between 1945 and 1949, roughly 700,000 returned to their homes in the Soviet occupation zone.<sup>54</sup> From 1950 to 1956, at least 23,000 German POWs remained in Soviet captivity as ‘war criminals.’<sup>55</sup> Those last prisoners were subsequently pardoned and released in several waves of amnesties until 1956, most of them after Chancellor Adenauer’s visit to Moscow in 1955. With the officially last prisoners of war transports arriving at the East German-Polish border in Frankfurt (Oder) in early 1950, it was still official SED policy to welcome returnees as contributors to the building of socialism. This would change dramatically thereafter. When Moscow announced that the repatriation process had come to a conclusion, it declared the remaining POWs “convicted war criminals” (in the SED’s language also called “war convicts”). On May 5,

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<sup>54</sup> Frank Biess, “‘Pioneers of a New Germany,’ 144f.

<sup>55</sup> Andreas Hilger estimates that roughly 20,000 persons have been repatriated between 1950 and 1956. See Andreas Hilger, ‘Faustpfand im Kalten Krieg? Massenverurteilungen deutscher Kriegsgefangener 1949/50 und die Repatriierung Verurteilter 1950 bis 1956,’ in: Andreas Hilger, Ute Schmidt, Günther Wagenlehner, eds., *Sowjetische Militärtribunale. Band 1: Die Verurteilung deutscher Kriegsgefangener 1941-1953* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2001), 211-271. Karner counted 25,624 returnees from 1951-1957. See: Stefan Karner, *Im Archipel GUPVI. Kriegsgefangenschaft und Internierung in der Sowjetunion 1941-1956* (Wien, München: Oldenbourg, 1995), 204. I follow my own estimates resulting from the evidence I examined and presented in my Masters Thesis: about 400 air force specialists and their families (totaling 1,000) were repatriated in November/December 1952, another 12,000 ‘convicted war criminals’ after the June uprising in 1953 and roughly 10,000 ‘war criminals’ in late 1955 and 1956. See Mayer, “Friends or Enemies,” 15-30.

1950, the Soviet news agency TASS officially announced the end of the repatriation. The Soviet Union declared that “overall, since the capitulation of Germany, 1,939,063 German prisoners of war had been repatriated from the Soviet Union to Germany.” Beyond that, 9,717 prisoners of war, who were “convicted of serious war crimes,” and 3,815 persons, who are “being investigated for war crimes” would remain in Soviet custody.<sup>56</sup> This group of unreleased POWs (which in reality was much larger numbering about 23,000<sup>57</sup>) would eventually become the SED’s collective scapegoat for war crimes committed in the Soviet Union.

The SED attributed the cathartic experience described by former generals in East Germany also to those pre-1950 returnees who were willing to join the socialist reconstruction effort in the GDR, or who at least silently accommodated in the new political system by withdrawing into their private lives. As former soldiers in Hitler’s army *and* as returning witnesses to the Soviet system, these men promised to lend the SED-regime moral credibility given they could be won over for the realization of the socialist project in a “new Germany.” Indeed, quite a few decided to share their

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 494. Responding to the TASS announcement in a US State Department “position paper” the US government indirectly accused Soviet officials of lying. From the numbers given by the Soviet Union it would appear “that there has been not one prisoner of war death since the 1947 Molotov statement.” Pointing to what the Western allies knew about the “high percentage of deaths in Soviet prisoner of war camps” this conclusion was “completely at variance” with the facts. See *Foreign Relations of the United States: The United Nations, The Western Hemisphere (FRUS)* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1976), 1950, vol. II, 554. Consequently, publication of TASS declaration triggered the United Nations’ official involvement with the repatriation question. In 1950 a special UN Ad Hoc Commission was set up. Recent scholarship supports the Western standpoint that between 500,000 and one million German POWs must have died during imprisonment in the Soviet Union, since those were unaccounted for by Soviet authorities. See Karner, *Im Archipel GUPVI*, 178.

<sup>57</sup> Morina, “Instructed Silence, Constructed Memory.” And Mayer, “Friends or Enemies.”

experience in the Soviet Union with the public and to position their personal stories of war and imprisonment into the rights and wrongs of recent German history. The foundation for this process of cooperation and accommodation with the new political situation was laid during the first GDR-wide “central meeting” of returnees in October 1949. It ran under the motto: “Returnees are and will be Friends of the Soviet Union.”

Speaking at this “central meeting of returnees” on October 29, 1949, just two weeks after the founding of the GDR, the new head of state, president Wilhelm Pieck, reassured the public that he “had been given a categorical pledge [by the Soviet government] that by January 1, 1950 all prisoners of war in the Soviet Union will have returned to their homes.”<sup>58</sup> Pieck’s presence at the conference emphasized the SED’s intention and commitment to include returnees into the political campaign for internal and external recognition and legitimization of the newly-found GDR. They were seen as the ideal “mediators between the German people and the peoples of the Soviet Union,” as Minister for Health Services and Eastern Front veteran Luitpold Steidle pointed out in his speech to the central meeting.<sup>59</sup> The challenge of forging lasting peace and friendship between the new Germany and the USSR could be mastered easier and faster if the returnees participated in this task “with honor.” President Pieck praised the returnees’ contribution to restitution in the USSR during their imprisonment where most of them had performed forced labor. He eloquently paid tribute to the POWs’ work: “With their hands’ work in

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<sup>58</sup> *Neues Deutschland*, October 30, 1949, 1.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*



the Soviet Union they have contributed to the dismantling of the wall of hate that Hitler had erected.”<sup>60</sup>

Earlier in the year, the SED had already instructed the *Länder* to properly greet the returnees upon their arrival, to offer them a warm and understanding welcome, to make them feel needed and to convey a sense of gratitude for their time served in Soviet prison and labor camps. Paul Merker, the former war-time member of the NKFD in Mexico City and by 1949 a leading SED official in the repatriation administration, had set the tone for this welcome in a memo to all *Landtage* (the regional parliaments) to which he attached a draft address to be read before returning soldiers. In his suggestions for an appropriate welcome speech, dated April 29, 1949, Merker linked the question of guilt directly with the reconstruction effort emphasizing the returnees’ double value as workers for restitution in the Soviet Union and as contributors to the reconstruction under way in East Germany:

Our entire nation is filled with great joy over the final return of the remaining German prisoners of war who had to spend several years in prison under harsh conditions. ... As much as the bitter past, as much as the Nazi war against other people which got back on our own people the most, will stick in our memory we still want to look ahead. Germany must again become a happy and beautiful country. ... We shall not forget that the majority of the prisoners of war, particularly in the Soviet Union, have already rendered great service to our country through their participation in the reconstruction work there. In the areas destroyed by the German armies, they have already greatly contributed to the restitution of part of the damage that Hitler had caused other peoples. For this reason too, these returnees deserve our help and support for they will participate even more eagerly in the peaceful and democratic reconstruction in their homeland.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Paul Merker, SED Zentralsekretariat, an alle Landesvorstände der SED, April 29, 1949, BA/SAPMO, DY30/IV/2/2022/23, 184f.

Merker was an advocate of paying restitutions not only to the former occupied territories but also to Hitler's main victim group, the Jews of Europe – a commitment which later cost him his position and all influence within the SED.<sup>62</sup>

The way Merker, Pieck and other leading SED members addressed the question of how to deal with the horrendous legacy of Nazi war and occupation in context of the return of German POWs probably represents the most thorough examination of this difficult issue in the early GDR. Far from naming concrete acts of crime, concrete crime scenes and individual perpetrators, the SED found a strategy that promised to settle the question once and for all. The general admission of responsibility for death and destruction and the simultaneous promise of active compensation by offering reparations to and forced labor in the Soviet Union put the SED – dwelling on the returnees' contribution – into a position of moral superiority.<sup>63</sup> History was paid its dues; past guilt could be redeemed with present activism, punishment accepted and atonement rendered.

The official efforts to reconcile the history of the deadly German-Soviet hostility mounted in such absurd acclamations as the following published in a *Neues Deutschland* editorial published shortly after the founding of the GDR in October of 1949: "The experience of the last war has shown that the German and the Soviet people have made the greatest sacrifices, that those two peoples have the greatest potentials in Europe for the achievement of great deeds with global importance." The authors of the editorial entitled "Everything for the Buildup of the German Democratic Republic" went on to

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<sup>62</sup> See Herf, „East German Communists and the Jewish Question.” And further the relevant chapters in Herf, *Divided Memory*.

<sup>63</sup> On the issue of reparations, removal of East German industries and the economic transformation of the Soviet zone see Naimark, *Russians in Germany*, 141-204.

invoke the “determination” and “exertion of the energies” with which the two countries had fought – against each other – during World War II. Providing they displayed the same resolution after the war, “peace in Europe” would be “secured.”<sup>64</sup> This borrows from a remark made by Stalin in a telegram congratulating the SED on the founding of the GDR.<sup>65</sup> By comparing, indeed equalizing, the suffering of the people in Germany and the Soviet Union during World War II, this East German version of the war in the East nurtured two fatal notions. First, this comparison simplified and thus relativized the tremendous losses of the Soviet Union – at least 20 million dead – and especially the unprecedented criminal energies invested in the industrialized mass murder of the European Jews. Secondly, this stream of thought blurred the line between perpetrators and victims, and thus sustained the campaign for the collective redemption of the East German population.

The rather speedy official settlement of the troubled German-Soviet past is splendidly exemplified by a decision of the SED to declare February 2, 1950, the anniversary of the Sixth Army’s capitulation at Stalingrad, a day of “Never Again!” Interestingly, the initiative to make February 2 a memorial day came from the DSF in August 1949. On August 16, 1949, during a Politburo meeting, Pieck, Ulbricht, Merker and Ackermann discussed this DSF proposal which requested to declare February 2 “Stalingrad Day.” The Politburo “approved” of the idea but added that “the day shall not be celebrated as returnees’ day but shall be commemorated under the motto ‘Never Again

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<sup>64</sup> „Alles für den Aufbau der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik,“ *Neues Deutschland*, October 19, 1949, 4.

<sup>65</sup> Printed in Deutsches Institut für Zeitgeschichte, ed., *Dokumente zur Deutschlandpolitik der Sowjetunion*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Rütten & Loening, 1957), 239.

War against the Soviet Union.”<sup>66</sup> Stalingrad was not to become a symbol for the returnees’ fate but its metaphorical meaning was to be exploited for pro-Soviet propaganda. Unlike in West Germany during the 1950s, where Stalingrad came to be a synonym for the senseless suffering and mass death of German soldiers, the East German memory of Stalingrad emphasized the battle’s potential to transport the “right lessons” of the past. The SED assured that this message was disseminated among the lower echelons of party and mass organizations. During the aforementioned first and largest “central meeting of returnees” in the GDR in October 1949, February 2 was explicitly referred to as a day of warning. A resolution of returnees from the Soviet Union fully mirrored the SED’s position on Stalingrad’s symbolic meaning and instrumental importance in a nutshell:

The day of the end of the battle of Stalingrad, the grandiose victory of the Soviet armies, the turning point in the history of the Second World War, February 2, 1950, shall become the day of warning and reflection [*Mahnung und Besinnung*]. On this day in particular, we want to devote all our energies to peace under the motto: never again war against the Soviet Union.<sup>67</sup>

Along with this declaration the returnees pledged to fulfill the „most honorable task of spreading the truth about the Soviet Union” and to “smash offensively every form of anti-Soviet hate propaganda, in whichever form it may occur.”<sup>68</sup> The tough wording suggests how smooth the transition from Wehrmacht soldier to socialist activist, from war veteran to peace fighter, could progress in a best-case-scenario.

Since prior to the foundation of the elitist AeO in 1957/58 no veterans organizations were permitted in East Germany, returnees had to find private ways of communicating

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<sup>66</sup> Protocol no. 38, meeting of the Politburo on August 16, 1949, 2. BA/SAPMO DY 30/IV/2/2/38.

<sup>67</sup> *Neues Deutschland*, October 30, 1949, 1.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

with each other about common experiences such as war injuries, traumas, nightmares, heroic deeds, crime scenes. More often, they just remained silent and confined to their families. Yet in some cases, the party invited collective communication among former Wehrmacht soldiers, the largest example of which was the “central meeting of returnees” in late 1949. Here it became clear that quite a few returnees used the window of opportunity provided by the SED to settle once and for all with their own personal pasts. At the “meeting” several statements by former POWs now organized in the DSF testified to this rather successful integration process. Speaking in the name of all returnees in the GDR, Klaus Willerding, elected representative of all former POWs in the Soviet Union, pledged: “Never again we will go to war against the Soviet Union or against any other democratic country;” “minute-long applause” followed according to *Neues Deutschland*.<sup>69</sup> In the recollection of his Eastern Front experience, Willerding adopted the official tendency to equal the war against the Soviet Union with World War II. In SED announcements of that time, “Operation Barbarossa” was increasingly portrayed as marking the actual beginning of the war; according to this interpretation, 1941 was the most crucial year of recent German history – not 1933, not 1939. With the invasion of the Soviet Union, this “greatest crime” in history, Hitler’s war was to fulfill its actual purpose: the destruction of the Soviet state and the extermination of “Jewish Bolshevism.”<sup>70</sup> In Willerding’s words: the “path of horror which drove us into imprisonment began on June 22, 1941;” it was on that day “that the greatest national catastrophe, the greatest mischief of our people saw its beginning.” And he continued that

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<sup>69</sup> *Neues Deutschland*, October 30, 1949, 1.

<sup>70</sup> See my discussion above in Chapter 5.I.

this “path was marked by crime and turpitudes (*Schandtaten*) which will forever remain an eternal monument in the history of the German people.”<sup>71</sup> It was paved with the names of Auschwitz, Maidanek, Treblinka and Lidice. The eleven-pages-long speech manuscript contains the main themes of the veterans’ stories as narrated in East Germany: on the wrong path fighting in Hitler’s army, awakening and transformation in Soviet POW camps, the antifascist turn as life-altering experience, lessons from the past leading directly to socialist activism in the present. The criminal character of the war against the Soviet Union served as the necessary initiating motif from which all further events resulted. The ritualized admission of responsibility again remained superficial and almost a matter of routine. Regardless of the fact what exactly one particular soldier had done or witnessed, the headlong admission of guilt was a necessary precondition for joining the community of transformed antifascists.

This kind of confession never prompted a criminal investigation. Former Wehrmacht soldier and prisoner Willerding is a superb example for this standardized narrative of war. He portrayed himself as one of the perpetrators without ever being precise, and without ever fearing or facing legal ramifications. What he described as having witnessed were at once concrete crimes and impersonal acts of brutality. Victims and perpetrators existed as historical bit players, not as real human beings. Referring to the time of his imprisonment, Willerding reflected his memories of guilt with the following words:

In a metaphorical sense, we were in the position of arsonists who for some coincidental reason could not get out of the house they had just burned, and who now had to put the fire out together with the tenants of the house. The destruction we had caused in the Soviet Union as soldiers in the fascist

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<sup>71</sup> Klaus Willerding, “Referat für die Zentrale Heimkehrerkonferenz am 29.10.1949,” BA/SAPMO, DY 32/10057 DSF, Büro des Sekretariats, 1.

armies were gigantic in extent. The misery we inflicted on the Soviet people was so great that all German soldiers shivered in view of the anticipated revenge.<sup>72</sup>

At this point, however, the Soviet man emerged in “all his greatness,” for German soldiers were treated as “humans beings.” However cruel the deeds of the German armies might have been, Soviet humanism was greater, and mercy came before revenge. Reminiscent of the arguments exchanged during the debate “About the Russians and About Us” in 1948/49, this instrumental narration of war crimes – instrumental because without them the Soviet Union would not have had a chance to prove ostentatiously its courage and humanism – turned history into a store of gruesome tales about war which were at the free disposal of those seeking to forge a suitable, legitimate memory of this war.

From here on the present and future role of the Soviet Union in German history and politics was self-evident. Moreover, it emerged as the logical conclusion and causal outcome of history. For those like Willerding who claimed to have undergone a complete moral and ideological make-over, the greatest lesson learned in Soviet prison camps was that the Soviet Union was the actual opposite of everything the Nazi propaganda had claimed. “Everything, all but everything, what they told us about the Soviet Union, had been a lie, nothing but a lie.”<sup>73</sup> While imprisoned, the soldiers not only got to know the “great achievements” of Soviet culture – “the greatest culture in the twentieth century” – but were also given the opportunity to become familiar with the “cultural creations” of the German people, most of all the history of the workers movement and scientific

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 2.

Marxism. Working jointly with the Soviet population to rebuild the country, the POWs had started to build German-Soviet friendships even before the war was over, the story continued. The more they became familiarized with the “nature of the Soviet state” and the more they realized “the absolute honesty of Soviet politics,” the “greater was [their] acknowledgment of [their] own guilt which [they] had loaded on [themselves] by participating in the fascist Hitler-war.”<sup>74</sup>

In reality, hundreds of thousands of German POWs served years of forced labor, many of whom were convicted to twenty-five years imprisonment for “war crimes” before a Soviet military tribunal void of any legal principles.<sup>75</sup> Estimates claim that out of three million German soldiers captured by the Red Army, about one million died while taken captive, on their way to the prison camps or in Soviet captivity.<sup>76</sup> A significant number of former Wehrmacht soldiers and officers, however, had joined or were forced to join the antifascist movement in the Soviet Union during the war. This group of veterans had, of course, a different, a positive story to tell. In most Soviet prisoner of war camps “antifascist committees” were set up to recruit soldiers for the cause of antifascism and communism. For soldiers considered particularly strong anti-Nazis, special “Antifa-

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 3f.

<sup>75</sup> Andreas Hilger, ‘Faustpfand im Kalten Krieg?’. And Martin Lang, *Stalins Straffjustiz gegen deutsche Soldaten. Die Massenprozesse gegen deutsche Kriegsgefangene in den Jahren 1949 und 1950 in historischer Sicht* (Herford: E.S. Mittler & Söhne, 1981). On the conditions of German POWs in Soviet prison camps see Karner, *Im Archipel GUPVI*. And Albrecht Lehmann, *Gefangenschaft und Heimkehr. Deutsche Kriegsgefangene in der Sowjetunion* (München: C.H. Beck, 1986). And Overmans, ed., *Soldaten hinter Stacheldraht*, which provides a comparative perspective on German POWs in American, French and Soviet imprisonment.

<sup>76</sup> Cf. Overmans, *Deutsche militärische Verluste*, 292. Included in this number are about 700,000 missing in action between 1941-1943.



schools” were set up all across the Soviet Union.<sup>77</sup> The general goal of these re-education efforts was to familiarize the POWs with the works of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Vladimir I. Lenin and Joseph Stalin and to instill them with a new understanding of German history, i.e. as the history of class struggle and revolution. After the end of the war, the political message in these schools shifted from antifascism to anti-Imperialism. Returnees from these schools played not only an important role in the SED’s official history propaganda but they attained political and strategic value: an internal SED statistic of 1951 shows that by that time, 5,776 Antifa-school graduates held positions in the GDR government or the public service, including the police and security apparatus.<sup>78</sup> Returnees with Antifa-school education thus played a major role in assuring the socialist reconstruction of East Germany, and were especially valuable for the establishment of a modern police state.<sup>79</sup>

The reintegration experience of former POWs returning from the Soviet Union to East Germany thus ranged from ‘significant conflict’ with the new political order to

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<sup>77</sup> Classes there would take place until as late as 1949. During the war at least 20,000 German prisoners of war graduated from the three-month courses in over 50 Antifa-schools in the Soviet Union, and about a further 50,000 from camp schools. Between 1945 and 1949 another 85,000 attended these schools. See Arthur L. Smith, *The War for the German Mind: Re-Educating Hitler’s Soldiers*. (Providence, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1996), 193.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 192f. On the SED policy towards the Antifa-graduates see also Jörg Morré, “Kader für Deutschland? Die Bemühungen der SED um die Repatriierung antifaschistischer Kriegsgefangener,” in Annette Kaminsky, ed., *Heimkehr 1948* (München: C.H. Beck, 1998), 217-231.

<sup>79</sup> Bernd von Kügelen, former member of the NKFD and POW summarized this importance after the collapse of the GDR: “Former Antifa students had every trust. Without them the building of the People’s Police and the basic organs of self-administration, later the state apparatus of the GDR, would not have been possible. [...] One found them in highest posts in the ministries, state administration, businesses, cultural institutions, and publishing [...]” Quoted in Smith, *The War for the German Mind*, 194. Kügelen was a prominent editor of several newspapers and magazines (*Berliner Zeitung*, *Neue Berliner Illustrierte*, *Sonntag*) and active member of the *Kulturbund*.

‘acquiescence, accommodation, and appropriation’ in the Soviet zone.<sup>80</sup> Frank Biess has approached the question of the post-war returnees’ reintegration by focusing on the (re-) creation of male and military identities and citizenship.<sup>81</sup> The reality of war and imprisonment, however diverse it may have been, was tuned into a story of “reflection and return” among those returnees who actively sought integration into a socialist GDR. Like former Wehrmacht generals, former soldiers too crafted and aestheticized their personal ordeal into a “legitimate narrative” of war and thus became an important lender of legitimization to the SED regime. Willerding’s “Never again”-pledge represents an example for the partial success of the SED’s strategy to remake former Wehrmacht soldiers into “friends” and “brothers” of the Soviet Union. A significant number of returnees catalyzed the war experience into the peace rhetoric of the ruling party and became faithful supporters of the SED regime.

These considerations, however, apply only to those POWs returning before 1950. Those former soldiers remaining in Soviet captivity after 1949, the declared “war criminals,” were *per se* excluded from the creation of a new, socialist, antifascist collective consciousness in East Germany. If they returned to the GDR and decided to

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<sup>80</sup> Frank Biess, “Pioneers of a New Germany,” 179. See also my work which analyses the divided SED’s political and propagandistic strategies concerning the reception and integration of former *Wehrmacht* soldiers returning from the Soviet Union as “ordinary,” desired and welcomed POWs until 1949, and as “war convicts” or *Kriegsverbrecher* between 1950 and 1956. See Mayer, “Friends or Enemies.” And Morina, “Instructed Silence, Constructed Memory.”

<sup>81</sup> See Ibid. Idem, *The Protracted War: Returning POWs and the Making of East and West German Citizens, 1945-1955* (PhD Thesis, Brown University, 2000). And idem, *Homecomings*. Idem, “Men of Reconstruction – Reconstruction of Men: Returning POWs in East and West Germany, 1945-1955,” in Karen Hagemann, Stefanie Schüler-Springorum, eds., *Home-Front: The Military, War and Gender in Twentieth Century Germany* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), 335-358. Idem, “Survivors of Totalitarianism: Returning POWs and the Reconstruction of Masculine Citizenship in West Germany, 1949-1968,” in Schissler, ed., *The Miracle Years*, 57-82.

stay there, they found their way into society by confining themselves to their workplaces and families with no participation in the political process whatsoever.<sup>82</sup>

Hence, among Eastern Front veterans returning to East Germany responses to this mode of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* varied and ranged from “open resistance” to “accommodation and genuine consensus.”<sup>83</sup> Some like Klaus Willerding managed to accommodate and became involved in the socialist experiment by settling the question of personal guilt as described above: subscribing to antifascist socialism promised and delivered redemption from the crimes and errors of the past. Beyond the putative radical break during the “reflection and return” process in Soviet prison camps, this political and mental settling in to the new system in East Germany was by no means the result of a total negation of the past. Rather and in a very subtle way, the willingness to cooperate and support the GDR “was based to a considerable degree on the continuity of certain mental dispositions among returning POWs from the war to the postwar period, such as the adherence to a distinct ethic of performance or to a rather militaristic emphasis on struggle and fighting.”<sup>84</sup> What appears to be a contradiction to official SED policy in terms of coming to terms with the Nazi past was, in fact, very much in congruence with the SED’s interpretation of history and its implications for the present. As the official attempts to connect the fate of the Soviet people to that of the Germans demonstrate, the SED sought to include past strengths and traditional virtues, such as determination to fight a war, among the principles upon which the GDR was to rest. The emphasis on the

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<sup>82</sup> Cf. my discussion in Mayer, “Friends or Enemies,” 142f.

<sup>83</sup> Biess, „Pioneers of a New Germany,” 179.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 179.

two peoples' "greatest potentials" that had clashed in the war between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union – invoking the extraordinary "exertion of energies"<sup>85</sup> with which the Eastern Front war was fought – supports Biess' observation that postwar communist antifascism matched well with the prevailing militaristic sentiments among returning soldiers.

Antifascist returnees, in particular, cherished and nurtured certain continuities between their past in the *Wehrmacht* and their present commitment to the socialist state. Before 1945, they had fought for a "final victory" in Hitler's army; they filled their "new roles as fighters for the 'forces of progress'" with similar fervor and dedication.<sup>86</sup> Returnees who supported the SED were thus able to "hold on to militaristic ideals of manliness which had determined their earlier life as Hitler's soldiers and continued to shape their postwar lives as party soldiers."<sup>87</sup> In a poem, entitled "Fight" and dedicated to the SED in 1948, a returnee formulated why and how the "fight" has to be continued:

We see in this struggle between the elements  
 a parable of our own struggle  
 a glance as the future opens up  
 and the certainty reaches all of us:  
 victory is ours  
 because time is ripe  
 and everybody takes an oath anew at this hour  
 fight!  
 fight and victory!  
 loyally following the red flag  
 through the roaring into the last battle  
 until it breaks through the night of the peoples  
 as a shining signal.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> *Neues Deutschland*, October 19, 1949, 4.

<sup>86</sup> Biess, "Pioneers of a New Germany," 178.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> Quoted in and translated by Biess, *Ibid.*, 178.

A “Pledge of the Antifa-Students,” drafted by German POWs in Moscow in 1949, struck a similar tone. Both in language and style it testified to an attitude reminiscent of the total dedication to “Fuhrer, nation and fatherland” under the Nazis:

I – son of the German nation – pledge to fight out of glowing love for my people, my homeland and my family until my people is free and happy, until the dishonor and shame of fascist barbarism is washed away, until Hitler fascism is extinguished.

I pledge: To invest all my abilities, all my energies and my life unconditionally and to be faithful to my nation until the last drop of blood.

This pledge bonds me with all antifascists in the brotherly and loyal struggle until the final victory of our sacred cause.<sup>89</sup>

The SED was certainly aware of these continuities, not least because some of its functionaries shared authentic similar war or resistance experiences. Ironically, the synthesis between the official concept of the East German nation and the prevailing “mental dispositions” of returning POWs quite successfully facilitated the “fashioning of new social identities”<sup>90</sup> among antifascist returnees.

Another social haven and “collective basin”<sup>91</sup> for former Wehrmacht soldiers and former members of the Nazi party alike was the already mentioned NDPD. Most of the founding members were former NSDAP members, returnees from Soviet imprisonment and former Wehrmacht officers such as the “Stalingraders” around Wilhelm Adam. Thus, the SED ensured that the NDPD would be dominated by reliable leaders, one of whom was Lothar Bolz (1903-1986). Bolz had spent the wartime years in Soviet exile, teaching in Antifa-schools and POW camps for the NKFD. From 1953 until 1965 he served also as

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<sup>89</sup> „Gelöbniß der Antifaschüler“, Moskau 1949, attached to the “Welcome Address” of a group of returnees, all “German democrats, German patriots” at the Congress of the Society for the Study of Soviet Culture, 1949. BA/SAPMO, DY 32/11460, “2. Kongreß der DSF,” not numbered.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>91</sup> Staritz, „National-Demokratische Partei Deutschlands (NDPD),“ 574.

Foreign Minister of the GDR. As already discussed, the NDPD struck a nationalistic tone in its program and rhetoric, and put the main focus on the “German question.” The NDPD did not call for a clear break with Germany’s nationalist and militaristic past, but rather built upon and encouraged old “patriotic” sentiments. The self-proclaimed key principle of the party was to “put the nation’s interests above everything else.”<sup>92</sup> Apparently the party was an appealing alternative to veterans, nationalists and former National Socialists in the one-party-state. In 1951, denazified *Pgs* alone made up forty-two percent of all 100,000 NDPD members. In the spring of 1953, the membership numbers had more than doubled to 232,605. By then the NDPD had become the strongest party within the “antifascist-communist bloc.”<sup>93</sup>

One likely reason for the rapid increase in membership was the party’s campaign “Call to the German Front Generation of the Second World War” initiated by the IV. Party Congress in June of 1952 in Leipzig. The head of the Berlin regional branch, former Air Force major Egbert von Frankenberg (1909-2000),<sup>94</sup> presented a paper entitled “Germany’s Future – not Destiny but Self-Determination.” He began with a “call to the front generation” and declared that the NDPD, above everything else, condemned the continuous presence of the four occupation powers in Germany seven years after the war. According to von Frankenberg, “this [was] a humiliation of our German nation and an insult to our national pride.” The “Call,” soon thereafter published in the form of a leaflet,

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<sup>92</sup> „Ruf an die deutsche Frontgeneration des zweiten Weltkrieges,“ June 1952. BA/SAPMO DY 16/1431.

<sup>93</sup> Staritz, „National-Demokratische Partei Deutschlands (NDPD),“ 576.

<sup>94</sup> An officer’s son, air force training, 1931 NSDAP, 1935-1945 Wehrmacht Major, volunteer of the Legion Condor in Spanish Civil War 1938/39, Eastern Front, 1943-1948 POW, NKFD/BDO founding member, agent for the Soviet military secret service; 1949 NDPD, expert on military matters, in 1956 acknowledged as “*Verfolgter des Naziregimes*” (Persecuted by the Nazis); 1958-1972 leading member of the AeO.

attacked the Western rejection of Stalin's "peace offensives" of March 10, 1952,<sup>95</sup> occasionally perceived as a missed opportunity for the unification of Germany. And – in the struggle for German unity the "German front generation" was to be appreciated as a "great national force that must not be excluded or ignored."<sup>96</sup>

The use of nationalist sentiments to further a political cause was part of the SED's propaganda and strategy from the very beginning.<sup>97</sup> There was no choice but to address public concerns about a permanent division of Germany, even if it meant to nurture nationalism, which in communist thinking was an obsolete bourgeois construct. Resulting from the inherently contradictory juxtaposition of Marxist-Leninist socialism and nationalism, the "SED's policy regarding the state of the German nation was always subordinate to other policy objectives."<sup>98</sup> Conveniently, the NDPD could more or less freely incorporate and express strong nationalist views. Sanctioned by the SED, it became a party that constituted the perfect ideological home for former members of the Wehrmacht and the Nazi Party. While the SED could not and would not – outwardly – carry on political and militaristic ideals of the Third Reich, the NDPD did so. Reviving a certain terminology (e.g. struggle, fatherland, patriotism) and traditional values, it resumed deeply rooted visions of a strong, unified and independent Germany. The "Call's" central message was thus:

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<sup>95</sup> For a discussion of Stalin's unexpected proposal to exchange reunification for neutralization and the Western response see: Ruud van Dijk, "The 1952 Stalin Note Debate: Myth or Missed Opportunity for German Unification?" *CWIHP Working Paper* No. 14, May 1996. Gaddis, *We Now Know*, 125-131. Wilfried Loth, *Stalin's Unwanted Child. The Soviet Union, the German Question, and the founding of the GDR* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), 132-140. And Gerhard Wettig, "Stalin and German Reunification: Archival Evidence on Soviet Foreign Policy in the Spring of 1952," *Historical Journal* 37, 1994, 411-419.

<sup>96</sup> „Ruf an die deutsche Frontgeneration des zweiten Weltkrieges," June 1952. BA/SAPMO DY 16/1431.

<sup>97</sup> McKay, *Official Concept of the Nation*.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

In Germany there are two states today, two governments and many parties. But there is only one German people, who has only one longing: unity and peace for our fatherland! The love and loyalty of our common fatherland unifies all classes of our people. ...  
*Germany's future is not destiny, but self-determination. Let us Germans take the creation of our future in our own hands at last! Then we will be the masters over all of Germany!*<sup>99</sup>

This self-confident reassertion of Germany's strength and sovereignty was balanced with the equal emphasis on the GDR-USSR alliance and friendship. "Russia will always be our greatest and most powerful neighbor," the "Call" continued and claimed that Germany had always fared well as long as it maintained friendly relations to "Russia" in the past. Without sparing a word on the German invasion of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Front war, the pamphlet brushed over the recent past and reiterated the importance of "Russia" today:

The weight of the Soviet Union in global politics has grown by a multiple compared to old Russia. A good neighborly relationship with the Soviet Union is the foreign-policy precondition for a successful national policy, the guarantee for securing peace in Europe.<sup>100</sup>

With this sophisticated synthesis of the concept of the classless society and the idea of national unity on the one hand, and the emphasis on the Soviet Union's historically risen role as the protégé and eternal friend of Germany on the other, the NDPD could function as an integrative force linking together nationalism and socialism, particularly for those who potentially remained rather skeptical of the new socialist system in East Germany.

In an additional effort to further those persons' political and social integration, the SED politburo accepted on September 2, 1952 the draft for a "Law on the Annulment of Restrictions for Former Members of the NSDAP and its Subdivisions and Former

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<sup>99</sup> „Ruf an die deutsche Frontgeneration des zweiten Weltkrieges“, June 1952. BA/SAPMO DY 16/1431. [Emphasis in original]

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.



Officers.” In its commentary to the law, the politburo stressed that the “overwhelming majority” of former NDSAP members and officers of the “fascist Wehrmacht” had “actively participated” in the reconstruction of “political, economic and cultural life in a peaceful and democratic Germany.” Furthermore, the Politburo clarified that the SED’s policy towards these groups was never “based on feelings of revenge” but instead sought to provide “every German who loves his fatherland with unrestricted possibilities to participate in the construction of socialism.”<sup>101</sup> The NDPD soon felt the effects of the new law as its membership numbers doubled between 1951 and 1953. Ever since its establishment the party had addressed the issue of rehabilitation the most explicitly. A lecture guide for the NDPD’s party-school [*Parteischule*] made an explicit connection between the “Call to the Front Generation” campaign and the rehabilitation law of September 1952. Echoing the Politburo’s view, it was stressed that once they had “realized their political errors,” former NSDAP and *Wehrmacht* members could “compensate” through “powerful assistance in the reconstruction.” The guiding principle was: “First one must give something to the nation before one can receive anything from it.”<sup>102</sup> Joining in the official SED line, the NDPD’s “Call” campaign manifested that the “question of former members of the NSDAP and former soldiers and officers” had been resolved in the GDR.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> „Anlage Nr. 1 zum Protokoll Nr. 129/52,“ politburo meeting on September 2, 1952. BA/SAPMO DY30/IV 2/2/229, 14.

<sup>102</sup> „Lektion für die Kreispartei-schule ,Unsere Propaganda nach Westdeutschland.“ BA/SAPMO DY16/1521, 4-6.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

By 1952, denazification was officially declared a success and completed in the Eastern part of Germany. The mechanism of redemption by affiliation with the new system proved to be a useful instrument facilitating the integration of war and Nazi party veterans. Both groups were offered the chance to redeem themselves by embracing socialism as Germany's future path. It is remarkable how strongly SED, NDPD and organized veterans in the GDR believed in the possibility of "making up" for historical guilt, of "washing it away" as the "Pledge of the Antifa-Students" had phrased it.<sup>104</sup> In this peculiar sense, East German society was more thoroughly pervaded by a *Schlußstrich* mentality than West Germany. While this mentality largely disappeared from the political memory after the end of the era Adenauer in the West, it remained a constant theme in the "antifascist" GDR which had settled the question of German guilt by in fact "externalizing" the Nazi past to the "reactionary" Bonn republic.

#### INTEGRATION VS. MEMORY: THE EASTERN FRONT EXPERIENCE AND THE POLITICS OF THE PAST AMONG THE VETERAN COMMUNITY IN ADENAUER'S GERMANY

Reintegrating former Wehrmacht soldiers into a socialist Germany was a difficult but not impossible task. Equally ambiguous, yet certainly more successful were the politics of integration and rehabilitation in Adenauer's West Germany. Norbert Frei has characterized the 1950s as the era of the "politics of the past" (*Vergangenheitspolitik*), i.e. the process of "amnestying and integrating former supporters of the Third Reich on the

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<sup>104</sup> „Gelöbnis der Antifaschüler“, Moskau 1949, attached to the "Welcome Address" of a group of returnees, all "German democrats, German patriots" at the Congress of the Society for the Study of Soviet Culture, 1949. BA/SAPMO, DY 32/11460, "2. Kongreß der DSF," not numbered.

one hand, completing a normative separation from Nazism on the other.”<sup>105</sup> Frei has demonstrated that the politics of the past aimed not only at the complete political, economic and social rehabilitation of former members of the NSDAP, Wehrmacht and even Waffen-SS. *Vergangenheitspolitik* also fulfilled a public desire to settle once and for all with the past, to draw a final line under history (*Schlußstrich*) and to identify convicted war criminals as “victims” of “victors’ justice” and to defend these “war convicts” along with all Germans against the supposed collective guilt campaign of the Allies.<sup>106</sup> As a result of this collective consensus to selectively remember the past as it fit, the postwar integration of former members of the Nazi Party, Wehrmacht soldiers and veterans of the Waffen-SS, is widely regarded as having been successful.<sup>107</sup> Most of all,

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<sup>105</sup> Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik*, 397. Here quoted from the English edition *Adenauer’s Germany and the Nazi Past: The Politics of Amnesty and Integration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 303.

<sup>106</sup> For a broad analysis of the slow but steady erosion of this consensus until the 1990s see Wrochem, “Keine Helden mehr,” 151-165. And specifically on the “politics of honor,” i.e. the rehabilitating of professional Wehrmacht soldiers in the early Federal Republic, see Bert-Oliver Manig, *Die Politik der Ehre. Die Rehabilitation der Berufssoldaten in der frühen Bundesrepublik* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2004).

<sup>107</sup> See the excellent scholarship on these veteran groups: James M. Diehl, *The Thanks of the Fatherland: German Veterans after the Second World War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993) places emphasis on the social and material hardship faced by veterans, their relatives, war widows and orphans, arguing that the establishment of an extensive welfare net for POWs, widows, disabled, former soldiers ect. along with the emergence of various lobby groups advocating such a course of action was essential to the integration of these millions into West German society. Jay Lockenour, *Soldiers as Citizens: Former Wehrmacht Officers in the Federal Republic of Germany, 1945-1955* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002) demonstrates – wary of the anti-democratic and “un-political” tradition of the German military – how former officers found ways to accommodate to the young democracy by competing to define the outlook of democratic discourse and politics rather than seeking to undermine it. David Clay Large, “Reckoning without the Past: The HIAG of the Waffen-SS and the Politics of Rehabilitation in the Bonn Republic, 1950-1961,” *The Journal of Modern History*, 59, 1 (1987), 79-113, and Karsten Wilke, “Organisierte Veteranen der Waffen-SS zwischen Systemopposition und Integration. Die ‘Hilfsgemeinschaft auf Gegenseitigkeit der Angehörigen der ehemaligen Waffen-SS’ (HIAG) in der frühen Bundesrepublik,” *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 53, 2 (2005), 149-166, deal with the political and legal rehabilitation and social and material provisions for members of the former Waffen-SS. HIAG worked successfully for the recognition of this group in the West German public by arguing that veterans of the Waffen-SS were soldiers just like any other; therefore they profited greatly from the “clean Wehrmacht”-myth. Finally, Robert Moeller’s work on POWs and expellees in the 1950s must be mentioned which illustrates the great importance of collectively shared images of the past as they were formulated by but more often about returnees and expulsion victims in literature, the print media, in

the remilitarization and international integration of West Germany secured a firm and rather smooth transition of former soldiers into the new armed forces based on democratic principles and rooted within the Western alliance system. A more than decade-long debate surrounding the rearmament process renegotiated older military traditions as well as character and role of the “German soldier” in modern war in light of the Wehrmacht legacy even if the criminal part of the story was neglected well into the 1960s.<sup>108</sup>

The process of *Vergangenheitspolitik* encompassed and nurtured an atmosphere of collective negation of individual guilt. The famous dictum coined by Eugen Kogon in 1947, that everyone must be granted the “right to political error” became the basic principle of the politics of the past in Adenauer’s Germany. Not dissimilar to the results of the “inner turn” propaganda in the East, former soldiers of the Wehrmacht were given a democratic way out of the intricate question of guilt: at the expense of historical truth, war veterans could forge their narratives of the war without addressing explicitly its criminal history and legacy. Claiming that fighting on the German side in World War II was just as patriotic a duty as fighting on the other sides of this war, veterans could imbue their experiences and memories with a meaning. The criminal character of the aggressive

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numerous radio and television pieces, and in movies. These popular modes of selectively coming to terms with past – of finding a “usable past” in individuals’ “war stories” had but one central motif: the victimization of the German people, and one central function: the integration of these millions into West German society – it was a discourse of victimhood fit to integrate individual suffering into a narrative of new national identity and collective memory, a discourse void of the question of guilt. See Moeller, “War Stories.” Idem, *War Stories*. And idem, “Heimkehr ins Vaterland: Die Remaskulinisierung Westdeutschlands in den fünfziger Jahren,” *Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift*, 60 (2001), 403-436.

<sup>108</sup> Abenheim, *Reforging the Iron Cross*. And for the international dimension of the debate see Wettig, *Entmilitarisierung und Wiederbewaffnung*.

wars waged by Nazi Germany was persistently brushed aside.<sup>109</sup> Moreover, the Cold War provided this discourse with the necessary interpretative framework within which World War II, and particularly the war against the Soviet Union, attained political meaning, even retrospective legitimization. The continuity of anti-Bolshevist rhetoric in the early FRG is a striking and disturbing aspect of the discourses over the past and the selective memory of the war on the Eastern Front makes this scandalum most clear and visible.

This can be illustrated with excerpts from various important publications circling among organized veterans in the 1950s, i.e. monthly journals and member newsletters of the two largest veteran organizations: the publications *Soldat im Volk* and *Mitteilungen* of the “Association of German Soldiers” (*Verband deutscher Soldaten e. V.*) as well as the journal *Wehrkunde* of the “Association for Military Studies” (*Gesellschaft für Wehrkunde e. V.*). Truly representing the “front generation” and followers of a sovereign and remilitarized albeit peaceful Germany, these publications reached thousands of interested readers. They greatly contributed to both the integration of former soldiers into a democratic political culture, and the articulation of distinct veteran positions on issues of present-day politics and historical significance. They are a hitherto neglected but extraordinary rich source for the genesis of historical memory among German war veterans as they articulated a peculiar mix of individual (hi-)stories and collective memories along with their “proper” appropriation of these recollections on the challenges of the day.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik*, 405. See on the context also Chapter 5.II. and 6. III.

<sup>110</sup> *Soldat im Volk* (“Soldier in the People”) appears monthly since 1954 until today; in recent years, the paper is suspected to be undermined by right-wing extremists.

The discourse among former Wehrmacht soldiers and officers about the legacies of Stalingrad and the Eastern Front in West Germany reached in part obscure dimensions. As a rule, far from being marginalized as in the political debates, the Eastern Front *was* discussed prominently, namely as an avoidable military disaster from which Germany's modern armed forces were to learn the right lessons. The fact that "Barbarossa" had been an aggressive war, that it had been waged in violation of international law and in breach of a bilateral contract remained unreflected. At most, it was falsely claimed, that the entire Wehrmacht leadership opposed Hitler's plans to attack the Soviet Union and proceeded with the invasion more or less unvoluntarily. According to the West German veterans narratives, the Wehrmacht did not engage in any criminal actions in the course of this reluctant fight except to fight patriotically and dutifully a relentless and barbarian enemy with all necessary fervor and under great sacrifices.

Before getting into the analysis, a brief discussion of the societal context seems in place in order to assess the contemporary value and role of the sources presented here. Veteran journals like *Soldat im Volk* and *Wehrkunde* reached largely an audience of former Wehrmacht soldiers, SS-veterans and contemporaries interested in the history of the German military as well as in the politics of rearmament. Authors included former high-ranking Wehrmacht officers such as Hans Reinhardt, Hermann Hoth (1885-1971) and Hans von Salmuth (1888-1962). All three had been defendants in the OKW trial and had been sentenced to 15 to 20 years in prison.<sup>111</sup> Their articles reflected and resonated the

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<sup>111</sup> Hans Reinhardt was *Generaloberst*, 1941 to 1944 Commander of Panzer Group 3 (later 3<sup>rd</sup> Panzer Army), and 1944 to 1945 acting Commander-in-Chief of Army Group Centre, sentenced to 15 years in prison. Reinhardt therefore had first-hand knowledge of warfare on the Eastern Front and became head of

main themes of the political debates of the 1950s and much of the opinionated material corresponded with the general public's opinion on the past war and the military at that time. That assertion can be supported with two contemporary studies conducted in order to evaluate German public and non-public opinion in the 1950s. The first, the well-known surveys carried out for the U.S. High Commissioner in Germany (HICOG) between 1949 and 1955 in West Germany and West Berlin, provided the American occupation forces and the U.S. government with valuable insight into Germans' minds about a wide range of relevant topics: coming to terms with the Nazi past (Nazi System, World War II, Treatment of Jews, war crimes trials, denazification), foreign occupation, independence, Germany in the world and so on.<sup>112</sup> Overall, these surveys indicated that the American reeducation efforts had rendered only limited success. Although most Germans condemned the failures and atrocities of National Socialism they also refused to reject the National Socialist idea on the whole and largely denied a share of responsibility for the regime's rise and criminal actions.<sup>113</sup>

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the "Society for Military Studies" (*Gesellschaft für Wehrkunde*) in 1954 (together with Admiral Friedrich Ruge), which published the journal *Wehrkunde* in order to "collect and assess the military experience from World War II and to utilize them in case for a reestablishment of German armed forces." See the foreword in *Fall 12*, 18.

Hermann Hoth was *Generaloberst*, 1940/1941 Commander of Panzer Group 3, 1941/1942 Commander-in-chief of 17<sup>th</sup> Army, 1942/1943 Commander-in-Chief of 4<sup>th</sup> Panzer Army, sentenced to 15 years in prison. Hans von Salmuth was *Generaloberst*, 1937 to 1939 Chief of Staff of the Army Group Command (*Heeresgruppenkommando*) 1, 1939 Chief of Staff of Army Group North, 1939 to 1941 Chief of Staff of Army Group B, thereafter Commander-in-Chief of several Armies until 1944, sentenced to 20 years in prison. Salmuth became president of the "Association of German Soldiers" (*Verband deutscher Soldaten e. V.*) in 1958.

<sup>112</sup> Anna J. Merritt, Richard L. Merritt, eds., *Public Opinion in Semisovereign Germany: The HICOG Surveys, 1949-1955* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980). Surveys dedicated to views of the Nazi past on pages 6-11. The documentation also contains a brief section summarizing surveys conducted with East Germans on various issues such as "Life in the GDR" and "The West," see pages 31-34.

<sup>113</sup> See for a summary Richard L. Merritt, "Digesting the past: Views of National Socialism in Semi-sovereign Germany," *Societas*, 7 (2), 1977, 93-119.

The second study, a “Group Experiment” conducted by returning “Frankfurt School” scholars in 1950/1951, is less well-known and rarely cited in connection with German views of the past during the early postwar years. This first larger study conducted by the remigrated Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt (Main) was a “pilot study” intended to contribute “to the study of public opinion” in the early Federal Republic.<sup>114</sup> It is of particular interest because this survey, located at the intersection of “non-public” and “public-opinion,” was conducted among various social groups, amongst them several groups of veteran career officers. The “Group Experiment” shows that former military leaders not only shared most popular views about National Socialism, World War II and the Holocaust at that time. They also show that their peculiar outlook on the past represented the public mood quite correctly even though they articulated opinions about German guilt and responsibility in an acuminated form.

The experiment began with the assumption that beyond “public opinion” there was something like “non-public opinion” in (West) Germany and that the latter differed greatly from the first – something “every visitor, tourist and journalist touring Germany can hear whistled from the roofs.” It was its declared goal to “make this non-public opinion of a nation the subject of the public political and academic discourse.”<sup>115</sup> Throughout the study, the conductors of the experiment were most stricken by the fact “how the opinion of the actual published opinion had bounced without any effect from

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<sup>114</sup> Friedrich Pollock, *Gruppenexperiment. Ein Studienbericht* (= *Frankfurter Beiträge zur Soziologie*, vol. 2, ed. Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Dirks), (Frankfurt/Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1955), 3.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, XIII.



the heads and souls of a very large part of our population.”<sup>116</sup> As I have demonstrated by way of other evidence in the chapter on the reception of the war crimes trials in postwar Germany, the countless reports and opinion pieces on Nazi and war crimes flooding the mass media in the immediate postwar years had a very limited influence on German collective and political memory – and as the “Group Experiment” proved, individual memories were left untouched in a similar way.

At the heart of the experiment was a text, the so-called basic impulse (*Grundreiz*), written by a fictitious American GI named Colbourn shortly after the end of the war. Colbourn had fought the Germans until 1945 and had served thereafter in various positions in the US occupation administration, thus claiming to have obtained a broad and thorough knowledge of German customs, thinking and emotions. In his fictitious letter, Colbourn listed the “good” and the “bad” sides of the “Germans” emphasizing both their alleged positive virtues such as discipline, cleanliness, and willingness to work hard, as well as their negative features such as a sense of superiority, of being eternally victimized by world history, and a proneness to run after the “strong man.”<sup>117</sup> During the winter of 1950/51, this letter was used as initiating trigger for a series of group discussions led by trained discussion leaders in groups of eight to ten persons totaling 1,800 participants from all social classes and backgrounds. For example, there were 33 youth-groups (students, Christian youth, political clubs ect.), 31 women groups (refugees, catholic, working class ect.), 14 rural groups (farmers, village communities) and 6 groups of

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid, XVI.

<sup>117</sup> On the set-up of the experiment and basic impulse see *ibid.* 33ff, 42ff. The Colbourn-letter is printed on 501-503.

former Wehrmacht officers.<sup>118</sup> The discussions were structured according to twelve thematic categories and the participants were encouraged to speak their hearts and minds freely; confidence and anonymity were assured. Out of the twelve thematic categories, three are of interest as discussed in the officer groups: the question of war guilt, responsibility for crimes in concentration camps and war crimes, and the countries of the Eastern bloc.<sup>119</sup>

The analysis of the various (recorded) group discussions demonstrated that 51 percent of all participants refused to admit any individual responsibility for the crimes of the Nazi regime, while it was neither uncommon to express outrage about the collective guilt charge nor to articulate some understanding of the collective dimension behind Hitler's aggressive foreign policy.<sup>120</sup> Twenty-one percent were willing to admit a share of personal responsibility for war crimes and crimes committed in concentration camps while 60 percent denied such responsibility in one way or another (154f.) In the officer groups, participants tended to discuss the question of guilt in a "philosophical" way, pointing on the one hand to the difficulty of "defining what guilt means," and to the metaphysical nature of individual guilt ("everybody is more or less guilty", 318). On the other hand, they tended to refer to the collective guilt of "all nations" for world wars, claiming that there was a need to settle once and for all with this issue, and then to move

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid, 83f. Of the six „officer groups“ four were composed exclusively of former career officers, two additional groups in this category were composed of dignitaries and members of the Bavarian nobility, most of them military men as well. The latter two discussions took place during evening gatherings of these persons in a former general's house. See *ibid.* 88. All military participants in the study were residents of Bavaria and had an urban background, *ibid.* 492.

<sup>119</sup> The other topics were: (1) political system, (2) German Federal Republic (Bonn), (5) Anti-Semitism, (6) US-occupation, (7) USA, (8) England, (9) France, (11) remilitarization, (12) German self-evaluation. See *ibid.*, 97.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 151f, *passim*.

on (375). The “East” was still and strongly perceived as a continuous threat: much like the other groups, the officers overwhelmingly expressed negative sentiments for the “East,” namely the Soviet Union. Eighty-three percent of the participants displayed a “radically deprecating position” (188) and reasoned this position with the lack of freedom in the USSR, “Russian imperialism,” brutal treatment of German POWs and the occupation regime in the Eastern zone. The thematic category “Eastern bloc” was the category to which the participants responded the most homogenously regardless of social, political, educational, and professional background. The legacy of the Eastern Front war was completely absent from these discussions. Rather, the present ruled the past, the realities of the Cold War allowed for the relativisation of guilt. As one discussion between two officers about “moral and foreign policy guilt” (*moralische und außenpolitische Schuld*) demonstrated – regardless of the fact that Germany had totally lost the war against the Soviet Union – the “world enemy” remained to be dealt with. Thus, the question of guilt was a twisted one:

G.: Are we talking about moral guilt or about guilt in terms of foreign policy? If we are talking about moral guilt ... this...

H.: Belongs into the confessional!

G.: ... then this belongs not here tonight, I believe, because in my view the Americans are just as guilty in moral terms, they are just as bad and just as good as us. If this is about guilt in terms of foreign policy, then I think the events have already overrun this question, because if [the Allies] call upon a nation to join the same army, in which oneself serves, in order to fight a world enemy [i.e. the Soviet Union], then the question of guilt is settled for there can only be a co-fighting on equal terms. (318f.)

With this reference to the new international balance of power in which the Western Allies sought to enlist a rearmed West Germany into the fight against Soviet communism, the question of guilt indeed seemed to have become obsolete, for the old enemy was also the new enemy.

Just as the war against the Soviet Union was in this way easily reduced to a mere anecdote in history, the “Jewish question” was ostentatiously and equally unreflectively

avoided in the officer groups (162). If it was discussed on rare occasions, the mass murder was either flatly denied (295) or the Jews were blamed for their own fate (392). These were views particularly often and strongly voiced during the two social gatherings among Bavarian military and noble dignitaries. In one instance, a discussion leader was even physically threatened by an officer who grew outraged by the insinuation that the Wehrmacht had knowledge of the extermination process (286). And finally, reflecting the basic conclusion of my own observations so far, crimes – if they were mentioned at all – were referred to only in passing. Occasionally, participants admitted reluctantly having witnessed war crimes but always refused to recall details and to give more concrete information (288f). The final analysis of the experiment summarized this phenomenon with the following words:

At first, knowledge is denied, albeit with such specious arguments that the participants obviously feel uncomfortable themselves. After an intervention of the discussion leader, however, the participants take courage and relieve themselves by concrete hints, which culminate in the expression “having seen with my own eyes.” What was seen with their own eyes remains untold here as in so many other discussion situations. Incidentally and despite of it all, nescience is pleaded compulsively again and again.<sup>121</sup>

This mind-set was characteristic of the veteran community at large. On the whole, the results of this study of the “non-public opinion” of former Wehrmacht officers provide a superb background for the reading of contemporary veteran publications in which veterans reflected on the presence of the past. As I will demonstrate in the following paragraphs, this *public* discourse in journals and newsletters was, unlike published opinion in the mainstream media, very much in sync with private memories of World War II. At least in the sphere of their own publications and written communications, war

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid, 289.

veterans could search and find “legitimate narratives of war,” and thus seemed ultimately to be able to move beyond the encumbering, painstaking and solitary endeavor of truthfully reckoning with the past.

Ten years after the end of the war, an anonymous editorial of the most important veteran journal of the 1950s, *Soldier in the People*, commemorated the end of World War II along with the demise of the once mighty and respected German Wehrmacht. The piece was entitled “Criminals in Fulfilled Obedience – On the Anniversary of the Capitulation” and it dealt with the problematic legacy of the German military. The title chosen by an unnamed author mirrored the reluctant ambiguity with which the organized veteran community remembered the criminal conduct of warfare (not only) on the Eastern Front and it encapsulated all the elements of the resultant Wehrmacht memory: historic defeat, exemplary and dutiful sacrifice, the “tragedy” of having served a wrong cause, and the in brutality and extent unprecedented complacency of many German soldiers in war crimes and crimes against humanity. Yet, the admittance of crimes implied by the catchy title did not go very far. The author encouraged the reader to put himself into a former soldier’s position and to consider “what it really must have meant [after the war] to be accused of and convicted for acts which were not inspired by one’s own initiative but were the consequence of an inescapable coercion of order?”<sup>122</sup> And if one was to accuse these soldiers of being criminals, then, the author continued, they had become criminals in obedience to superior orders. Yet, German soldiers had followed

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<sup>122</sup> Anonymous, „Verbrecher aus erfülltem Gehorsam. Zum zehnten Jahrestag der Kapitulation,“ *Soldat im Volk*, 5, 1955, 2.

military orders not with “slavish obedience” (“*Kadavergehorsam*”), their actions had not been the result of a “dehumanization of duty and honor.” They even were aware of the fact that some orders were “morally wrong” but they nonetheless had bowed to the force of command and thus fulfilled the first duty of every good soldier: to obey. The scandal thus was not committing crimes against Soviet POWs, Jews and other civilians on an unprecedented scale but the unjust judgment, i.e. victimization, of German soldiers after the fact – in judging them for actions which had been beyond their control. The author concluded his call for a political, legal and moral rehabilitation of the German soldier by recalling that “thousands of Germans” had therefore become “victims” of Allied justice after 1945, convicted of crimes which had not been considered crimes before 1945. To him this seemed particularly absurd since one central theme in the contemporary discussions about the creation of a new West German army was indeed the need for a soldier to fully comply with superior orders, for “without discipline, no armed forces can be established.”<sup>123</sup>

In a similar tone, stressing the victimization of the German military, the tenth anniversary of the capitulation was commemorated. “Ten Years After,” in 1955, a retired major general celebrated the “great achievements” and “great sacrifices” of the Wehrmacht without once questioning the causes and consequences of this war for Germany’s former near and distant neighbors.<sup>124</sup> Instead he elaborated: “we knew that we weren’t fighting out of lust for wars and for killing but in good faith and willingness to sacrifice our lives for the protection of our nation, our homeland and our families.” The

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid. Cf. Chapter 6. III.

<sup>124</sup> Erich Dethleffsen, “1955: Zehn Jahre danach. Zur mahnenden Erinnerung,” *Soldat im Volk*, 5, 1955, 1.

author pondered over the reasons for the loss of the war and pointed out that not the ordinary soldier was to be blamed for the historic defeat of the German Wehrmacht but the “political leaders” of the nation.<sup>125</sup> This was an argument which resembled attempts to revive the stab-in-the-back-legend, for, as in 1918, not the military leadership was to be blamed for defeat, but “politicians” yet again. Worse, the consequence of this perceived historic failure was that a semi-sovereign West Germany (“the thus far only free part and therefore nucleus of a new German Reich”) continued to face the ever-looming “threat from the East” and was in urgent need of defense. Moreover, the – for the moment – “cold” war with the Soviet Union should thus reflect in its conduct and assure in its outcome that the German soldiers’ countless sacrifices had not been in vain.<sup>126</sup> The well-known arguments of the era of *Vergangenheitspolitik* during the 1950s about the role of Hitler as the great abuser and seducer of the German people, the dutifully fighting German soldier, and the after all not completely unjustified crusade against the Bolshevik threat in the East, were articulated in a particularly passionate manner in veteran journals and with a special emphasis on the “achievements and sacrifices of the German soldier.”<sup>127</sup> While – at most – a “conflict of conscience” might have existed in some soldiers’ minds the whole sphere of actual fighting, the concrete events during and after the invasion of a foreign country, the methods used to fight enemy forces and to keep the local population under control were entirely absent from this discourse.

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>127</sup> See for example also Gerhard Ludwig Binz, “Wert und Ehre des deutschen Soldaten,” *Soldat im Volk*, 8, 1955, 1f.

With regards to the war on the Eastern Front, the commemoration among West German veterans was extraordinary in two respects. One, there was a lasting and intense interest in all question of military strategy and tactics, i.e. in the practical “lessons” to be learned from “Operation Barbarossa” – always implying that a victory of Hitler’s troops had been both desirable and possible.<sup>128</sup> Secondly, dealing with these military questions entailed addressing the nature of modern warfare and the soldier’s role and responsibility in it. Wehrmacht retirees discussed mass extermination of civilians in the wake of modern war in great detail and on a highly theoretical level in numerous articles.<sup>129</sup> However, the realities of World War II, of the Eastern Front war in particular, remained nebulous and marginal despite the fact that this was the omnipresent historical reference point in these texts.

In order to capture the spirit of these debates it suffices to look more closely at two of these “expert” pieces in which the Eastern Front war functioned as historical lesson. In 1954, former lieutenant general Helmut Staedke contributed a lengthy text about the “Soldier in Service of the Modern War Apparatus” to the military journal *Wehrkunde*.<sup>130</sup> In a rather philosophical manner the author set out to describe the technologization of modern warfare tracing this development back to the First World War in the course of which killing became an “anonymous” ritual and the “shared fighting

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<sup>128</sup> See for example Hebert Golz “Erfahrungen aus dem Kampf gegen Banden” in *Wehrkunde. Organ der Gesellschaft für Wehrkunde e.V.*, 2, 1955, 134-140; Rudolf Baumeister, „Erfahrungen mit Ostfreiwilligen im Zweiten Weltkrieg“ in *ibid*, 153-156; Hellmuth Kreidel, „Partisanenkampf in Mittelrußland“ in *Wehrkunde*, 9, 1955, 380-385.

<sup>129</sup> See for instance „Wert und Ehre des deutschen Soldaten“ in *Soldat im Volk*, 4, 1955, 1f; „Psychologische Kriegsführung“ in *Mitteilungen, Verband deutscher Soldaten*, 5, 1953, 1f; „Der Soldat in der Bedienung des modernen Kriegsapparates“ in *Wehrkunde*, 2, 1954, 48-55.

<sup>130</sup> Helmut Staedke, „Der Soldat in der Bedienung des modernen Kriegsapparates,“ *Wehrkunde*, 2, 1954, 48-55.



experience” ceased to be a central feature of the experience of war.<sup>131</sup> In this reading, World War II with its propaganda, partisan wars, air-raids and nuclear culmination “almost completely destroyed the human relations between those fighting.” Peculiar was Staedke’s characterization of a future war, a “push-button war” as he coined it: it would entail “mass extermination without faces,” it would make “no distinction between soldier, woman or child”<sup>132</sup> – as if this had been the case in the concentration and extermination camps and on the battlefields of the World War II. The author also observed that modern wars were wars of opposing world views. Already Hitler and Stalin had torn down the last moral barriers so that a future war would be a “total and global civil war” (“*totaler Weltbürgerkrieg*”),<sup>133</sup> again implying that World War II had not been total and global. In

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<sup>131</sup> On blaming technology for mass crimes in war see Jeffrey Herf, “Belated Pessimism: Technology and Twentieth Century German Conservative Intellectuals,” in Yaron Ezrahi, Everett Mendelsohn and Howard Segal, eds., *Technology, Pessimism and Postmodernism* (Dordrecht (NL), Bosten, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994), 115-136.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>133</sup> The idea of World War II as „Weltbürgerkrieg“ was shortly later elaborated by the German historian Ernst Nolte in his first major work *Der Faschismus in seiner Epoche. Die Action Française. Der italienische Faschismus. Der Nationalsozialismus* (München: Piper, 1963). Borrowing from Lenin who had – erroneously – projected that the Communist revolution in Russia would trigger a “European civil war,” Nolte suggested that, basically, European fascism evolved as a reaction and in response to the rise of Bolshevism in the Soviet Union and that the global contest of the two ideologies culminated in a global civil war, i.e. the Second World War. The German-Russian war of 1941-1945 was in his view as a “world fight” and “bore the characteristics of an international civil war.” See the more recent piece by Ernst Nolte, “Weltbürgerkrieg 1917-1989?” in Eckhard Jesse, ed., *Totalitarismus im 20. Jahrhundert. Eine Bilanz der internationalen Forschung* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für Politische Bildung, 1999), 391-403, quote on 397. In the wake of the *Historikerstreit* in the mid-1980s in Germany, Nolte repeated this theory and encountered much resistance among colleagues. In his infamous article “A past that doesn’t go away” (“Die Vergangenheit, die nicht vergehen will. Eine Rede, die geschrieben, aber nicht gehalten werden konnte,” printed in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 6 June 1986) he asked provocatively „vollbrachten die Nationalsozialisten, vollbrachte Hitler eine ‚asiatische Tat‘ vielleicht nur deshalb, weil sie sich und ihresgleichen als potentielle oder wirkliche Opfer einer ‚asiatischen Tat‘ betrachteten? War nicht der ‚Archipel GULag‘ ursprünglicher als Auschwitz? War nicht der ‚Klassenmord‘ der Bolschewiki das logische und faktische Prius des ‚Rassenmords‘ der Nationalsozialisten?“ In reaction to this article Nolte was accused of equating Communist, Fascist and National Socialist crimes and of playing down the uniqueness of the industrial murder of the European Jews on the hands of the Nazis by claiming that Lenin’s and Stalin’s mass terror (“class murder”) merely predated the Nazi Holocaust and was in fact equally brutal and massive in quality and extent. The “historians debate” is documented in Rudolf

the war of the future, the “technocratic West” with a “Christian conscience” would face the “unscrupulous (*hemmungslos*) technocratic East.” Staedke added that it was the West who had genuinely contributed to the modernization and technologization of modern warfare. In the “East”, the Soviet peoples had no “internal relationship to technology” which, the author pointed out, provided the “occident” with the “great chance” to prevail over its Eastern enemy.<sup>134</sup> Here the war on the Eastern Front comes in as historic lesson: the “occident” could only triumph if these lessons were heard and the bitter experience of defeat was transformed into profitable know-how of how to successfully wage war against the Soviet Union in the future. It is no surprise that SED agitators such as Albert Norden on the other side of the wall used these arguments as material in the anti-Western propaganda war.

Finally, Staedke introduced what could be called the democratic version of Goebbels “total war” idea:

Here lies a great chance for the occident if it can supply apt and independent people on all levels of politics, science, production and military apparatus, who are not just intellectually dead tools of a central will but who live up to the respective requirements as a result of their own impulse and in voluntary service to a common idea – even if the apparatus is tarnished here and there. In a four-year-long struggle with the East we have seen the superiority of the German fighter flash up again and again from the infantryman to the general and we have no reason to believe that this substance is already exhausted.<sup>135</sup>

In concrete, in a future “struggle” it would suffice to “spare the disabled enemy and civilians” in order to win the suppressed Russians over for the fight against Soviet tyranny. If the rule of law and respect of human dignity would “ensoul the military

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Augstein, ed., „*Historikerstreit*.” *Die Dokumentation der Kontroverse um die Einzigartigkeit der nationalsozialistischen Judenvernichtung* (München: Piper, 1987).

<sup>134</sup> Helmut Staedke, „Der Soldat in der Bedienung des modernen Kriegsapparates,” *Wehrkunde*, 2, 1954, 53.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

apparatus” of a future German army, the Soviet peoples would soon gain confidence that this war was a war of liberation from Bolshevik oppression. This sort of warfare would ensure the “justified measure of means and methods” and thus “Katyn, Hiroshima or Dresden” would be just as impossible as the “commissar order”<sup>136</sup> – a curious list of historic examples which left out, for instance, Auschwitz and Babi Yar, and at the same time implied the moral equivalence of Soviet, American, British and German crimes and actions during World War II.

Without ever going into more detail on Wehrmacht crimes as part of the “historic lesson”, the author referred only implicitly to war crimes on the Eastern Front between 1941 and 1944. Not “Operation Barbarossa” as such had been a criminal war but the way it was carried out in some places and instances. Moreover, just as Hitler’s war in the East promised “Europe’s liberation” from the Bolshevik grip, the future, quasi sequel-war to be launched in defense against persisting Soviet expansionism could easily be won if the “Soviet peoples” could be convinced that a victorious West would bring a “more human and peaceful order.”<sup>137</sup> Similarly, one would have approved of Hitler’s war if they had only treated the local population more humanely. In this sense, dealing with the criminal legacy of the Eastern Front war entailed at most an implicit admittance of war crimes. This is a good example for *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in the Adenauer era: not denial or complete silence was the order of the day, but rather a superficial referral to Wehrmacht crimes on the Eastern Front revealing an astounding lack of emphatic interest in the fate of millions of victims.

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 54.

Another way of looking at the “lessons” of the Eastern Front was to address the question of what the new German *Bundeswehr* could and should be learning from Germany’s recent military history. Hans Reinhardt, an experienced former general who participated in the war against the Soviet Union and was sentenced to 15 years in prison in the OKW-Trial in 1949, contributed articles to *Wehrkunde*, particularly on the subject of warfare in the East and the *Bundeswehr*.<sup>138</sup> He became the head of the “Society for Military Studies” in 1954, and the fact that he was a convicted war criminal did not hinder his career as military “expert” and veteran lobbyist in the young West German republic. In an article on the “Instruction in the History of Warfare,” Reinhardt argued that the teaching of military history is of vital interest to a “future German *Wehrmacht*” because soldiers needed to know about “the great deeds and contexts,” and the role of the great “leaders” in leading an army to success or failure.<sup>139</sup> The last war in particular provided in the view of the author a range of examples for good and bad leadership decisions. Compared to more distant military adventures in German history, it was for instance possible to demonstrate the great failure of Hitler’s “stubborn stick-it-out tactics” (*starre Haltetaktik*) on the Eastern Front – again implying that the war should and could have been won if someone more “professional” would have been commander-in-chief.<sup>140</sup> Therefore, “not the ‘how’ of the war, but the ‘why’ of its success or failure must be the primary focus of instructions in military history.”<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> On his career see above footnote 108.

<sup>139</sup> Hans Reinhardt, „Unterricht in Kriegsgeschichte“ in *Wehrkunde*, 7, 1955, 272-275.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 274.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

These examples of “expert pieces” on the lessons of “Barbarossa” illustrate the general mind-set among (organized) West German veterans. In order to provide their readers with additional historiographical and military expertise, *Wehrkunde* and *Soldat im Volk* carried reviews of recent books on Stalingrad and the war on the Eastern Front on a regular basis. The main criteria for the selection of the reviewed books seemed to have been whether their content contributed to the “fight against the defamation of the soldier and his leaders”<sup>142</sup> and to the honorable memory of the “German soldiers’ achievements.”<sup>143</sup> Noteworthy in this sense was, for example, Hans Latenser’s *Verteidigung deutscher Soldaten* (“Defense of German soldiers”), a documentation of the author’s pleadings in his function as defense lawyer of the accused OKW-members before the Nuremberg Tribunal in 1946. In the view of the reviewer, it was Latenser who convinced the court that the “General Staff and OKW” were not to be judged as “criminal organization” as the indictment suggested. His defense strategy had further provided “convincing evidence” that the

“...military leaders by no means had ‘actively participated in all these crimes, or sat silent and acquiescent, witnessing the commission of crimes on a scale larger and more shocking than the world has ever had the misfortune to know,’ as the International Military Tribunal’s verdict of October 1, 1946 claimed. Rather, they had acted in accordance with their conscience and had drawn their conclusions if they failed to convince Hitler.”<sup>144</sup>

Two of the generals on trial, Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb and Wilhelm List (1880-1971), who both had served as military commanders on the Eastern Front and shared an

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<sup>142</sup> Review of Josef Foltmann, Hanns Möller, eds., „Opfergang der deutschen Generale.“ Die Verluste der Generale und Admirale und der im gleichen Dienstrang stehenden sonstigen Offiziere und Beamte im zweiten Weltkrieg (Witten: Bernard & Gräfe, 1953) in *Wehrkunde*, 4 (1954), 139.

<sup>143</sup> Review of Heinz Schröter, *Stalingrad...Bis zur letzten Patrone* (Osnabrück: Selbstverlag, 1953), and review of the monthly *Schild-Hefte* (München: Schild-Verlag, 1953-1954), in *ibid.*, 137f.

<sup>144</sup> Review Hans Latenser, *Verteidigung deutscher Soldaten. Plädoyers vor Alliierten Gerichten* (Bonn: Girardet & Co., 1950), in *Wehrkunde*, 4 (1954), 137.

ambivalent personal history of obeying and opposing Hitler's orders, were mentioned specifically to underscore that "amidst all turmoil of a dictatorship," German generals had upheld the "*Soldatentum*" – the soldierly tradition. This was the complete opposite of what the Nuremberg judgment had maintained. The exculpatory character of Latenser's commitment to defending the accused generals was explicitly praised by the reviewer. In his view, the book contributed "to restoring the reputation of the military leadership and the German soldier and to convincing public opinion in the victorious nations that the revision of the verdicts by release of those generals already in year-long imprisonment [was] inescapable."<sup>145</sup>

Within this line of argument, the events at Stalingrad served as the grand historic drama embodying all the good the German soldier was capable of: unconditional obedience and discipline, an unbreakable fighting morale, and the willingness to die for the German fatherland. One noteworthy version of this drama was Heinz Schröter's *Stalingrad... Bis zur letzten Patrone* (1953). The book by a former war correspondent had already been written in 1943 „on Goebbels's instruction and in Hitler's name," as the author noted, but was not published under the Nazis because Goebbels was "aghast" in light of the account of the battle details and decided that this was "intolerable for the German people."<sup>146</sup> In 1953, Schröter published the work by himself in West Germany

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid. General Field Marshall von Leeb served in the war against the Soviet Union as supreme commander of Army Group North. The siege of Leningrad in the winter of 1941 triggers a conflict and fall-out between Leeb and Hitler, and Leeb asked for this resignation in January 1942 and ended his active duty. List was commander of Army Group A within Army Group South when he refused to obey Hitler's order to continue the Caucasian offensive during the Winter of 1942 ("*Operation Edelweiß*"). He was thereafter dismissed from active duty.

<sup>146</sup> Cited in Baird, "The Myth of Stalingrad," 200, fn. 31. An English translation was published under the title *Stalingrad* (London: M. Joseph, 1958).

and reached an interested audience. The review in *Wehrkunde*, though critical of a few incorrect military terms and titles, predicted the “great impression” this account of the fighting of the Sixth Army would make on every reader. “With his work the authors has erected a worthy monument to all fighters of the Sixth Army – dead or alive.” Though it dealt with “much suffering and great misery,” this “eulogy to German soldierdom” was nonetheless to be recommended “most warmly.”<sup>147</sup> Stalingrad, the “bitterest chapter of World War II,” was remembered exclusively for the suffering of German soldiers. Context and consequences remained marginal, in effect were still absent a decade after the Wehrmacht was defeated on the Eastern Front.

Another book reviewer ventured to enter the sphere of historical speculation after having read Manstein’s *Lost Victories*. He agreed with Manstein that Stalingrad by no means was the turning point towards defeat but Hitler’s decision to halt the “Operation *Zitadelle*” (the battle for Kursk) in July of 1943. In this view, the death of thousands of German soldiers in Stalingrad had not been senseless at all. It had “stabilized the front once again in early 1943” and had it not been for Hitler’s in consequence and “dilettantism,” the Eastern Front war could have ended in a “draw solution in the East” (“*Remisslösung im Osten*”).<sup>148</sup> The reviewer thus noted regretfully that this opportunity to escape total defeat had been missed “again and again,” and that Manstein’s argumentation was conclusive: “through a clear strategic conception and operative flexibility along with bold decisiveness a tie could have been accomplished in the East -

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<sup>147</sup> Review of Heinz Schröter, *Stalingrad...Bis zur letzten Patrone* (Osnabrück: Selbstverlag, 1953), *Wehrkunde*, 4 (1954), 137f.

<sup>148</sup> Review of Erich von Manstein, *Verlorene Siege* (Bonn: Athenäum, 1955), in *Wehrkunde*, 10 (1955), 462.

at the least.”<sup>149</sup> Neither Manstein nor the reviewer gave a thought to what exactly this “tie” would have meant for the occupied territories.

Yet, in rare instances war crimes on the Eastern Front were addressed, not discussed but mentioned. A review of Wladyslaw Anders’ *Hitler’s Defeat in Russia* (1953) granted the author a realistic view on the Wehrmacht’s criminal record in Russia. Anders had been a leading figure of the Polish military resistance against Nazi Germany (as supreme commander of the Second Polish Army Corps in the Soviet Union). The reviewer briefly alliterated the crimes Anders documented in his book. Yet, the “honorable” memory of the German soldiers was once again subject to defamation:

The author dedicates separate chapters to the treatment of the Russian prisoners of war, the “*Ostfreiwilligen*” [Eastern volunteers] who fought on the German side, the treatment of the Russian people and to the partisan warfare .... The sufficiently known mistakes and inhumanities with regards to the treatment of the Russian peoples, of the POWs and the *Ostfreiwilligen* are depicted soberly and clearly. Unfortunately, generalizations slipped in the description of the behaviour of German soldiers, and details from other sources for which one would have liked to see the evidence were incorporated without references to names and places. The way these details are presented here is likely to generate a skewed picture.<sup>150</sup>

To be clear, this was a rare instance in which the crimes against Soviet POWs, forced laborers and civilians found mention. Commonly they were not part of the public discourse at the time. Yet, even when recounting historical facts – the “sufficiently known mistakes and humanities” – the imperatives of the defensive veteran memory were at work and triggered the appropriate critical reaction. Like a reflex, the reviewer noted

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Review of Wladyslaw Anders, *Hitler’s Defeat in Russia* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1953), in *Wehrkunde*, 1 (1955), 38.



the dangers of generalization when it came to (the un-detailed) atrocities committed by German soldiers.

The mainstream mindset among organized veterans largely evaded the question of war crimes altogether and in a particularly striking way articles commemorating important military anniversaries such as the beginning of “Operation Barbarossa” (June 22, 1941) and the capitulation at Stalingrad (February 2, 1943) illustrate this comfortable consensus. World War II, in general, was viewed as the Wehrmacht’s “self-sacrifice without comparison” (“*Opfergang ohnegleichen*”). Commemorating the fifteenth anniversary of the beginning of the war, *Soldat im Volk* carried a front page article in September of 1954 which contained a brief version of the current official reading of the Eastern Front in West Germany. German soldiers had fulfilled their patriotic duty “until the end” (adding parenthetically “no army can exist without unconditional obedience”), Hitler was the great failure in recent German history, and the war against the Soviet Union had been an adventure inspired solely by Hitler’s overestimation of his own abilities and the armed forces. From the very beginning, “Operation Barbarossa” was doomed for the Russians turned out the most tenacious fighters. Stalingrad, the perceived epiphany of Hitler’s inabilities as supreme commander, was the “most terrible defeat of the Wehrmacht” and the decisive “turning point of the war.”<sup>151</sup> This recollection of the war focused to a large extent on identifying and analyzing the missed opportunities; its motivations and consequences remained unspoken. In a sober tone, the author, a veteran of World War II himself, presented a sweeping summery of the war in Russia. He

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<sup>151</sup> Albrecht Brand, „Opfergang ohnegleichen! Zum Gedenken des Kriegsausbruchs vor 15 Jahren,“ in *Soldat im Volk*, 9 (1954), 1f.

considered the “preconditions for the success of this operation” and concluded that Hitler’s order to attack came too late (in view of the harsh Russian winter) and that, ultimately, he had sacrificed military strategic imperatives to economic and prestige reasons.

Hitler had failed to realize the importance of taking Moscow where all train lines of the huge country come together. To him it was most important to take the U k r a i n e and L e n i n g r a d, because he hoped to boost his personal prestige in the latter – the breeding- and birth place of Bolshevism, and to gain economic profit in the first. He thus had put political and economic desires over military necessity and, hence, had sown the seed for the failure of the First Russian campaign.

This is not the place to recall the course of events in the entire campaign against Russia; apparently it went according to the OKH plans in the beginning, the names of the great battles might not matter; B i a l y s t o k, M i n s k, S m o l e n s k mark the victories of the Army Group Center. Again, the tank divisions crushed the enemy front lines into the rear of the enemy who resisted fiercely; again, the infantry divisions rushed after them in order to complete the grip and encirclement. This succeeded and the result was that masses of prey and prisoners were made as never before in a war. ...

The campaign in the East failed [in the winter of 1941/42 near M o s c o w]. Greatest devotion, bravery and the will to victory among the troops; their unimaginable suffering in mud and dirt, in the Siberian cold had not sufficed to prevail over the Russian masses who were equipped for the winter. To the contrary: the Russian had enough energy to take the offensive. ...

The belief in himself led Adolf Hitler towards S t a l i n g r a d and the C a u c a s u s. He ordered an operation which slapped every healthy military thinking in the face. According to the lessons of Clausewitz one attacks an enemy with a baled fist not with spread fingers. Yet, that is exactly what the ‘supreme commander of the Wehrmacht’ did. He also forgot the lessons of Moltke and Schlieffen according to which one gives an assignment to a military leader but leaves the execution to him and that it is the local commander’s decision whether such assignment can be executed or not. ...

Stalingrad, the worst defeat a German army has ever suffered, became the turning point of the entire war. Here originated the lack of energy which soon became cataclysmically tangible everywhere.<sup>152</sup>

In other words, had the Wehrmacht been commanded according to the professional German military tradition, the Eastern Front war could actually have been won. That in the course of this campaign unprecedented “masses of prey and prisoners” were made was worth no more words than that. And, saving the reputation of the brave German soldiers, Stalingrad served as the cataclysmic event of World War II codifying the collective “self-sacrifice” of the Wehrmacht. Fifteen years after the outbreak of the war, the entire article makes no mention of civilian victims, let alone especially targeted

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 2. [Emphasis in original].

victim groups such as the Jews. Curiously, a table right next to the text listed – mostly incorrectly – the war losses in 17 nations: Germany was said to have lost 3.2 million soldiers and two million civilians; Poland, in comparison, lost 500,000 soldiers and 6 million civilians. The Soviet Union was listed to have lost seven million people overall, yet here the chart made no differentiation between military and civilian victims. A note below the chart adds that the total losses of 23 nations amount to 26 million, out of which 11.5 million soldiers were killed in action or from injuries, and 15.5 million “civilians died of prohibited means, especially of bombing terror.”<sup>153</sup> The author of this sketch apparently considered the Allied air war against Germany as a war of “prohibited means” but felt no need to count the victims in concentration and extermination camps, gas chambers, mass shootings, euthanasia programs, or forced labor camps.

Looking back on VE Day in 1955, the front-page editorial in *Soldat im Volk* recalled the “great victories” of the Wehrmacht and clarified yet again that the Führer alone was to be blamed for total defeat. Obedience had been the soldier’s fate, the text continued, therefore he deserved respect and honorable memory. Moreover, a direct link existed between the “unsolved relationship between the Soviet system and the non-Bolshevist world,” and the current state of affairs.<sup>154</sup> In 1955, at the height of the rearmament debate in West Germany, the veteran community felt obliged to remind the rest of the republic of the threat looming in the East, and of the duty to resist it. A second editorial on the same front page thus called for a “spiritual remilitarization first.” Reminding the reader of

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<sup>153</sup> The source for these numbers is unclear. Infact, the Soviet Union lost about 20 million lives, two-thirds of which were civilians.

<sup>154</sup> Erich Dethleffsen, „1955: Zehn Jahre danach: Zur mahnenden Erinnerung,“ in *Soldat im Volk*, 5 (1955), 1.

the precarious international situation, it pondered “if all attempts at preventing a new war failed,” the alternative was: to “yield to the attacker defenselessly, or to defend oneself with all means.” In order to be prepared, however, the

chancellor and his ministers must finally emphasize on every occasion clearly and unambiguously that the Federal Republic is the only legitimate successor of the German Reich and that the Federal government’s authority over the territories East of the zonal border is merely hindered temporarily by foreign usurpation. ...

When will they finally point to the daunting endangerment of the economic and social progress in the Federal Republic from the East and call for its defense?<sup>155</sup>

It was thus a new generation’s task to determine whether the death of millions on the Eastern Front “had been in vain,” whether the “capitulation was final or whether a new, hopeful life for our people can emerge from the ruins of collapse.”<sup>156</sup> This shade of the West German Eastern Front memory implied that while the fighting on the Eastern Front had come to a shameful end in 1945, its resumption remained an option, possibly even a necessity of *Realpolitik* in a world continually threatened by Bolshevism.

A front-page article commemorating the fifteenth anniversary of the beginning of “Fall Barbarossa” in the July 1956 issue of *Soldat im Volk* illustrated how barbaric Bolshevism could be at its worst. Two pictures accompanied the text: one showing a group of German soldiers during the invasion of France – decorated with flowers and apparently in good physical and mental condition; the other photograph depicting exhausted infantrymen in worn-out uniforms in Russia. As the pictures implied, “Operation Barbarossa” was the “greatest offensive in military history,” a “grim struggle for life and death” whose “outcome and consequences keeps the world electrified to this

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<sup>155</sup> H.U. Schroeder, „Zuerst geistige Wiederbewaffnung,“ in *Soldat im Volk*, 5 (1955), 1-2.

<sup>156</sup> Erich Dethleffsen, „1955: Zehn Jahre danach: Zur mahnenden Erinnerung,“ in *Soldat im Volk*, 5 (1955), 1.

day.”<sup>157</sup> The German *Landser* realized in the first hour what kind of adversary he was facing: the “Asiatic, cruel enemy instigated and fanaticized by Bolshevism.” What followed was a story of triumph and tragedy of the German armies, and had it not been for the incompetent military leadership, the Wehrmacht could have “annihilated the Red Army completely” after the series of “truly grandiose successes in the summer battles of 1941.”<sup>158</sup>

The misery and death of millions of German soldiers remained the central motive in this memory of the Eastern Front with no reflection on either the losses of the “masses of the Red Army” or the fate of the civilian population. Even though Cold War tensions and the realities of Soviet rule in Eastern Europe make this indifference somewhat explicable, it remains incomprehensible that a historical event of such horrific extent and a battlefield about which so many details were known in public can be remembered without even mentioning that beyond military defeat there was unprecedented human suffering among millions of non-Germans across Eastern Europe.

This lack of empathic imagination as to the gruesome realities of this war on the *other* side of the front is the common feature of all published texts dealing with the war against the Soviet Union in veteran publications of the 1950s and early 1960s – and it reflects a central aspect of the political memory at the time. Military-strategic mind games, historical speculations and the celebration of so-called soldierly achievements merged into a peculiar hodgepodge of textual contributions to the memory of the Eastern Front in

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<sup>157</sup> Alex Buchner, „Fall Barbarossa’. Vor fünfzehn Jahren begann der Rußlandfeldzug,“ in *Soldat im Volk*, 7 (1956), 1.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 2.

two ways: it romanticized the Wehrmacht and it relativized its complicity in Hitler's war of extermination on the Eastern Front. The iconographic event of "Stalingrad" served as the link between the two in so far as it embodied both stunning bravery and immeasurable suffering of the German soldier. In view of this perceived awe-inspiring legacy it may become somewhat plausible that there was no emotional and intellectual room for pondering the losses of the other side.

### **III. Dictating History? Official vs. Private Memory**

There was all but silence with regards to the Eastern Front among German World War II veterans in East and West. Even crimes were addressed to some extent: never directly but rather implicitly, vaguely and purposefully. Either they formed the basis for a complete personal transformation in the socialist GDR, a process which began with the expression of remorse and shame, and ended with the declared "eradication of guilt and errors."<sup>159</sup> Or, Western veterans such as lieutenant general Staedke mentioned them in passing while the actual focus was on working out the military lessons to be learned from the lost war. The moral premises of these individuals' narratives did not necessarily collide with the respective official political-intellectual discourse about the war on the Eastern Front as they fit well into the demands of every-day Cold War politics. In both Germanys veterans shaped the political memory in so far as they participated in the official discourses about the war against the Soviet Union, naturally based on contrasting premises: in the GDR, veterans could successfully integrate themselves into the one-

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<sup>159</sup> Heinrich Homann, „Offizier ein Kainszeichen?“ in *Nationalzeitung*, April 3, 1949, 2. Here quoted from BA/SAPMO, DY 16/6340 ("Büro Bolz, Materialsammlung zur Ehemaligen-Eingliederung, 1949-1957"), pages not numbered.

party-state if they were willing to place their own individual war stories within the SED interpretation of recent German history. In the FRG, veterans participated voluntarily, even enthusiastically in the societal discourse about the past. By doing so, they each sought to establish a sustainable, legitimate narrative reflecting their personal war experiences, and to (re-)gain public recognition as experts on military affairs in past and present. Both strategies offered Eastern Front veterans in the two Germanys an opportunity to make sense of the war.

In context of Cold War politics, both veteran communities more or less willingly served the interests of the state in fighting their distinct peacetime wars. They advocated eternal German-Soviet friendship as first lesson of the criminal war against the Soviet Union in the GDR. And they engaged in the fight against the alleged persisting Bolshevik threat to Western democracy in the FRG. In the course of these attempts to forge “legitimate narratives of war,” these veterans formulated their distinct narratives about the past but found little or no regards for the historical truth in its details.

It was postwar German literature which offered a rare refuge for historical reflection, for a closer examination of historical reality and some of its painful truths. Unlike the emerging political and veteran memories of the Eastern Front war described thus far, a number of literary works created between 1945 and 1960 addressed this war with an often subtle, often partisan, but sometimes surprisingly sincere sense for the complexity and ambiguity of its history and legacy.

## **Chapter 8**

### **War and Literature: The Eastern Front and the German Soldier in Postwar German Literature**

„Death smelled different in Russia than in Africa.“

From Erich Maria Remarque's *Time to Live and Time to Die*



## I. The Limits of Language: The Barbarization of Warfare as Literary Subject

The most reflective and critical examination of the Eastern Front war in postwar West and East Germany took place in literature. More so than politics and historiography, literary works addressed the multitude of experiences and memories connected to this war, even though certain motifs such as the soldier as hapless tool and victim in Hitler's war also figured prominently. Sigrid Weigel has pointed out that after 1945, the literary confrontation of the war in general in German postwar literature has often "functioned as *Deckerinnerung* for National Socialism and its crimes."<sup>160</sup> Yet, quite a few works of the so-called German high literature avoided covering up Nazi crimes with illustrations of war as kind of a natural catastrophe. Sometimes these works included the other facets of war: the senseless suffering of non-German civilians, the systematic destruction of entire landscapes, and the not only blind naivety but willing complicity of Wehrmacht soldiers in the "war of extermination." This chapter provides a comparative analysis of such works and defines their place in postwar German political culture. Beyond a mere content analysis, it begins with a thorough examination of the political-intellectual context of these works' creation: the 1950s debates among literary artists inside each German state and also across the border, on what "war literature" (*Kriegsliteratur*) can and should say about war.

The front experience in World War II, though it did not inspire another postwar "myth" of soldierly life and death, was for every single one of the soldiers a life-altering

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<sup>160</sup> Sigrid Weigel, *Bilder des kulturellen Gedächtnisses: Beiträge zur Gegenwartsliteratur* (Dülmen-Hiddingsel: Tende, 1994), 157.

experience. No doubt, some veterans reflected their personal role in the war on the Eastern Front critically and presumably mostly in private. Many might have harbored an uncertain feeling of discomfort, shame or even guilt when memories surfaced. Those who chose to ally more or less actively with the new regime in East Germany mostly found a convenient way to settle their personal question of guilt. They could invest all energies, all frustrations and doubts into an activism that guaranteed both relieve and distraction from a troubled past and provided a chance to being kept busy and involved with matters of present-day politics. In West Germany, as discussed above, organized veterans rather than fighting democracy, integrated into the new system and adopted the rules of the democratic game in order to advance their particular social and political interests. Notably, in both Germanys, former soldiers were given the opportunity to resume and reinforce soldierly values, even to nurture continuing militaristic and (in the West) anti-Bolshevist sentiments. The two otherwise very different spheres of veteran politics in East and West German thus occupied a vibrant and relevant space in the political cultures of both societies.

Nonetheless, the majority of former Wehrmacht soldiers led a quiet private life after the war without ever becoming involved with DSF or NDPD, with the *Heimkehrer-Verband* or the *Bund Deutscher Soldaten*. For them, literature offered both refuge and a place to look for the meaning of war. It was one important medium they could turn to without leaving the secure haven of their private worlds, an opportunity to find individual ways of “remembering war,” of coping with their experiences. During the 1950s, numerous so-called *Landershefte* – cheap novels depicting military adventures and adventurers – popped up in West Germany, generals’ memoirs flooded the book markets

in both Germanys and found hundreds of thousands of readers.<sup>161</sup> Yet, the memory of the Eastern Front war was not only a recurring theme in mass literature. The more serious, “high” literature too grappled with the realities and legacies of the Eastern Front. A whole generation of German writers created what can be called a “war literature” in the first postwar decade and a half. Focussing on these authors, this chapter explores how the war on the Eastern Front figured in the literary imagination, how it was remembered and interpreted by the first postwar generation of writers between 1945 and 1960.

This venture into the literary arts requires, of course, a very different methodological approach and calls for a brief discussion of the special source base and its use. The question of the “usefulness and disadvantage of literature for the historical sciences” remains disputed until today.<sup>162</sup> German contemporary historiography, in particular, makes little use of literature as historical source. Yet, recently scholars have pointed out that Germany’s post-war history can also be read in terms of its literary production and have

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<sup>161</sup> Cf. Geiger, *Kriegsromanhefte in der BRD*. Gerstenberger, „Strategische Erinnerungen.“ Schornstheimer, *Die leuchtenden Augen der Frontsoldaten*. On East Germany, Hüttmann, „Das Gedächtnis der Generäle.“ Schornstheimer has also contributed a detailed study of the two most widely read print products of the 1950s in West Germany, the weekly tabloid magazines „Quick“ and „Stern.“ In a thorough contents analysis the author demonstrates that while a great majority of the readers rejected the revival of National Socialism these publications nurtured a nostalgic memory of the “old times” during the Nazi era. 1950s popular culture was by no means geared only towards present and future; to the contrary, magazine stories revealed an obsession with images and stories of a past that was not remembered for its horrendous legacies but for its summer vacations, booming economic times and heroic and bloody war stories. Several clichés of the Nazi years continued to shape the public conscience, Schornstheimer argues, such as the idea of a master man (*Herrenmensch*), the role of women in society, racist stereotypes about Poles, Russians and Sinti and Roma, Jews and the Jewish catastrophe were absent altogether. See Michael Schornstheimer, *Bombenstimmung und Katzenjammer. Vergangenheitsbewältigung: Quick und Stern in den 50er Jahren* (Köln: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1989).

<sup>162</sup> Gary D. Stark, „Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Literatur für die Geschichtswissenschaft: A Historian’s View,“ *The German Quarterly*, 63 (1), 1990, 19-31.

started to pay more attention to post-war literature in general,<sup>163</sup> and to literary and artistic forms of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in particular.<sup>164</sup> However, none of them discusses the theoretical-methodological challenges of such an undertaking.<sup>165</sup>

I follow Umberto Eco's famous dictum according to which there is a fundamental difference between *interpreting* literature as a *text*, or *reading* literature as a *source*.<sup>166</sup> I henceforth read and "use" literature as a source for the reconstruction of a literary discourse over the past in search for an answer to the question how the war on the Eastern Front and the battle of Stalingrad were narrated, remembered, interpreted and evaluated in German postwar literature. Literary works thus serve not the reconstruction *of* past events but they are sources for the reconstruction of a discourse *about* the historical event

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<sup>163</sup> Düsterberg, *Soldat und Kriegsliteratur*. Peter Fritzsche, „Volkstümliche Erinnerung und deutsche Identität nach dem 2. Weltkrieg“, in: Sabrow, Jarausch, eds., *Verletztes Gedächtnis*, 75-97. Wolfgang Hardtwig, „Fiktive Zeitgeschichte? Literarische Erzählung, Geschichtswissenschaft und Erinnerungskultur in Deutschland“, in: *ibid.*, 99-123. Ursula Heukenkamp, ed., *Deutsche Erinnerung. Berliner Beiträge zur Prosa der Nachkriegsjahre (1945-1960)* (Berlin: Schmidt, 1999). Elizabeth Snyder Hook, „Awakening from War: History, Trauma and Testimony in Heinrich Böll“, in: Confino, Fritzsche, eds., *The Work of Memory*, 136-153.

<sup>164</sup> See for example Becker and Schöll, *In jenen Tagen ....* Bernig, *Eingekesselt*. Classen, *Bilder der Vergangenheit. Nationalsozialismus im Fernsehen der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1955-1965* (Köln: Böhlau, 1999). Düsterberg, *Soldat und Kriegsliteratur*. Thomas Heimann, „Erinnerung als Wandlung: Kriegsbilder im frühen DDR-Film“, in: Sabrow, ed., *Geschichte als Herrschaftsdiskurs*, 39-85. Leonore Krenzlin, „Der ‚Ostkrieg‘ in der DDR-Belletristik“, in: Quinkert, ed., *„Wir sind die Herren dieses Landes“*, 207-222. Olaf Lange, „Wandlung oder Tod: Der Zweite Weltkrieg in der Prosa der DDR 1949-1960“, in: Ursula Heukenkamp, ed., *Unerwünschte Erfahrung. Kriegsliteratur und Zensur in der DDR* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1990), 100-134. Peter Reichel, *Erfundene Erinnerung. Weltkrieg und Judenmord in Film und Theater* (München: Carl Hanser, 2004). Rolf Günter Renner, „Hirn und Herz. Stalingrad als Gegenstand ideologischer und literarischer Diskurse“, in: Förster, ed., *Stalingrad*, 472-492. And Santner, *Stranded Objects*.

<sup>165</sup> That this interdisciplinary task remains a wide open field was demonstrated at a conference „Literature and History“ in October 2004. See the insightful conference report by Martina Winkler, „Literatur und Geschichte - Interdisziplinäre Ansätze zwischen Fakt und Fiktion“, online available at <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/tagungsberichte/id=583> [last visited August 2005].

<sup>166</sup> See Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979). And *idem*, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

“war against the Soviet Union,” over its realities and lessons, its consequences and interpretations.

Naturally, there are limits which the historian has to be aware of. A fictitious text is not a “document” in the conventional historiographical sense, because it is primarily fiction. Yet, here it is read as an authentic source, as a contemporary document, a written record of the past. Further, the meaning(s) of a literary text may not reveal itself after a first reading, its genesis is closely connected to the author’s biographical background as well as to the historical context, and the views expressed in a text do not necessarily reflect the author’s views or those of his contemporaries. For literature can not only create an image or mirror of a certain reality but it is also a product of this reality. Thus, literary creation can and should be understood as “social process.”<sup>167</sup>

In focusing on some of the main works created between 1945 and 1960, I offer a concentrated analysis of the literary attempts of the “long” war generation born between 1890 and 1930 to come to terms with the legacy of the Eastern Front war. All of the works under consideration saw multiple editions and were widely read often well beyond the year 1960. For example, Gerd Ledig’s *Die Stalinorgel* (“The Stalin Organ”) first appeared in 1955. After at least five editions, its most recent edition came out in 2003. It is impossible in this context to comprehensively address the reception of the works in the German population. However, as I am reading these works not as a literary critic but as pieces of evidence for postwar mentalities, their circulation is extremely relevant because

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<sup>167</sup> See Gary D. Stark, “Vom Nutzen und Nachteil,” 25.

it indicates their importance and impact. Thus, where ever available, I include editions and circulation numbers in order to point to the potential reach of a novel or short story.<sup>168</sup>

The chronological limitation to the years 1945 until 1960 allows for a succinct look at the inner-German discourse about literature and war until the building of the wall in 1961 – a discourse highly politicized and politicizing due to a unique political background marked by Germany’s division and global Cold War tensions. George Orwell with his astute sense for the significance of language in politics, wisely predicted in 1941 that in the age of modern totalitarianism, and of competing ideologies, the “frontiers of art and propaganda” blurred: the literary artist was becoming a “didactic, political writer, aesthetically conscious, of course, but more interested in subject-matter than in technique.”<sup>169</sup> Orwell aptly described the moral and intellectual dilemma a politically thinking literary person was bound to encounter – not only within the boundaries of totalitarian regimes:

The writers who have come up since the 1930s have been living in a world in which not only one’s life but one’s whole scheme of values is constantly menaced. In such circumstances, detachment is not possible. You cannot take a purely aesthetic interest in a disease you are dying from; you cannot feel dispassionately about a man who is about to cut your throat. In a world in which Fascism and Socialism were fighting one another, any thinking person had to take sides, and his feelings had to find their way not only into his writing but into his judgements on literature. Literature had to become political, because anything else would have entailed mental dishonesty.<sup>170</sup>

This is exactly the dilemma East Germany’s writers were caught up in during the early postwar years. And even though “fascism” was defeated in 1945, it continued to haunt both, East German communists in their perception of reactionary Western “imperialism,”

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<sup>168</sup> See fn. 49.

<sup>169</sup> George Orwell, „The Frontiers of Art and Propaganda,“ in Orwell, Angus, eds., *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. 2, 123-127, quote on 123.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 126.

and West German literary intellectuals seeking to come to terms with its dreadful legacy. On either side, there was a strong sense emerging that creating art for art's sake was no longer possible. The fact that the inner-German discourse about war and literature took place in two different political systems with fundamentally differing work and living conditions for writers, thus, is of central importance. Nonetheless, this analysis includes *both*, works of free literary expression, and works usually subsumed under the label “antifascist literature,” i.e. those works created in sync with the party-official propaganda in the early SED state.<sup>171</sup>

Any historical analysis of literature in divided postwar Germany begins with the question what the written word could still express after the “rupture with civilization”<sup>172</sup> for which Auschwitz became a synonym. After the war, a handful of German philosophers who had endured the Nazi era in inner or external exile pointed to the seeming impossibility of a verbal mastering of the despicable crimes of the Nazi regime. Theodor W. Adorno believed that “poetry” – and he meant in this case arts and culture in general – was “barbaric” after Auschwitz. With this thought he also alluded to the

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<sup>171</sup> See for details Wolfgang Emmerich, *Kleine Literaturgeschichte der DDR* (Leipzig: Kiepenheuer, 1997). Heukenkamp, ed., *Unerwünschte Erfahrung*. Werner Mittenzwei, *Die Intellektuellen, Literatur und Politik in Ostdeutschland, 1945-2000* (Leipzig: Faber & Faber, 2001). See also on the „social history of GDR literature,” Hans-Jürgen Schmitt, ed., *Die Literatur in der DDR (= Hansers Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur*, Vol. 11) (München: Hanser, 1983), therein especially in the context of the literary confrontation of the war the essay by Heinrich Küntzel, “Der Fachismus: seine Theorie, seine Darstellung in der Literatur,” *ibid.*, 435-467. On the connection between remilitarization and literary memory of the Wehrmacht in the GDR („Geläutertenliteratur“ as „background music [Begleitmusik] for the creation of the NVA”) see Karen Hartewig, „Militarismus und Antifaschismus.“

<sup>172</sup> Hannah Arendt was the first to describe National Socialism and Holocaust as “rupture with civilization.” As early as 1943 she realized that the murder of the Jews in Eastern Europe was a crime that “signaled the destruction of the common bond of European civilization.” Cf. Rabinbach, *In the Shadow of Catastrophe*, 11.

intellectual pile of rubble which confronted German writers, indeed all survivors, after May 8, 1945. What remained to be done in the land of writers and thinkers after the “German catastrophe” (Friedrich Meinecke), Adorno pondered, was to “reflect on one’s own failure” (*Reflexion auf das eigene Versagen*).<sup>173</sup>

Hannah Arendt realized that unlike after World War I, the Second World War, instead of inspiring another myth of the front experience shattered the basic fundamentals of Western civilization, unmasking man as a creature capable of unspeakable crimes.<sup>174</sup> Thus, only „evil“ itself could become the central theme of post-apocalyptic literary-philosophical discourses:

The reality is that, the Nazis are men like ourselves; the nightmare is that they have shown, have proven beyond doubt what man is capable of. ... The problem of evil will be the fundamental question of postwar intellectual life in Europe – as death became the fundamental problem after the last war.<sup>175</sup>

A third contemporary, Karl Jaspers, called in 1946 for a public reckoning with the causes for this “evil” within Germany. First condition for such a reckoning was to talk to each other about the historical facts in „full frankness and honesty,” which Jaspers knew was a “spiritual-political venture along the edge of the precipice.”<sup>176</sup> Yet, „Germany can only come to [its senses] again, unless we Germans find a way to communicate with each

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<sup>173</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), vol. 10/1, 27. This statement has often been misinterpreted. Adorno subsumed art and culture in general with the term “poetry,” he did not postulate the end of writing lyrics but insisted that the very act of “writing poems before and after Auschwitz is separated by an unbridgable rift.” Cf. Rolf Tiedemann’s commentary, „Nicht die erste Philosophie sondern eine letzte.’ Anmerkungen zum Denken Adornos“, in: Theodor W. Adorno, „Ob Nach Auschwitz sich noch leben lasse.“ *Ein philosophisches Lesebuch*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Leipzig: Suhrkamp, 1997), 12.

<sup>174</sup> For a comparison of the „literary responses“ to the two world wars see Mosse, „Two World Wars and the Myth of the War Experience.“ And idem, *Fallen Soldiers*, esp. chapter 10.

<sup>175</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Nightmare and Flight”, in idem, *Essays in Understanding, 1930-1954: Formation, Exile, and Totalitarianism*, ed. Jerome Kohn, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1994), 134 .

<sup>176</sup> Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, 16.



other.”<sup>177</sup> In face of the monstrosity of the crimes and the totality of defeat this was a task not only for politicians, journalists or philosophers, but maybe even more so for writers, namely people who by profession seek to comprehend and communicate the entire spectrum of human experience and emotion.

Were writers then able to “reflect” on the catastrophe? Was 1945 not the end of “poetry”? Could, in fact, only writers in post-war Germany get near the “actual historical truth,” as the nineteenth-century historian Jakob Burckhardt once had claimed?<sup>178</sup> How did they address the unprecedented and ultimate barbarization of warfare on the Eastern Front? What fragments of historical memory entered their novels and short stories, what was left aside, brushed over, warped? Was it possible to express interest in, even empathy for the many victims of Germany’s aggressive wars, for the suffering of the “others,” considering the catastrophic conditions in Germany and German suffering? And in which way did writers allow their voices and text to be politically instrumentalized in the daunting, soon all-encompassing Cold War atmosphere? If “he who in total defeat prefers life to death can only live in truthfulness” and critical self-reflection, as Jaspers warned,<sup>179</sup> was literature about the war one suitable medium and platform to attempt such a truthful reflection?

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 23. The English translation is incomplete. Compare the passage in the German edition, *Die Schuldfrage. Von der politischen Haftung Deutschlands* (München: Piper, 1987), 13f.

<sup>178</sup> „Die Poesie leistet mehr für die Erkenntnis des Wesens der Menschheit ..., weil das Vermögen, welches der Poesie zugrunde liegt, an sich ein viel höheres als das des größten Historikers und auch die Wirkung, wozu sie bestimmt ist, eine viel höhere als die der Geschichte ist. Dafür findet die Geschichte in der Poesie eine ihrer allerwichtigsten Quellen und einer ihrer allerreinsten und schönsten.“ Jakob Christoph Burckhardt, „Über das Studium der Geschichte“, in idem, *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* (Stuttgart: Körner 1978), 69.

<sup>179</sup> Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, 108.

## II. The Politics of War Literature

Since literature is not created in a social vacuum, I briefly turn to the political aspects of postwar literary life and production. Particularly during the 1950s, literary men and women were caught up in negotiating and renegotiating their role and function in postwar German society. Debates circled around the question what literature could afford after total defeat, and they took place both inside each part of Germany as well as amongst them.<sup>180</sup> After reconstructing this fascinating debate among German writers in the 1950s, this chapter concludes with a critical look in between the book covers of the war literature created in both Germanys between 1945 and 1960.

In March 1950, three months before the „German Writers Union“ would be founded in East Berlin, the prominent East German writer Arnold Zweig debated the lessons of history and the “most important social role of the writers,” namely to reach the masses, in the *Kulturbund*’s journal *Aufbau* with the following words:

... if during the decade of the Weimar Republic those novels, dramas and poems that were directed against war as a social process would have reached an audience in whose school books and readings the real face of war would have been portrayed instead of the century-old idealization of war, of aggressive war, in fact, in all its needlessness in the long run, its cruelty and its exterminating function – it would have been impossible to catch hundreds of thousands of young people with the parole ‘Let’s ride to the Eastern Lands.’<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> I am concentrating on the time after 1949, the immediate postwar period has already been much described. See for example on the Soviet zone Wolfgang Emmerich, „Kein ‚Nullpunkt‘: Tradition und Neubeginn im Zeichen des Antifaschismus (1945-1949)“, in idem, *Kleine Literaturgeschichte*, 70-112. On the Western zones, Jost Hermand et. al., eds., *Nachkriegsliteratur in Westdeutschland 1945-1949. Schreibweisen, Gattungen, Institutionen* (Berlin: Argument-Verlag, 1982). And Hans Wagner, ed., *Von Böll bis Buchheim. Deutsche Kriegsprosa nach 1945* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997). And Hans-Gerd Winter, ed., „Uns selbst mußten wir mißtrauen.“ *Die „junge Generation“ in der deutschsprachigen Nachkriegsliteratur* (Hamburg: Dölling & Galitz, 2002). An excellent collection of primary sources documenting the literary-political debates within and in between the four occupation zones was published by Gerhard Hay, ed., „Als der Krieg zu Ende war.“ *Literarisch-politische Publizistik 1945-1950* (Marbach: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, 1995).

<sup>181</sup> Printed in Klaus Wagenbach et. al., eds., *Vaterland, Muttersprache. Deutsche Schriftsteller und ihr Staat seit 1945* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 2004), 95.

Hitler's aggressive war against Europe, that is, particularly against the Soviet Union, was to be the subject of the writers' literary works so that the (right) lessons could be drawn from the past in order to prevent the horrors of war in the future. Since the beginning of the 1950s, organized East German writers submitted to the ideological and propagandistic objectives set by the SED. During the Fifth Meeting of the SED Central Committee in March 1951 the party decided to take up the "fight against formalism in art and literature" and instead propagated the turn towards "socialist realism," a turn also taken by the Writers' Union. In the Union's statute the members confessed to "socialist realism" as "method of creation" ("*Schaffensmethode*"), they acknowledged the "leading role of working class and party" and pledged to fight relentlessly "against all forms of ideological coexistence and infiltration of reactionary and revisionist views into the realm of literature."<sup>182</sup>

After a series of popular uprisings was crushed by East German and Soviet troops in June 1953, regime-friendly writers in the GDR reaffirmed this position and underlined that the riots proved how necessary this fight still was. The writer Anna Seghers called upon her colleagues to stand against "this horde of bandits" seeking to "interrupt our peaceful, democratic reconstruction:"

They [the bandits] succeed everywhere where there are people who are still not fully allied with us. They use every imperfection, every mistake, every failure, every unresolved question. Nothing can show the writers so clearly their tasks and their responsibility. We will continue on the chosen path

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<sup>182</sup> Printed in Reinhild Köhler-Hausmann, *Literaturbetrieb in der DDR. Schriftsteller und Literaturinstanzen* (Stuttgart: Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1984), 137f.

even more determined, more conscientious than before, allied with our government and with our party.<sup>183</sup>

Against the background of the 1953 uprising, the popular revolt in Hungary in 1956 and the rearmament-debates in West Germany, an intense discussion about the role of the writer and the literary mastering of the Second World War in modern German literature unfolded in the monthly journal of the GDR Writers' Union, *neue deutsche literatur* ("New German Literature"). The writer Ludwig Renn kicked off the discussion in 1956 with the question "Why no literature about the war?" He noted critically that in "our democratic literature, the dominant collective experience of a whole generation, the Second World War, was occasionally historical background but never or rarely the actual subject of the narrated events."<sup>184</sup> Renn further observed that if at all, the issue of war was only addressed by antifascists – by the "old guards" (Willi Bredel, Johannes R. Becher, Erich Weinert, Konrad Wolf). What was necessary, however, was a literary treatment of those who had not stood on the "right side" from the very beginning but who had been "lured or led or pressed by Hitler to the fronts of the Second World War" and for whom the war experience had emerged as a "juncture for inner pondering, realization and return."<sup>185</sup> In other words, Renn called for the literary treatment of the veteran's transformation in war, the experience of "reflection and return."

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<sup>183</sup> Anna Seghers, *Über Kunstwerk und Wirklichkeit*, vol. III: „Für den Frieden der Welt“ (Berlin: Akademie, 1971), 105, Quoted in Wagenbach, ed., *Vaterland, Muttersprache*, 122.

<sup>184</sup> Ludwig Renn, "Weshalb keine Literatur über den Krieg?" *neue deutsche literatur*, vol. 4, no. 1 (1956), 126f.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 127-129. Renn mentions Franz Fühmann's short story *Comrades* (1955) as an example for such „Umkehrliteratur“, in which a group of Nazi soldiers kills the daughter of their superior and later witnesses the execution of Russian civilians for this crime.

A few months later, Rolf Seeliger resumed the discussion by pointing to the “silent generation” and the few “literary partisans in West Germany.”<sup>186</sup> With an eye on the flood of *Landserheften* and front memoirs in the West, Seeliger demanded an utterly sober, realistic description and mastering of the “experienced ruptures war, death and catastrophe.” Only a “radicalization of the thematic agenda,” i.e. a description of „cruelly mutilated human beings in the madness of war” served the process of drawing lessons from the past. Literature about war must not be a mere “interpretation of fate” (*Schicksalsdeutung*), but should be a “doubled reality: the mirrored flashes of reality must whip us awake.”<sup>187</sup> Among the few “partisans” in the West fulfilling this task, Seeliger counted Gerd Ledig and his novels *Stalin Organ* (1955) – discussed below – and *Revenge* (1956), as well as Ingeborg Bachmann’s lyric.<sup>188</sup>

This explicitly political and partisan understanding of war literature was advocated once more in a noteworthy essay by the writers Hermann Kant (born 1926) and Frank Wagner in late 1957. Modern German literature was to be placed at the center, they argued, because what was needed was a “great requital” with imperialist war, not a

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<sup>186</sup> Rolf Seeliger, „Schweigende Generation? Literarisches Partisanentum in Westdeutschland“, *neue deutsche literatur*, vol. 5, no. 1 (1957), 127-131.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>188</sup> Literary „partisans“ are only those writers who seek to illustrate the connection between the literary dealing with the war with current affairs and who in conclusion condemn the „restorative development in the Federal Republic,“ i.e. above all its rearmament. Seeliger provides one example which in his view fulfils these requirements: one of Ingeborg Bachmann’s poems (ibid., 128):

*Der Krieg wird nicht mehr erklärt,  
sondern fortgesetzt. Das Unerhörte  
ist alltäglich geworden. Der Held  
bleibt den Kämpfen fern. Der Schwache  
ist in die Feuerzone gerückt.  
Die Uniform des Tages ist die Geduld,  
die Auszeichnung der armselige Stern  
der Hoffnung über dem Herzen.*

“naturalistic reproduction of the horrors.”<sup>189</sup> Ultimately, this peculiar understanding of war literature would work according to the rule “tell me, what you think about the past war, and I will tell you, how you would stand towards a coming one.”<sup>190</sup> Much like Renn, the authors encouraged dealing not with the exception, i.e. Hitler’s opponents of the first hour, but with the rule – the “blinded.”

What matters is that literature gets at the nature of things, that it shall search for and describe the typical – and all these doubtful, suspecting or even knowing soldiers [depicted in the antifascist literature of the ‘old guards’] are not images of the soldier of the German Wehrmacht who has let himself be abused by the fascists so shamefully.<sup>191</sup>

Here the authors not only reflected the official SED interpretation of the past according to which the ordinary soldier was but a passively acting, blinded worker’s son relieved of any responsibility for the crimes of the “fascist Wehrmacht,” but Kant and Wagner also sought to transport the official discourses over the past into literary life and society as a whole. Thus, writers too functioned as messengers of the SED’s strategy of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*.<sup>192</sup> Accordingly, the essay closed with the call to create “positive heroes” of the antifascist fight, heroes who credibly struggled with reformation

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<sup>189</sup> Hermann Kant, Frank Wagner, „Die große Abrechnung. Probleme der Darstellung des Krieges in der deutschen Gegenwartsliteratur“, *neue deutsche literatur*, vol. 5, no. 12 (1957), 124-139, quote on 129.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>192</sup> Martin Sabrow has described these mechanisms of dominance of the public and academic discourses for the GDR-historical sciences, using the terms „discourse on dominance/power“ (*Herrschaftsdiskurs*) and „dominance of discourse“ (*Diskursherrschaft*). *Herrschaftsdiskurs* is defined as the „mit verbindlichen Denkmustern, Deutungskonzepten und Ausgrenzungen besetzten Verständigungsebenen über die Vergangenheit in der DDR, die vor allem von den ideologischen Normen und politischen Ansprüchen der sozialistischen Diktatur bestimmt war.“ See Sabrow, „Einleitung: Geschichtsdiskurs und Doktringesellschaft“ in Idem, ed., *Geschichte als Herrschaftsdiskurs*, 9-35, quote on 19. Sabrow’s theoretical considerations regarding the ambiguous functions of this „power“ exerted on and in between those in power and those subordinated to this power might even be applicable to the GDR literary scene during the Ulbricht years even if the institutionalized historical science was under a much more direct influence of the SED than the more or less independently working writer. Sabrow views those participating in the discourses explicitly not only as powerless subordinates but also as individuals who obtain power themselves within their institutional and professional spheres. They thus give the regime a certain amount of additional stability and integrative power.

and return, who “against all inner and external resistance and errors [reached] their new insights.”<sup>193</sup> This was not least of all a question of choosing the right place and setting for a war novel, because it was a fact that

the main decision of World War II was made on the so-called Eastern Front, that the thorough re-education of German soldiers started almost too late, but eventually not too late in Soviet imprisonment, and since the fostering of friendly relations between the entire German people and the peoples of the Soviet Union [is] an existential task, we call upon our writers to deal more intensively with the fascist attack on the Soviet Union and to keep their focus on this main front of the military class struggle – including as background.<sup>194</sup>

This orchestrated concentration on the war against the Soviet Union (and the battle of Stalingrad as *the* turning point, as we will see) partly explains why East German literature compared to the West appears to have started earlier and more intensively to deal with the Eastern Front war. In addition, the explicitly political understanding of literature shared by SED strategists and many writers, and the desire to utilize the past for the legitimization and implementation of present policies in the most effective possible way, have contributed to the focus on the history and consequences of the war against the Soviet Union in early GDR literature. Read before this background, the selection of texts from East Germany analyzed below represents the result of a literary process which was significantly steered and influenced by politics and ideology. Nonetheless, these literary texts served not necessarily and not exclusively the creation of politically opportune historical narratives, but always dealt with historical reality as well – albeit often tainted by a particular worldview. As the observant writer Günter de Bruyn (born 1926) retrospectively commented the ambivalent position of the literary artist: in the GDR

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<sup>193</sup> Kant, Wagner, „Die große Abrechnung,“ 136.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 138.

„writing about war and post-war times was only possible by leaving things out and by lying if one wanted to be printed during the 1950s and 1960s.”<sup>195</sup>

The literary scene in the early FRG was quite different. Despite the pluralistic democratic system in place there, most intellectuals viewed themselves as “outcasts” during the Adenauer era – as “intellectuals in the offside.” It is commonly believed that the bitter realities of the Cold War made writers in the GDR to “henchmen of the communist regime,” and West German writers to “outsiders and powerless critics” of a reconstruction process they had not wanted the way it evolved.”<sup>196</sup>

How inescapable this situation seemed to many West German intellectuals was well described by Thomas Mann in an article in the French journal *L'Express* in the fall of 1954:

Because of a hapless and sinister world constellation ... we see a mankind whose moral status has been severely damaged by the wars of yesterday and before yesterday, torn apart in two camps. Over the terribly strained relationship [between these camps] daunts a catastrophe of such gravity that civilization would be finished. That the most important border between these camps runs through a country, the forlorn Germany, makes the intolerability of this complex situation even clearer.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Quoted in Herfried Münkler, „Das kollektive Gedächtnis der DDR“, in Dieter Vorsteher, ed., *Parteiauftrag: Ein neues Deutschland. Bilder, Rituale und Symbole der frühen DDR* (München: Köhler & Amelang, 1997), 466.

<sup>196</sup> This is Kurt Sontheimer's catchy characterization of the era Adenauer. See Sontheimer, *Die Adenauer-Ära*, 160. Besides Sontheimer, also Manfred Görtemaker has used the phrase „intellectuals in the offside” („*Intellektuelle im Abseits*“) to summarize the situation of intellectuals in the 1950s. See Manfred Görtemaker, *Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Von der Gründung bis zur Gegenwart* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 2004), 260. On the „social history“ of West German postwar literature, see in general Ludwig Fischer, ed., *Literatur in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland bis 1967* (= *Hansers Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur*, vol. 10) (München: Hanser, 1986). And Wagner, ed., *Von Böll bis Buchheim*.

<sup>197</sup> Printed in Wagenbach, ed., *Vaterland, Muttersprache*, 122. Already in 1950, Adorno had described this „world constellation“ caused by „German fascism“ and responsible for the „paralysis of the spiritual productivity“ in Germany even more drastically in his essay „Auferstehung der Kultur in Deutschland?“, „Die Gesellschaft spaltet sich in starre Blöcke. Was geschieht, empfinden die Menschen als ihnen angetan, nicht als Anliegen ihrer eigenen Spontanität. Darum ist die Neigung des Geistes, schattenhaft mit sich selbst zu spielen, die ihn verkümmern lässt, keineswegs bloß auf sein eigenes Schuldkonto zu setzen. Sie



Hans-Werner Richter two years later described what this untenable situation meant for contemporary writers in West Germany. The author and founding member of the famous “Group 47” observed in March 1956 on the occasion of the creation of the “Grünwald Circle:”<sup>198</sup>

If you write here a book against war, they quickly see you as fellow traveler over there [*driüben*, i.e. in the GDR], and here occasionally as a man who “poisons” the young soldiers of Mister Blank [Minister for Defense at the time]. If you write a book, however, about the misery of the expellees from the East, you are a henchman of the monopolists paid by the Americans over there, and here you are pushed into the corner of Radio Free Europe. For the German intellectuals this situation is undoubtably a unique, dangerous and unbearable situation. ... It makes it infinitely more difficult to stand up for the truth, for justice and for freedom and it paralyzes honest criticism almost until complete paralysis because the edge on which such criticism must wander is thin.<sup>199</sup>

The feeling of discomfort Richter expressed in these lines was shared by many of his young colleagues in the 1950s. He also provided an apt analysis of what many perceived as a paralyzed intellectual and cultural climate of those years overshadowed by the heated debates about the rearmament of West Germany. In retrospect it has often been noted that the contemporary literature of the 1950s was if not apolitical, then un-political, that it was a matter of “privacy” for “as an institution [it was] not integrated into the rapidly solidifying order” of the young FRG.<sup>200</sup>

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entspringt einer objektiven Notwendigkeit, die solange übermächtig bleibt, als nicht das Bewusstsein sie in sich selbst aufnimmt und damit über sie hinausgeht. Die Welt ist aufgeteilt in unmäßige und übermächtige Kraftfelder. Der Geist sieht sich vor dem Zwang, entweder sich anzupassen, oder sich zur Isolierung, zur Ohnmacht, zur Donquichotterie verurteilt zu sehen.“ See Theodor W. Adorno, *Kritik. Kleine Schriften zur Gesellschaft*, (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1971), 20-33, quote on 29f.

<sup>198</sup> The „Grünwald Circle“ was founded in March 1956 as a loose association of writers and publicists aimed against the remilitarization and neo-Nazi tendencies in West Germany. The “Gruppe 47” was a loose association of young writers who met annually for readings, text discussions and networking. It was the first stage for a number of later famous writers such as Günter Grass, Ingeborg Bachmann and Martin Walser.

<sup>199</sup> Printed in Wagenbach, ed., *Vaterland, Muttersprache*, 134f.

<sup>200</sup> Heinz Forster, Paul Riegel, *Deutsche Literaturgeschichte*, vol. 11: „Nachkriegszeit 1945-1968,“ (München: dtv, 2002), 42.

Nonetheless, the 1950s were years of literary new beginnings and productivity. Authors like Heinrich Böll, Günter Grass and Wolfgang Koeppen had their first successes.<sup>201</sup> The literary “mastering” of the war differed greatly from the war literature produced by East German writers, it had different forms and emphases. Aside from the flood of cheap war novels and memoirs, a few important novels about the battles of Leningrad and Stalingrad dominated the literary market and are thus included in the following analysis. In general, though, it should be noted that the war on the Eastern Front served rather as background or occasional reference point than as central theme in West German high literature of the 1950s.

Despite the factual division of Germany there were still a few inner-German debates about how to deal with the legacy of the Eastern Front war in contemporary literature. One debate in particular stands out for its format and intensity, namely the controversy surrounding Gerd Ledig’s novel *Stalin Organ* – the title refers to a Soviet boxlike rocket launcher mounted on a gun carriage widely used by the Red Army in World War II. After its release in 1955, the book was reportedly praised as “the best novel about World War II” but then was long forgotten until its republication in 2000.<sup>202</sup> Ledig, himself a veteran of the Eastern Front, narrated without many flourishes and details but with gruesome precision the fighting, suffering and dying of a group of unnamed soldiers near Leningrad in 1942. Tenor of the novel is the senselessness of war in which fear and brutalization

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<sup>201</sup> This transitory phase of a new “departure” in West German postwar literature in the mid-1950s is best described in Ulrich Ott, Friedrich Pfäfflin, eds., *Konstellationen. Literatur um 1955 (= Marbacher Ausstellungskatalog Nr. 48)* (Marbach: Deutsche Schillergesellschaft, 1995), 15-18.

<sup>202</sup> Published by Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main 2000. Quote in the book-cover of the first paperback edition (2003).

were the order of the day, and in which a soldier did not fight and die heroically because of his commitment to a cause, but perished pitifully because he had no other choice. War was not the result of human action but a kind of catastrophe that had come over German and Soviet soldiers alike, a calamity dumped on to the shoulders of the common soldier by incompetent and ruthless generals.<sup>203</sup>

Ledig's novel was praised enthusiastically by the West German press. The weekly intellectual paper *Die Zeit* lauded its "seeming cool style" behind which "the passion of a torn heart and the love for the German and Russian men"<sup>204</sup> lay hidden. The author himself sought publication in the GDR. The editors of the book in West Germany, however, rejected the idea pointing to the very likely ideological instrumentalization of the work by SED-propagandists. Still, the manuscript circulated among East German writers, and Anna Seghers in person praised the realistic and deterring portrait of war during her speech to the Fourth Writers' Congress in East Berlin in January of 1956. At the same time, a critical review of the novel in *neue deutsche literatur* denounced the "nihilistic" undertone of the text and demurred that Ledig had failed to reach the "right" insights and conclusions in terms of the ever-and still-raging class struggle:

Gerd Ledig is concerned with war as such, with material war, for which to him the Stalin Organ was a symbol; he is less concerned with the fascist character of war, and not at all with its causes. ... To him the Russian soldiers are the same poor victims as the German, both not knowing what they are fighting for, both only chessmen on the chess board of the generals.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> This is how Ledig later also explained his anti-war attitude: „Nachdem aber das Unglück des Krieges nun einmal über uns hereingebrochen war, konnte man wenigstens erwarten, daß dieser so geführt wurde, wie die Gegebenheiten es verlangten. Trotzdem reihte sich Fehler an Fehler. Aus diesen Betrachtungen heraus entwickelte sich bei mir, während meiner Militärzeit, eine Art passiver Opposition.“ Quoted from the epilogue by Florian Radvan in Gerd Ledig, *Die Stalinorgel* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 218.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>205</sup> Günther Deicke, „Drei neue westdeutsche Kriege romane“, *neue deutsche literatur*, vol. 3, no. 6 (1955), 139.

This partly justified criticism encapsulated the nucleus of the East German interpretation of the war against the Soviet Union and at the same time illuminates its ideological distortion. The review denounced the undifferentiated depiction of German and Russian soldiers which blurred the line between aggressors and defenders. The reviewer pointed to the need to illustrate that German soldiers had been misled and misused for the evil cause of fascism while Soviet soldiers fought for not only their own liberation, but for the liberation of the German nation and ultimately for the historical victory of communism as well. In the categorical words of Anna Seghers this amounted to the following conclusion:

In reality, the fear of life and the fear of death are never identical and [should not] be mixed up in the war between the Soviet Union and Hitler fascism. Just as the fight for bread and peace cannot be mixed up with the fight for power and profits.<sup>206</sup>

The *Stalinorgel* dispute exemplifies the main tendencies in the West and East German literature of the post-war years. The majority of West German authors of the so-called rubble-literature placed individual suffering in war at the center without subscribing to a new version of a collectivist world view. Most East German writers found their (collectivized) voice in the official history discourse by drastically and relatively authentically depicting the suffering inflicted on the Soviet lands by the German Wehrmacht and by idealizing and glorifying the heroes of Soviet and German communist resistance.

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<sup>206</sup> Anna Seghers, „Der Anteil der Literatur an der Bewußtseinsbildung des Volkes“, in Deutscher Schriftstellerverband, ed., *IV. Schriftstellerkongreß. Erster Teil* (Brandenburg: Druckerei Bahms, 1956), 66f. Quoted from the epilogue by Florian Radvan in *Die Stalinorgel*, 212.

### III. “Barbarossa” as Literary Stuff: Stalingrad and the War on the Eastern Front in Postwar German Literature, 1945-1960

The following analysis of fifteen novels and short stories from East and West German writers is based on a selection of literary texts which deal implicitly or explicitly with the history of the war against the Soviet Union.<sup>207</sup> Thus, while a broad reading included works such as Günter Grass’ “Tin Drum,” my analysis makes no references to the world-famous novel because even though it is partly set “on” the Eastern Front, i.e. in Danzig, the actual war enters only from afar. Grass depicts his hero, the young man Oskar stuck in the body of a three-year old, rebelling against militarism, war, and death by excessively playing his drum as expression of his resistance against the (Nazi) world around him. Yet, he narrates the Eastern Front only selectively, most notably as the Germans’ flight/expulsion from their homes in the wake of the intrusion of Russian

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<sup>207</sup> These are from West German authors: (year of first edition, and available circulation numbers in parenthesis): Heinrich Böll, „Der Angriff,“ in: *Der Geschmack des Brotes. Erzählungen* (1990). Wolfgang Borchert, „Draußen vor der Tür“ (1947) und „Generation ohne Abschied“ (1946), in: *Gesamtwerk*, (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1998). Heinrich Gerlach, *Die verratene Armee* (1957), München 1959. Hans-Hellmut Kirst, *Null-Acht-Fünfzehn im Krieg* (1954), München 1979<sup>11</sup>. Gerd Ledig, *Die Stalinorgel* (1955), Frankfurt/Main 2003. Theodor Plievier, *Stalingrad* (1945), Berlin 1946 (30,000 copies). Erich Maria Remarque, *Zeit zu leben und Zeit zu sterben* (1954). And by East German authors: Johannes R. Becher, *Winterschlacht* (1953), Berlin (Ost), 1961. Willi Bredel, *Die Enkel*, Berlin (Ost), 1954. Franz Fühmann, „Kameraden“ (1955), in: „*Den Katzenartigen wollten wir verbrennen.*“ *Ein Lesebuch* (München, 1988). Stephan Hermlin, *Leutnant Yorck von Wartenburg* (1946), Leipzig, 1977. Herbert Otto, *Die Lüge* (1956), (61,000 copies) Berlin (Ost), 1960. Anna Seghers, *Die Toten bleiben jung* (1949), (Berlin (Ost), 1969<sup>11</sup>). Harry Thürk, *Die Stunde der toten Augen* (1957) (Berlin (Ost), 1957). Bodo Uhse, *Die Patrioten* (1954), Berlin (Ost), 1975. I have also read but not included in this analysis for reasons of limited space: West: Heinrich Böll, *Der Zug war pünktlich* (1949). Günter Grass, *Die Blechtrommel* (1959). Ernst von Salomon, *Der Fragebogen* (1951), (206,000 copies), Hamburg 1952.<sup>8</sup> Wolfdietrich Schnurre, „Die Tat,“ in *Erzählungen* (Olten, 1966). Carl Zuckmayer, *Des Teufels General* (1946) (325,000 copies), Frankfurt/Main, 1981.<sup>11</sup> East: Willi Bredel, „Die Frühlingssonate,“ in Franz Fühmann, ed., *Menschen im Krieg. Erzählungen über den zweiten Weltkrieg von Autoren der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik und der Sowjetunion* (Berlin (Ost): Aufbau, 1975), 452-465. Heiner Müller, „Schlacht“ (1951), in idem, *Lohndrucker’, ,Philoktet’, ,Die Schlacht’ mit Materialien* (Stuttgart, 2001). Dieter Noll, *Die Abenteuer des Werner Holt. Roman einer Jugend* (1963). Friedrich Wolf, „Siebzehn Brote,“ in Fühmann, ed., *Menschen im Krieg*, 178-184. Whenever readily available, I have used the published English edition; if no English edition is cited, the translation is mine.

soldiers (“the Ivans”) into the city. The observant reader notes, for example hints at the mass murder in the East when Grass describes how Germans raised their arms to surrender to machine-gun bearing Russian soldiers: “That adults raised their arms I thought was normal, one knew that from the *Wochenschaun*.” (376).<sup>208</sup>

In contrast to Grass’ “Tin Drum,” the works considered in the following analysis address the Eastern Front war directly in one way or another. They were written during the first postwar years, i.e. between the years 1945 until 1960. The battle most often described in German postwar literature, the battle of Stalingrad, was also the subject of several texts included here, but it is impossible to include all of them in this context.<sup>209</sup> The authors of the texts represent a generation of Germans for whom the Second World War, or in some cases even both world wars, had a formative influence on their personal biographies. War and its aftermath was one, if not the central theme of most of their young and adult lives.

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<sup>208</sup> Other scenes include more explicit references to the gassing of humans in Nazi extermination camps, see for example the scene in which Oskar is examined by a doctor who knew from his Treblinka experience how to handle „disinfecting substances.“ Jews are not mentioned explicitly, rather the text refers to hundreds of thousands of “people sent to shower.” (396f.)

<sup>209</sup> See further Ulrich Baron, „Stalingrad als Thema der deutschsprachigen Literatur“, in Wette/Überschär, eds., *Stalingrad*, 222-232. And Bernig, *Eingekesselt*. And Rolf Günter Renner, „Hirn und Herz. Stalingrad als Gegenstand ideologischer und literarischer Diskurse“, in Förster, ed., *Stalingrad*, 472-492. Also, none of the autobiographical texts and *Landserhefte* find consideration here whose authors’ main intention was arguably rather the aesthetization and popularization of the Eastern Front war than the critical memory thereof. See further Geiger, *Kriegsromanhefte in der BRD*. And Gerstenberger, „Strategische Erinnerungen“, 620-633.

The selection of the texts was not primarily determined by the possibility to place them all in the category „war novel.“ Rather, I took a broad look at the contemporary book market in order to get a sense of the importance and meaning as well as ignorance and negation of the war on the Eastern Front in Germany’s postwar literature. All of the selected authors were adults in 1939, about a third had already experienced World War One. The majority of the authors had served as soldiers in the I. and/or II. World Wars, eight of them had fought on the Eastern Front resp. in Stalingrad.

In my analysis I refrain from retelling the plots of the books but instead select scenes which illustrate the various ways in which the authors used the war as literary stage, as a reference point for describing thoughts and emotions of their leading figures, and which exemplify the use of language to depict misery and crimes, victims and perpetrators. The reading of all the texts has inspired the following thematic structure of the analysis. A first section looks at the historical context in which the stories and literary figures are placed, i.e. it asks how the historical background “Eastern Front war” is utilized as literary material: is it portrayed as “hit of fate” (*Schicksalsschlag*), or as a sort of natural catastrophe, or as the result of human action; does the question of aggressive war and conspiracy to wage war come up at all and if so how is it addressed? Who is fighting for what reason? A second section is dedicated to the depiction of the individual soldier’s world, his thoughts and emotions. Under the headline “Conscience in Upheaval: Legends of Return,” this section deals with the soldier torn between discipline and resistance, thus with the issue of personal responsibility, of how to remain a human being responsible for one’s own actions when one is caught in the middle of a war of extermination. When does a soldier become a murderer? And what about those moments of (supposed) inner return, when the conscience is no longer clear and when defeat seems inevitable, especially after the “turn” at Stalingrad? How did literature deal with the cathartic experience after indoctrination and reformation, and was there something like an authentic transformative experience at all beyond the communist master narrative of the antifascist turn? Finally, the third sections “Scenarios of Horror: Of Crimes and Criminals” discusses how language is used to reconstruct historical horrors, i.e. crime scenes, victims’ fates and perpetrators’ actions and motivations. Was there indeed a

tendency to merely “reproduce the horrors naturalistically” as Kant and Wagner criticized? Or could literature do more, could it provide a balanced, emphatic insight into the human sufferings during war when soldiers are not always just potential perpetrators but also potential victims.

This set of questions serves as thematic guide. Obviously, many of the texts discussed are works of high complexity and textual density who deserve to be read as a whole. In this case and without intending to negate these features, I use them as historical source in order to examine in which way literature in the 1950s contributed to the memory of the war against the Soviet Union and whether these works of art provided alternative interpretations beyond the officially propagated narratives of Stalingrad and the Eastern Front. Did some of them offer alternative narratives which opened the readers’ hearts and minds, and thus the public conscience to a more “empathetic understanding of [historical] truth?”<sup>210</sup>

#### „WHAT DO THEY ACTUALLY WANT HERE?” – THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

„Death smelled different in Russia than in Africa“ – this is the first sentence of Erich Maria Remarque’s remarkable novel *Time to Live and Time to Die* about the soldier Ernst Graeber who witnesses both the war on the Eastern Front as soldier and the bombing of German cities at home (5).<sup>211</sup> When it comes to the clear stand about who was responsible for “Barbarossa,” this book is unique in the West German literary landscape of the

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<sup>210</sup> Dirk van Laak, „Widerstand gegen die Geschichtsgewalt. Zur Kritik an der ‚Vergangenheitsbewältigung‘“, in Norbert Frei, Dirk van Laak, Michael Stolleis, eds., *Geschichte vor Gericht. Historiker, Richter und die Suche nach Gerechtigkeit* (München: Beck, 2000), 11-28, quote on 22.

<sup>211</sup> In the following paragraphs the exact citations are put in parentheses in the text. The page numbers correspond to the editions listed in footnote 48.



postwar years, maybe because Remarque never returned to Germany from his American exile after the war. Despite the fact that the first German editions appeared with significant alteration from the original manuscript, the novel represents one of the most candid reckonings with the Eastern Front war, and the complicity of the Wehrmacht in war crimes.<sup>212</sup> Just as in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Remarque masterfully describes the complexity of the manifold sufferings caused by war without equalizing victims' and perpetrators' fates. That the „meaning of this war“ was the „mass murder of the innocent“ alone (196), was rarely formulated with such clarity and Remarque's style, free from pathos and ideological undertones, stands out for the sober, carefully crafted descriptions of individual experiences in the many facets of modern war. The historical context is

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<sup>212</sup> The novel has a remarkable history in West Germany. The book, written by the author in German, originally appeared in an English translation in May 1954. The first German translation (translated back from the English edition) was published by Kiepenheuer & Witsch the same year. This first West German edition appeared indeed scandalously censored: one of Graeber's comrades was turned into a social democrat (Remarque's original manuscript described him as communist), and a few crucial scenes depicting the mass murder of Jews and the killing of Slavic *Untermenschen* were cut out in order to minimize the degree of the Wehrmacht's involvement in the mass murder. Also, the central character Steinbrenner, representing an ordinary German *Landser* in the 1954 West German edition, in the original was a die-hard Nazi: a member of the SS, and NSDAP, and a former Gestapo agent, thus the "prototype of the National Socialist warrior" (Hannes Heer). In omitting facts like these the altered version put party and SS outside the Wehrmacht. The last scene during which Graeber is shot by Russian "partisans" whom he had saved earlier was also cleansed, for example, Graeber's referring to himself as "murderer" – thus clearly showing a sense of personal guilt – was cut out. Remarque accepted these changes in "silent disgust," possibly because he felt the essence of the book still remained intact. The first correct German translation of the English original appeared only in 1989. See Heer, "Vom Sieg der Geschichte über die Erinnerung. 257-286, esp. 275-278..On the history of its censoring and publication see See Hannes Heer, "Vom Sieg der Geschichte über die Erinnerung. Das Bild der Wehrmacht im kollektiven Bewußtsein der Bundesrepublik," in idem, *Tote Zonen: Die deutsche Wehrmacht an der Ostfront* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1999), 257-286, esp. 275-278. And Thomas F. Schneider, „'Befehl ist Befehl. Oder nicht?' Erich Maria Remarque: 'Zeit zu leben und Zeit zu sterben' (1954),“ in Wagner, ed., *Von Böll bis Buchheim*, 231-247. The changes were documented already in 1957 in the GDR's *neue deutsche literatur*: F.C. Weiskopf, „Die politischen Valenzen des Dr. Witsch oder Der kastrierte Remarque,“ *neue deutsche literatur*, vol. 3, no. 2 (1955), 99-107, and „Der kastrierte Remarque. Nochmals zum Roman ‚Zeit zu leben und Zeit zu sterben,“ *neue deutsche literatur*, vol 5, no. 4 (1957), 108-127.

clear, the reader is not thrown into a war theater somewhere out there on the Eastern Front as in most other novels written in West Germany at the time.

Hans-Hellmut Kirst bestselling book *Zero-Eight-Fifteen in War*, another much less sophisticated example, treats war as acting subject and not as an event caused by human action. At the very beginning, the reader literally falls into a “resting break” of one Patrolman Asch while the war in Russia is waging on:

The war is sleeping his winter sleep, and nobody seems to exist in this area who would be keen on disturbing it. But spring stood already at the door and it would also get into the war's bones and help him back on his feet. This first Russian winter sleep was no permanent condition. (5)

For Asch, who embodies the disillusioned, occasionally brazen-ironical and mostly indifferent run-of-the-mill-soldier who fights without much qualms and thus is basically exchangeable, this war is an “inevitable evil” – like any 08/15-war – that he had not started, yet in which he nonetheless had to fight.<sup>213</sup> This indifferent basic mood implies in passing that the Second World War was a war just like any other. To Asch's relatively easy-going superior Wedelmann who entertains a relationship to a Russian “volunteer” interpreter, the question of “why” seems easy to answer as a benign dialogue between the two “lovers” demonstrates:

‘Why must there be war?’ she asked.

‘Without the war we would never have met.’

‘How you say that!’ she responded angrily and withdrew her hand. ‘That is a comfortable excuse and a bad one in addition. We could have met at a great sports event, on a vacation trip, somewhere in a theatre, in a gallery. Does there always have to be war so that two people from different countries encounter?’

‘No, not that. But they wage it!’ (162f.)

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<sup>213</sup> The term zero-eight/fifteen – originally the name of a gun – became popularized into every-day German by Kirst's novel and henceforth served as metaphor if something appears useless, senseless, arbitrary or irrelevant. On the book and the movie made out of it see Robert G. Moeller, „Kämpfen für den Frieden: 08/15 und westdeutsche Erinnerungen an den Zweiten Weltkrieg,“ *Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift*, vol. 64, no. 2 (2005), 359-390.

For Gerd Ledig's nameless soldiers in the novel *Stalin Organ* the question of the cause for war never even arises. The novel praised so enthusiastically by contemporary critics for its detailed and realistic description of mutilations, injuries and death, deals with the suffering on both sides in an – again “senseless” – battle on “Height 308” just outside Leningrad during the Winter of 1941/42. The question what the German troops had actually brought there does only occur to one Soviet lieutenant, yet no answer is given. In view of the impending doom of the German attack the man ponders over the motives of the invaders who rather died than surrendered:

Another such animal, the lieutenant thought. In a cage he behaves like a human, but when he has a gun he shoots at corpses. What does he actually want here? This beast with the sheep's face. His home has plenty of heights like this one. I have seen them: green trees, rivers, clean villages. On their streets there is no rubble and no dirt. On their fields the ears of corn stand like soldiers. (170)

The most famous novel about the battle of Stalingrad, Theodor Plievier's *Stalingrad* poses questions in a similar way and sticks to an accusatory tone throughout. This earliest and probably most widely-read Stalingrad novel carries a decided condemnation of the war on the Eastern Front. Above all, it denounces the generals as “corpse-deliverers” and “executioners of their own soldiers.” The limitless sufferings of both German and Russian soldiers are depicted in detail, and again, the ordinary soldiers seem to have no idea why and for what cause he is fighting. At least, the novel questions Hitler's reasons for waging this war:

What are we dying for, General? Will our wives, our children dry their tears on the flags of victory or will they have to cry forever? Was this war necessary, was this war forced upon us and is it about a great and sacred cause, is this war just and is it about Germany? Do we defend Germany at Njeschegol, on the Oskol, Don and Volga Rivers, General? (28)

In Heinrich Gerlach's saga about the *Betrayed Army* in the “winter of horror 1942/43 somewhere near Stalingrad” the title already implies that the war was started by Hitler and his henchmen, and that the Wehrmacht was merely misused as an instrument for

“saving the world from Bolshevism” (188). The hero of the novel, a rank and file soldier from a working class family, learns from one of his more honest superiors that this was however a “fairytale,” that war was a “business, nothing else. Big industry and big business did not fund the [Nazi] party for nothing; of course they finally want to see dividends” (188).

Most East German authors leave no doubt as to who had caused this war. Willi Bredel’s novel *The Grandchildren* from his family trilogy *Relatives and Acquaintances* tells the story of the worker family Hardekopf in Hamburg from the *Kaiserreich* to 1945. Is set at the home and the Eastern Front simultaneously. On June 22, 1941, the beginning of “Barbarossa,” a friend runs into antifascist Walter Hardekopf’s house and breaks the news: “It’s war!... Hitler has attacked the Soviet Union!” (359) – implying in its way that the war had started only then. A few pages down the author describes how the „war of extermination [is spreading] like a giant wild fire over Russia” (378). Franz Fühmann’s remarkable short story *Comrades*<sup>214</sup> about the entanglement of a young soldier in a murder and its consequences has the three main characters Josef, Thomas and Karl discuss the official Nazi version of why this war was waged and thereby hints at the aggressive, offensive nature of the invasion of Russia:

‘Now we want to occupy Russia then,’ said a low voice, ‘Moscow, the Urals, as far as the Pacific.’ Weirdly, although the voice swung so low, it drowned all noises, and it made all mouths silent. The silence was an unbearable burden, laid on everyone. ‘What ...,’ said Josef, he spoke very hoarsely, ‘what – of course we go against the Bolsheviks. It had to come like this.’ He suddenly started to shout: ‘It had to come like this, better today than tomorrow.’ ‘Better an end with horror...,’ said

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<sup>214</sup> Based on the book, DEFA produced a movie entitled *Betrayed Until the Youngest Day*. See the details provided by Thomas Heimann, „Erinnerung als Wandlung,” 50-60.

Karl and laughed. 'Now, everything will be alright, little fellow,' said [Josef to Thomas], 'with the three of us, with Germany and with the whole world.' (32f.)

In most texts it is the soldiers who first realize that nothing would be alright – the men, boys, fathers and sons in uniform. Their sacrifice is not stylized as a heroic front experience like in the novels of Ernst Jünger after World War One.<sup>215</sup> Rather, their being human is at the center of attention. Ledig describes most explicitly that fear is not cowardice and being attached to life is not high treason. The captain without a name, for example, “wanted to live, like they all wanted to live. He had come to the conclusion that it would be better to not become a hero and instead to stay alive.” (*Stalinorgel*, 9). For, „somewhere women wait for their men, children for their fathers“ (87). The nameless sergeant who prevents a nameless radio operator from running away during an attack, asks: „Are you afraid?“ “Yes,” the operator responds. The sergeant says calmly yet determined: “Me too, shoot!” (64)

The youngest soldiers like this radio operator receive the most attention, those who had spent their summer vacations under the motto „We are born to die“ in Nazi youth camps during the 1930s. Wolfgang Borchert and Heinrich Böll, the young postwar writers who gave a voice to this “lost generation,” dedicated much of their early work to the suffering of soldiers, prisoners of war and returnees who after the end of the war were perceived as victimized, traumatized wanderers. With their works – eager to prevent that notions of a misunderstood heroism would ever again lead to a celebration of war – these young poets embodied the absence of a new “myth of the war experience,” the

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<sup>215</sup> On Ernst Jünger and the perception of his work after 1945 see Elliot Y. Neaman, *A Dubious Past: Ernst Jünger and the Politics of Literature after Nazism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Thomas Nevin, *Ernst Jünger and Germany.: Into the Abyss, 1914-1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

impossibility of a new celebration of military values after World War II. Böll once reflected on war as the main theme underpinning his life and work; to him, the war would never be over “as long as there is one wound still bleeding from it.”<sup>216</sup>

In his short story *On the Road*, Wolfgang Borchert called this generation the “generation without fare-well” and he considered himself to be one of them:

We are the generation without bond and without depth. Our depth is the abyss. We are the generation without luck, without home and without fare-well. Our sun is narrow, our love is cruel and our youth is without youth. And we are the generation without boundaries, without restraints and protection – expelled from the playpen of childhood. ... (59)

The experience of war and imprisonment remains in the abstract historical background, the reader is to fathom its horrors. In his famous play *The Man Outside*, Borchert apostrophized this experience with the phrase “1000 days of cold.”<sup>217</sup> A young woman whose husband went missing at Stalingrad finds the returnee Beckmann on the shore of the Elbe River outside Hamburg after a failed suicide attempt. The martyrdom at Stalingrad evolves only in insinuations with the women mentioning one of her own loved ones missing since the battle:

Girl (*bitter, softly*): Starved, frozen, left laying there – who knows. Since Stalingrad he is missing. That was three years ago.  
Beckmann (*motionless*): In Stalingrad? In Stalingrad, yes. Yes, in Stalingrad, not a few guys were left laying there. But a few return. And they then wear the clothes of those, who don’t return. (114)

Heinrich Böll’s short story about an *Attack* of the Red Army on the Western lines of the Eastern Front during the last days of war, limits the description of the war context to the melancholic illustration of the “indifferent stiffness of the grey creatures” who await the next round of slaughtering in some dirty hole: “Meager bushes behind them, a field of

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<sup>216</sup> A quote from his short story “Die Botschaft,” cited in J.H. Reid, „’Mein eigentliches Gebiet...’ Heinrich Böll’s Kriegsliteratur,” in Wagner, ed., *Von Böll bis Buchheim*, 91.

<sup>217</sup> Borchert, *Draußen vor der Tür*, 109.

sunflowers churned up by tanks, and a forest again, a bright, green forest; but it was so meaningless: soil was soil, and war was war” (32).

Yet, the focus on the soldier as victim of indoctrination and war nonetheless leads once again to his idealization, only this time he became the hero of suffering, an anti-hero. The exemplary heroes of suffering were the Stalingrad fighters whose individual stories were reproduced uncounted times in German postwar literature. Plievier's *Stalingrad* saga provides a representative characterization of the forlorn anti-hero of World War II:

The Stalingrad soldier, his humbleness, his ability to adjust, tenacity, perseverance, quiet enduring of torments, his on-time obedience, his endurance and fighting will until the last – what greatness of un-pathetic and silent fighterdom [*Kämpfertum*]! And finally his faith as well, his unconditional faith which was his greatest [virtue] and became his greatest guilt! What a memorial do you intend to put up for him, my gentlemen, what inscription to chisel into his gravestone? (301)

#### „CONSCIENCE IN UPHEAVAL:” LEGENDS OF RETURN

The phrase „Conscience in Upheaval” stems from the title of the autobiography of one of those former Wehrmacht officers who had experienced an “antifascist turn” in Soviet imprisonment.<sup>218</sup> In GDR literature those figures dominated the scene for whom the war symbolized an experience of inner transformation. To Bodo Uhse, they were the true *Patriots*, a “new generation of strong, fearless human beings free from any worries” (10), exemplarily embodied by the Soviet man. Uhse's novel about the struggle of German communists fighting the German armies before Moscow is the literary pendant to the SED's master narrative of Germany's liberation by the Red Army and a handful of decent, “good Germans, German communists” – the true patriots. For “to confess to a

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<sup>218</sup> Rudolf Petershagen, *Gewissen in Aufruhr* (Berlin (Ost): Verlag der Nation, 1957). The book was made into a five-part TV series and aired in 1961 on GDR television.

certain cause in the hour of danger is not as hard as to stand by it in the hour of shame and humiliation” (12).

In reality, most soldiers did not join the resistance but fought as „Hitler’s soldiers” (42) until the bitter end of the „fascist Wehrmacht.“ After the war, the legacy of this army and its understanding of soldierdom was dealt with in differing ways in the two Germanys. In the literature under scrutiny here, the German soldier has many faces, many characters. Not rarely the conflict between discipline and conscience is discussed in one form or another, often to the effect that the “little man” in uniform was not the master of his own will, even stopped being a human being. He was more or less responsible himself for becoming a conspirator and perpetrator in the criminal war against the Soviet Union. Seldom the legend of the “clean Wehrmacht” is the central motif and constant theme of a novel or short story; rather, the authors introduce varying characters who each represent a certain type: the fanatic Nazi, the profiteer and career man, convinced anti-Nazi or transformed hanger-on. In the works of East German writers, the communist hero dominates the scene even though he is often contrasted with a particularly spiteful Nazi in uniform.

Harry Thürk’s intriguing novel *The Hour of the Dead Eyes* which stirred a heated debate in the GDR<sup>219</sup> addresses the brutalization of the soldier and his role as an instrument of murder. Ultimately, the soldier here appears not to be responsible for his deeds as individual because he was to function, and indeed functioned well, as killing machine. The young, experienced soldier Thomas Bindig looks back on one year of

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<sup>219</sup> See Heimann, „Erinnerung als Wandlung,“ 60-75.



fighting on the Eastern Front in his company in 1944, and the reader is granted a look into his mind:

[He had] learned what it meant to be a soldier. It meant that you obtained a special, subordinated place within the human race; that you were not to think about your actions and neither about the future and the past. If you managed to do that, you lacked nothing. (16f.)  
... Germany has bred faultless soldiers. They don't even bite on their lips when they kill. Young and cold. They kill like butchers. (21)

According to this view, Nazi indoctrination had been immensely successful in turning the German youth into reliable henchmen and executioners of the regime.

Another example is Fühmann's faltering hero Josef who justifies his profession as "murderer" while reading Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* and finds his peace of conscience in the words of the great philosophers:

He read into a world which was cold, frosty and empty, populated only by One, that was him; and there was something around this One, something swarming, undifferentiated, a mass, a throng of the living, deep down below him: people. ... Thus spoke Zarathustra: 'You made a profession out of the danger, there is nothing to be said against that. Now your job is your ruin: for this I want to bury you with my hands.' Thus spoke Zarathustra. Josef found his most secret thoughts confirmed. He thought: Zarathustra understands the myth of danger, the myth of death, Zarathustra understands the German soldier. To make a profession out of the danger, just for the sake of danger, that is great, that is German! The *Nibelungen* wandered into their certain doom and they knew it but they still went to the Huns' lands; they perished, and their death was their fulfillment. And they also beheaded an innocent child and still, no, that is why they were heroes: It also needs heroism to behead innocent children! (34f.)

Being a soldier against one's own will is also the central theme of Borchert's novel *The Man Outside* whose tragic, tired returnee Beckmann realizes laconically that he had never actually been a soldier. Confronting his former superior with his feelings of guilt (about the death of eleven of his comrades) which deprive him of sleep after his return, the colonel warns him: "Na na na na! Don't you talk such unmanly nonsense. You were a soldier, weren't you?" Beckmann denies that and when he is asked „Why not? You are wearing a uniform," Beckmann simply replies: "Yes, for six years. But I always thought

that when I'd wear the uniform of a mailman for ten years that would still not make a mailman out of me."<sup>220</sup>

Yet, again and again also those soldiers are portrayed who immerse in their role as soldier, those alleged "perpetrators of conviction," who had given up thinking independently and were willing to fight in any war. Kirst's ironic and disillusioned protagonist patrolman Asch not only mocks his superior but also despises some of his comrades because: "soldiers are not asked for their opinion. Some even like that. They prefer giving their blood rather than to start using their brains" (9f.). Yet, ultimately these were all "poor wretches. And you are a poor wretch yourself," he ponders a few days later, "many poor wretches in the world!" (127)

#### SCENARIOS OF HORROR: OF CRIMES AND CRIMINALS

For a long time the suffering of „the others,” namely of civilians, Jews, Soviet POWs and „partisans” who were killed and tortured during the war on the Eastern Front did not receive the appropriate measure of empathetic attention in neither the political nor the literary discourses over the past. Yet, occasionally the suffering was verbalized in postwar German literature. The language used ranged from clinical to realistic, from nebulous insinuations to drastically depicted scenarios of violence, torture and death.

Johannes R. Becher's drama *Winter Battle* tells the story of Johannes Hörder, the personification of the „unknown soldier of the Second World War.” Hörder is fighting in the battle of Moscow and the reader witnesses his experience of inner return and reformation. Only vaguely, as so often, the reasons for this transformation are hinted at:

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<sup>220</sup> *Draußen vor der Tür*, 119.

the crimes of the Wehrmacht and SS in the occupied Eastern territories at and behind the front lines remain schematic and unclear. While on leave from the front, Johannes reports about his “long journey” through Poland and Russia:

I came through Poland. Hatred I saw, nothing but hatred. There I saw t h e hatred ... And in Russia I saw, there I saw ... Yes, I am exhausted from a long, far journey. It is exhausting, Anna, such a seeing. ... (123)

The insinuated witnessing of crimes committed on the Eastern Front is what also inspired the inner return of Stephan Hermlin’s young *Lieutenant Yorck of Wartenburg*, a fictional conspirator of the 20 July 1944 plot against Hitler.<sup>221</sup> Shortly before his execution, the young man dreams of his liberation and a national uprising against Hitler in Germany. But in reality there was no uprising in Germany; instead: “Our SS-mobs shoot the children of Charkov; we must wade in blood up to our knees before we begin to think” (29). This is one rare concrete reference to a real crime in the history of the Eastern Front war.<sup>222</sup> The short drama ends with the programmatic observation that the historical failure of Germans to dispose of their tyrant can only be overcome by a complete break with the past, or rather by evading it, just as it was later realized in Hermlin’s socialist Germany: “Escape and escape again – only that is the future: conversion and forgetting” (37).

Just like this example, many texts include scenes of horror, suffering of civilians, destruction and deprivation albeit as brief, scattered sequences; only rarely do they take

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<sup>221</sup> One of the real conspirators of the 20 July plot bore the name Yorck of Wartenburg, but Hermlin clarified in the epilogue, that his literary count was fictitious (51).

<sup>222</sup> The Ukrainian city of Charkov was after Orel one of the first Soviet cities to fall to the Germans in August of 1941.

up more than one or two pages. Anna Segher's *The Dead stay Young* contains descriptions of expulsion of Soviet civilians, of devastated villages and lynched persons on the road side (485, 469, 492); Plievier mentions twice the inhuman treatment of Soviet POWs by their German captors (30, 136). Fühmann's *Comrades* witness the cold-blooded execution of innocent Russians for the murder of the Captain's daughter (for which the "comrades" themselves were responsible) (42-46). The individual entanglement of the soldier into the war of extermination, however, is nowhere described more vividly and compellingly as in Remarque's first chapter in *Time to Live, Time to Die*. Ernst Graeber's involvement in an execution of Russian "partisans" is one of the most realistic and complex literary scenes addressing the question of individual guilt, the circle of violence in war and the group dynamics in a military unit: almost the entire specter of human action and emotion becomes tangible, maybe even comprehensible. The scene is worth being quoted at length for its exceptional intensity:

Day-light dawned. Steinbrenner spat: 'Shooting – way to good for this mob! To waste ammunition for that! One should hang them!' 'Where,' Sauer looked around, 'do you see a tree anywhere? Or should we make a gallows ourselves? And from what?' 'There they are,' said Graeber. Mücke appeared with the four Russians. The two soldiers walked before and behind them. The old Russian came first; the women followed after him, and then the two younger men. Without an order the four of them stood in a row before the ditch. The woman looked down before she turned around. She wore a red woolen skirt.

Lieutenant Müller from the first platoon emerged from the house of the company commander. He stood in for Rahe at the execution. It was ridiculous, but often they still stuck to the formalities. Everyone knew that the four Russians were perhaps partisans, and perhaps not – but they were interrogated and sentenced with all formalities. Without ever having had a real chance. What was to be investigated anyway? They allegedly had weapons. Now they were shot, with all formalities and in the presence of an officer. As if they would care. (18f.)

... The group of soldiers stood still. Graeber felt his rifle. He had taken off his gloves again. The steel stuck cold to his thumb and forefinger. Hirschmann stood next to him. He was all yellow, but he stood motionless. Graeber decided to shoot at the Russian to the far left. Initially he had always shot in the air when he was ordered to an execution but that was over. You didn't do a favour to those who were to be shot. Others had thought the same way; and it happened that almost all shot to the side on purpose. The execution then had to be repeated. And the prisoners were executed twice. (21)

... 'Fire!' came the command. The Russian seemed to rise and move towards Graeber. He bent and fell back ... The other two fell where they had stood. The one without the boots had raised his arms in the last moment to protect his face. One hand hung on the tendons like a rag. None of the Russians had the hands tied up and the eyes blind-folded. It had been forgotten. The women had fallen ahead. She wasn't dead. She pushed herself up with her hands, the face upright and looked at the group of soldiers. Steinbrenner had a satisfied look on his face. No one but him had shot at her. ... She didn't seem to

realize that Mücke approached her sullenly from the side. She hissed and hissed and only in the last moment did she see the revolver. She turned her head suddenly and bit in Mücke's hand. Mücke cursed and hit her on the lower jaw with his left hand. And when her teeth yielded, he shot her in the neck. (22f.)

The extraordinary situations in which Graeber finds himself in again and again in this war are rare literary examples for an early challenge of the “myth of the clean Wehrmacht.” Remarque’s novel is in fact the only example on my reading list that attempts to disentangle the web of options for action for a soldier in war. That these options oscillated between the brutalization of war, the relative (but not absolute) powerlessness of the individual, the will and courage to resist and the act of killing arbitrarily becomes vividly clear in the above-quoted scene. Someone like Graeber is indeed a tragic figure caught in the brutal dynamics of war. Yet, others in the group are credible examples of men who adapted willingly and energetically to the requirements of a “race war” and “war of world views” on the Eastern Front. Remarque’s novel begins with this scene and all subsequently described sufferings of the soldier Graeber at the front and in his bomb-stricken home town remain overshadowed by the crimes committed by German soldiers on the front. In most other works the protagonists are bystanders, witnesses of crimes, only rarely are they depicted as actively participating perpetrators– not even in those cases where the later “antifascist turn” promises to exonerate the soldier from his misdeeds.

Even less common than the hint at the criminal conduct of Wehrmacht soldiers are explicit references to the Holocaust. The mass murder of six million Jews could not have been carried out without the war waged on the Soviet Union. Without the Wehrmacht occupying the Eastern territories it could not have been executed the way it was. Nonetheless, the Jewish fates, anti-Semitism and race-hatred play only a marginal role in

the works examined here. Bredel mentions the “concentration and extermination camps” in passing, in which “millions of people were gassed and burned without the smallest guilt, only because they were racially or politically undesirable” (*The Grandchildren*, 587). Anna Seghers describes in one place a Jewish transport leaving Berlin towards Poland under the eyes of non-Jewish Berliners (*The Dead Stay Young*, 520, 525f.). And some of the most cut-out scenes in Remarque’s *Time to Live and Time to Die* depict the burning, gassing and shooting of Jews.<sup>223</sup>

Cooperation between Wehrmacht troops and SS/SD-execution commands was the order of the day in the war on the Eastern Front. In the numerous battle descriptions it is as good as non-existent. One exception is a compelling scene in Heinrich Gerlach’s *The Betrayed Army*: soldier Lakosch encounters a group of “foreign-looking, black creatures,” which is rounded up for execution by a German *Landser*s. Responding to Lakosch’s “stupid question” why they were shot, one of the men says: “Why? Supposedly they shot! – Besides, it’s all their fault” (183). Infected with the “bloodlust,” Lakosch wants to help with the execution although he had noticed just a moment earlier that he could not quite see the connection between those forlorn guys and the “Jewish conspirators on Wallstreet and in the Kremlin.” Only the decided intervention of an officer who demanded to see the order for execution prevented the Jews from being shot. Later Lakosch’s thoughts repeatedly wander back to this scene leaving his conscience in unrest:

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<sup>223</sup> The scenes are documented in „Der kastrierte Remarque. Nochmals zum Roman ‚Zeit zu leben und Zeit zu sterben,‘“ *neue deutsche literatur*, vol 5, no. 4 (1957), 114f.

He saw the awful fear of death in the eyes of the Jewish men, saw the deep-down hatred of a people that for thousands of years were only trampled on and abused. ... And he saw himself, the gun in his hand - - And what remained was disgust and shame and the burning desire to be able to erase what had happened, or at least the memory thereof. No, thought Lakosch, this is no war anymore, this is ... he found no words for what tortured him. (186f.)

Gerlach's novel ends in a prisoner of war camp with the insight that delusion and indoctrination had turned soldiers into criminals. Ultimately, personal responsibility had its limits. Why men fight in war of which most knew that it was unjust and criminal is a main motif in most texts. The literary answer to the crimes committed and their mastering was thus none of negating these crimes but one of explanatory justification, namely that German soldiers had acted in the belief to serve a noble cause. Representative for this way of literary *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* is Gerlach's version of the end of the war:

'Comrades!' said [the captain to his soldiers shortly before they surrendered to the Red Army]. 'We are finished. And this end is hard. We all didn't want this. But we were silent and obeyed in the belief to be serving a good cause. That the dress we are wearing today is no longer a dress of honor is not our fault. ... We were soldiers of the Führer ... We want to learn to be human beings again!' (556)

The knowledge of crimes, the parallelism of being a victimizer and a victim, and the only too human desire to mourn and to forget, were probably the decisive experiences and emotions at the end of this total war, and indeed not only for many former Wehrmacht soldiers but also for Germans on the "home front." It was not only a question of existential stabilization in divided postwar Germany that all energies concentrated on the material reconstruction and the future but also an expression of the very human need to settle with the past, to somehow overcome it.

This need is eloquently expressed by Remarque's main character Ernst Graeber who is shot at the end of the war by a group of "partisans" he helped to liberate.<sup>224</sup> During the war, at the end of one of his leaves from the front he visits his former school teacher Pohlmann – a regime-critic and religious man – and ultimately finds no answers to his questions:

'I want to know, in how far I was involved in the crimes of the last ten years,' he says. 'And I want to know what I shall do.' ... I have read quite a bit,' says Graeber. 'And heard a lot. I also know that the war is lost. And I know that we only keep on fighting because the government, the party and the people who caused everything can stay in power a bit longer in order to cause even more harm.'

'You know all that?' asked [Pohlmann].

'I know it now. I didn't always know it.'

'And you have to go back out?'

'Yes.'

'That's terrible.'

'It is even more terrible to have to go back out and to know it and perhaps to become an accomplice. Will I become one?'

Pohlmann said nothing. 'What do you mean?' he asked after a while, whispering.

'You know what I mean. ... In how far will I become an accomplice if I know that not only this war is lost but also that we have to lose it so that the slavery, the murder, concentration camps, SS and SD, mass extermination and inhumanity will stop – if I know that and go back out there again in two weeks to keep on fighting for this? ... When is it murder what we usually call heroism? If you don't believe in its reasons anymore? Or in its purpose? Where is the boundary?'

(195-197)<sup>225</sup>

This reflective depth was rare. Yet, reflection itself was not the exception in the war literature in postwar East and West Germany. The high literature of those years offered those who sought it, fictitious space for *individual* pondering about one's own history, about one's own entanglements, feelings and inner conflicts. It thus stood in contrast to the official politics of overcoming the past, of drawing a final line under the dark Nazi years as advocated by the political elites in both Germany's in different ways during the 1950s. This conclusion is plausible if we realize that for Germans the memories of war

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<sup>224</sup> Again, the censored 1954 edition conveys the impression this were partisans, yet Remarque's original manuscript left this open.

<sup>225</sup> Schneider sees in this passage a "superficial small-talk" compared to Remarque's original which, among other things, had Graeber consider desertion. Cf. Schneider, „Befehl ist Befehl...," 240.



were an integral part of their personal lives and emotional worlds – in whatever form, kept alive or suppressed, communicated or evaded, selectively recaptured or comfortably distorted. These memories were present and demanded some form of settlement. Contemporary literature beyond the mass market of generals' memoirs and *Landserheften* offered a multitude of explanatory narratives and literary heroes fit to provide identification or role models. Quite unseasonably, reading this literature demanded more often than not a differentiated and critical consideration of the nation's and its citizens' gruesome past.

Before I turn to the transformations in the political memory of the Eastern Front during the 1960s to 1980s, the next chapter serves as a transition from the era of Adenauer's politics of the past spanning the "long 1950s" (Norbert Frei) to the era of Détente. It widens the chronological view and shifts attention from the official narratives to the rituals of official commemoration between 1949 and 1989. It recaptures how the political elites in both Germanys wanted their citizens to remember, to mourn, to honor their "own" dead – as well as the "others" – in context of the Eastern Front memory. The way these commemoration ceremonies and themes changed over time, only slightly in East but swiftly in the West, reflects both the swayings of Cold War rivalry and the changing domestic needs for a ritualized memory of the Eastern Front.

## Chapter 9

### **Rites of June, Rites of November: The Politics of War Memory in Divided Germany, 1949-1989**

“Thousands of tanks destroyed the land,  
Behind them just death and misery,  
Miles of Soviet territory burned,  
Cities dismembered in rubble and debris.

Yet, above the hatred, all the gloom,  
Rose the victorious Soviet Union.  
Brotherly she offers her helping hands,  
As well to our German lands.”

From a songbook of the Free German Youth (1952)

## I. Rites of June: June 22 as Official Memorial Day in East Germany

Political regimes generally assume that the regular and ritualized celebration of official memorial days increases their legitimacy and popular acceptance. In both democratic and dictatorial systems, memorial days function as collective events which are believed to endow society with a sense of identity and belonging. They are important elements of the respective political culture – reflecting it and shaping it at the same time.<sup>1</sup> Neither in East nor in West Germany was June 22 such a national holiday. The purpose of this chapter is, however, to demonstrate that in the case of the GDR it played a hitherto largely neglected role as a key “recallable date”<sup>2</sup> in the SED’s official calendar of commemoration. None of the standard works on the official memorial and national holiday calendar in the GDR contains a reference to the annual, centrally and locally held

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<sup>1</sup> Dietmar Schiller, „Politische Gedenktage in Deutschland,“ *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte (APuZ)* 25/1993, 32-39. Rüdiger Voigt, „Mythen, Rituale und Symbole in der Politik,“ in idem, ed., *Symbole der Politik, Politik der Symbole* (Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 1989), 9-38. With a focus on the specific memorial cultures in the GDR and FRG, cf. Sabine Behrenbeck, „Rituale des Zwiespalts. Politische Feiertage in Ost und West,“ in Peter Bender et al., eds., *Zeichen und Mythen in Ost und West* (= *Rostocker Philosophische Manuskripte*, Neue Folge, 6 (1999)), 45-70. Jan-Holger Kirsch, „Sichtbarer Beweis der bewältigten Vergangenheit? Deutsche Gedenktage als strategische Erzählungen vom Nationalsozialismus“, in *Jahrbuch Zentrum für Niederlande-Studien*, 12 (2001), 81-104. Ralf Rytlewski, Detlve Kraa, „Politische Rituale in der Sowjetunion und der DDR,“ in *APuZ* 3 (1987), 33-48. On the emergence of official memorial culture(s) in Germany since the Weimar Republic see most recently Insa Eschebach, *Öffentliches Gedenken. Deutsche Erinnerungskulturen seit der Weimarer Republik* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus Verlag, 2005). Eschebach contrasts the „acts of public commemoration which in West Germany have become a prevalent medium of collective self-communication [*verbreiteten Medium kollektiver Selbstverständigung*]” with the “state official, uniform memorial” in the GDR. Ibid., 9f. For a general introduction into the study of war and remembrance in the twentieth century see Jay Winter, Emmanuel Sivan, eds., *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), esp. 6-39. and Winter, ed., *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (Yale Univ. Press, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> To borrow Edgar Wolfrum’s phrase „*abrufbare Schlüsseldaten*,“ Cf. Edgar Wolfrum, *Geschichtspolitik*, 24, fn. 9, see also below, fn. 8.

rituals on June 22.<sup>3</sup> The ritualized commemoration of June 22, 1941 was also essential to the party's attempts to substitute the lack of popular support with a sense of collective identity.<sup>4</sup> In West Germany, remembering "Barbarossa" was long a matter left to popular culture and the media, yet the general shift in the politics of memory in the 1960s gradually fostered a more balanced representation and interpretation of the Eastern Front war. The second part of this chapter discusses this shift in context of the speeches held on *Volktrauertag* ("National Day of Mourning") every November in the Federal Republic.

This chapter traces the genesis of June 22 as memorial day back to the late 1940s and ventures well into the 1980s in order to detect the long-term changes and continuities in what I call the "Rites of June" in the GDR, and the "Rites of November" in the FRG. Both rites illustrate how, in the long run, the "politics of war memory and commemoration" shaped divided Germany's political cultures, and vice versa.<sup>5</sup> The ceremonies held to commemorate June 22 in East and West Germany were not only the result of an already existing set of historical views, political ideas, and ideologies. They

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<sup>3</sup> The ritualized commemoration included heavy media coverage, memorial services and silent demonstrations before monuments and on cemeteries, exhibits and discussions in Houses of German-Soviet Friendship, ect. See Monika Gibas, "'Auferstanden aus Ruinen und der Zukunft zugewandt.' Politische Feier- und Gedenktage der DDR," in Sabine Behrenbeck, Alexander Nützenadel, eds., *Inszenierungen des Nationalstaats. Politische Feiern in Italien und Deutschland seit 1860/71* (Köln: SH-Verlag, 2000), 191-220. Ralf Rytlewski, Birgit Sauer, "Die Ritualisierung des Jahres. Zur Phänomenologie der Feste und Feiern in der DDR," in Wolfgang Luthardt, Arno Waschkuhn, eds., *Politik und Representation: Beiträge zur Theorie und zum Wandel politischer und sozialer Institutionen* (Marburg: SP-Verlag, 1988), 265-285. Vorsteher, ed., *Parteiauftrag: Ein neues Deutschland*. And Rytlewski, Kraa, "Politische Rituale in der Sowjetunion und der DDR."

<sup>4</sup> Rytlewski and Kraa have aptly summarized these attempts: "The highly visible deficits of official ideologies force politics to break new ground: Bureaucratic rule seeks to implement socio-cultural policies. Forms of crisis management dominate, and, as integrating ideologies, are to generate limited consent, diffuse identification and to hinder conflict among the population... The ritualization of politics is one such form. It must be understood as both directed socialization and ideologization of the conscience."

Rytlewski/Kraa, "Politische Rituale in der Sowjetunion und der DDR," 34.

<sup>5</sup> Ashplant, ed., *The Politics of War Memory*, esp. the introduction.

also influenced the respective modes of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Memory is both a product of political culture, and a factor shaping it. Further, this expedition through four decades of East and West German memorial culture is intended to serve as a hinge connecting the thus far presented analysis of the political memory of the Eastern Front until the building of the wall, with the eras of *Ostpolitik* under Willy Brandt, and of “late socialism” under Erich Honecker.

While in West Germany, the memory of Stalingrad and “Operation Barbarossa” was long popularized not by the political elites but by the mass media, the East German communists – believing to invoke the right lessons learned from history and to utilize them for their quest for political legitimacy – anticipated early on the ideological-political potential of these key events, and thus the importance of their appropriate commemoration. Over time, February 2, the day of the Sixth Army’s capitulation at Stalingrad, received only secondary attention. The central historical date was (next to VE Day) June 22, 1941, the day of the Wehrmacht’s attack on the Soviet Union. As the following analysis of the annual Rites of June, i.e. the ritualized and canonized commemoration of the beginning of “Operation Barbarossa,” shows, June 22 was a set date in the SED’s official memorial calendar. The DSF, too, took special care to establish the date as regular memorial-day.<sup>6</sup> In addition to the three other World War II memorial

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, a list of commemoration days attached to the 1953 “yearly perspective plan for activities in universities and institutions of higher education.” Next to the adaptation of “scientific knowledge” from the Soviet Union and the “deepening of respect” for it, the “plan” included a list of memorial-days to be celebrated: among them Lenin’s death (January 21), founding of the Soviet Army (February 23), Marx’ birthday and death (May 5, March 14), VE Day and June 22, the 36<sup>th</sup> anniversary of

days – May 8 (“International Fighting and Memorial Day of the Workers and Anniversary of the Liberation from Fascism”), September 1 (“Anniversary of the Beginning of the Hitler War”), and the second Sunday in September (“International Memorial Day for the Victims of Fascist Terror and Fighting Day against Fascism and Imperialist War”) – the commemoration of June 22 constituted a fourth, equally important memorial day. This quadrangle in the GDR’s official memorial calendar contained the key events of World War II as the SED saw them: the outbreak of the war on September 1, 1939, the invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941, and the end of the war on May 8, 1945. The SED completed the calendar with the “Week of the Brotherhood in Arms,” starting annually on February 23, the anniversary of the founding of the Red Army, and the “Month of German-Soviet Friendship,” celebrated every November around the anniversary of the “Great Socialist October Revolution.”<sup>7</sup> The SED elevated June 22 to the pantheon of “recallable key dates” in recent German history – dates always available for recall in the collective memory of East Germany’s citizens.<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly, the celebration of June 22 – albeit a set annual ritual in the USSR – seemed not to have been the result of instructions from the Kremlin. Unlike the VE Day parades and ceremonies which were largely copied from the Soviet example, the

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the October Revolution (November 7) and Stalin’s birthday (December 21). See BA/SAPMO, DY 32/4941, 14.

<sup>7</sup> See the annual cycle described by Rytlewski/Sauer, “Die Ritualisierung des Jahres. Zur Phänomenologie der Feste und Feiern in der DDR,” esp. 281. May 8 was the only World War II Memorial Day that was also a national holiday; the two other holidays were May 1 (International Labor Day), and October 7 (Day of the Republic). See also Gibas, “‘Auferstanden aus Ruinen und der Zukunft zugewandt.’“

<sup>8</sup> This borrows from Edgar Wolfrum who has pointed to several older „*abrufbare Schlüsseldaten*“ which to Germans carried a set meaning and connotation and with the help of which certain political decisions were legitimized and explained. He cites recent World War I research, for example, according to which dates such as 1756, 1813 and 1870 have been found to have played a major role in emotionalizing and mobilizing Germans for going to war in 1914. Edgar Wolfrum, *Geschichtspolitik*, 24, fn.9.

commemoration of June 22 in the GDR was directed autonomously by the SED.<sup>9</sup>

Naturally, Ulbricht's personal experiences on and memories of the antifascist struggle on the Eastern Front assured an "appropriate" commemoration of the events which was fully in accordance with Moscow's master narrative of the Great Patriotic War. This personal factor is of great importance for the genesis of the June 22 memory as it emerged over the first two postwar decades. What became the established narrative under Ulbricht later remained largely unchanged under his successor Erich Honecker – a man with no veteran memories of the Eastern Front war. While the content of the Eastern Front memory did not change much over four and a half decades until 1989, the way the SED's propagandists contextualized the historical events and related them to the present altered significantly. Furthermore, certain aspects of the story, e.g. the role of Stalin or the German High Command's involvement in war crimes, were either downplayed or emphasized depending on the current state of affairs and on the propagandistic needs of the day.

In general, seven recurring themes can be identified in the propaganda surrounding every fifth and tenth June 22 anniversary, all of which became fixed motifs in GDR's Eastern Front memory. The war against the Soviet Union was the worst crime committed during World War II; it was based on the "greatest lie ever," namely of a "Bolshevist threat in the East;" the Wehrmacht's crusade was doomed from the start; the Eastern Front was the decisive front of the entire war; the Red Army's victory equaled socialism's victory over capitalism; it inspired and boosted anti-Hitler movements all

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<sup>9</sup> Jürgen Danyel, „Politische Rituale als Sowjetimporte,“ in Jarausch, Siegrist, eds., *Amerikanisierung und Sowjetisierung*, 67-86.

over Europe; and its central lesson was “eternal” gratitude and friendship with the Soviet Union. It should be stressed that some of the themes “propagated” by the SED reflect historical reality; others were conclusions drawn from history based on ideology and political interest. For example, the war on the Eastern Front was the costliest and most crucial theater of World War II in Europe. The Red Army’s victory and ultimately Hitler’s defeat, however, were not the result of historical law but of the successful wartime alliance between the Soviet Union, the United States and Great Britain against Nazi Germany.

Three aspects underpinning these themes underwent considerable modifications over time. First, the SED’s official history accounts varied as to who had suffered the most (the Soviet peoples, both Germans and Soviets, the German nation). Second, as long as Ulbricht was in power, these accounts prominently discussed the role of the NKFD. Under Honecker it became comparatively marginal. Third, the space dedicated to past and present events varied significantly over time, sometimes the SED’s propagandists focused on the recollection of the historical events on the Eastern Front, at other times references to the present under the headline “current lessons of Barbarossa” dominated the commemorative agenda.

The SED celebrated the Rites of June annually. It dedicated a lot of energy and dedication to every tenth anniversary, and gave less but also regular attention to every five- year- and yearly anniversary. Not only that the propaganda machine lavished the population with the key messages, but the SED organized central and local



demonstrations, held meetings in factories and schools, and gathered residents for memorial services on local cemeteries of fallen Soviet soldiers.<sup>10</sup> The party's "central organ," *Neues Deutschland*, published many reports, memoir pieces and editorials addressing the history and legacies of "Barbarossa." The entire SED leadership as well as leading government representatives and Soviet delegates gathered in Berlin-Treptow before the "Soviet Honorary Memorial" (*Sowjetisches Ehrenmal*), where they celebrated an official memorial service. Ulbricht, or Honecker, and their associates would lay down flowers and wreaths while a military ensemble played Chopin's *Trauermarsch* and the revolutionary elegy "*Unsterbliche Opfer*."<sup>11</sup> Hundreds of "ordinary citizens," neatly categorized by their affiliation with certain factories, labor unions and mass organizations, joined the procession. Usually, *Neues Deutschland* carried front-page-filling photographs of the ceremony along with excerpts from speeches and statements the next day.

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<sup>10</sup> In 1952, for example, on the uneven 11<sup>th</sup> anniversary of "Barbarossa," the DSF registered a number of local activities: in Bitterfeld (*Bezirk Halle*), the local paper warned that "we know that the situation in the USA and in other imperialist countries is similar to the one here [in Germany] in 1941" and that also the "peace-loving GDR shall be attacked;" in Reichenbach (*Bezirk Dresden*) "the blackest day in history" was commemorated by "exemplary" local factory brigades who committed to various community services on that day – all with the purpose to intensify German-Soviet friendship; the inhabitants of Potsdam were called to gather for a "powerful demonstration" and a wreath-ceremony on the Memorial for the Soviet Heroes and to prove with their participation their "determination to prevent a new June 22, as Adenauer plans it;" a similar mass meeting took place in Rudolstadt (*Bezirk Gera*), and at the central Soviet Memorial in Berlin-Treptow. See the collection of local newspaper articles in BA/SAPMO, DY 32/10286.

<sup>11</sup> „Unsterbliche Opfer/ihr sanket dahin/wir stehen und weinen/voll Schmerz, Herz und Sinn. Ihr kämpft und starbet/um kommendes Recht/wir trauern, wir trauern/der Zukunft Geschlecht. Einst aber, wenn Freiheit den Menschen erstand/und all euer Sehnen Erfüllung fand/dann werden wir künden/wie ihr einst gelebt/zum Höchsten der Menschheit empor nur gestrebt!“ The lyrics were written by W.G. Archangelski, German by Hermann Scherchen. The song used to be sung at the graves of victims of the revolutionary fights in 1905 and 1917 in the Soviet Union. After 1918, it also became popular in the German workers movement. Lyrics printed in *Leben, singen, kämpfen. Liederbuch der Freien Deutschen Jugend*, ed. Lehrerkollektiv der Jugendhochschule am Bogensee (Berlin: Verlag Neues Leben 1952), 114-115.

In contrast to this full-scale commemoration program on June 22, the anniversaries of Stalingrad played a less central role throughout the years. Since Stalingrad contained the name Stalin, it became increasingly difficult after 1956 to continue the aesthetization of the battle for political and self-legitimizing reasons.<sup>12</sup> The “battle on the Volga River,” as it was referred to since the late 1950s, was less suited to describe a “Hegelian moment,” a mythical saga of trial and triumph. Therefore, SED propaganda diminished efforts to cultivate the memory of Stalingrad as the central metaphor for socialism’s historically logic victory arising from the ashes of the historic defeat at Stalingrad.<sup>13</sup> The battle occasionally even lost its role as turning point of World War II, and it was substituted with the two other crucial military defeats of the Wehrmacht in Russia, the battles of Moscow and Kursk.<sup>14</sup> Notably, *Neues Deutschland* carried a picture of the tank battle near Kursk instead of the embattled city of Stalingrad for the first time in June 1971, the first major anniversary of “Barbarossa” commemorated under Honecker. This can be said to demonstrate symbolically the shift from the biographically inspired political memory of the Ulbricht era to the de-personalized, canonized political memory

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<sup>12</sup> In general, this seems not to have been the case in the Soviet Union. See, for example, the continuous use of the name “Stalingrad” in Soviet film, media and literature. Jahn, ed., *Stalingrad erinnern*, 118-165. Yet, in 1963, when the twentieth anniversary of Stalingrad was commemorated (two years after the city’s renaming into Volgograd) official coverage of the battle referred only to Volgograd; for the time being, the sculpture “fighter for life and death” was used as visual substitute for the name “Stalingrad” now officially banned from the official memory. Ibid., 140, 148. Soon later, after Khrushchev’s downfall in 1964, the historic name of the battle was again used. Had it not been for Khrushchev’s personal Stalingrad experience, it has been speculated, the battle might have lost its central function in the wake of de-Stalinization. While this remains a speculative argument it seems save to claim that the temporal name purge probably boosted the “myth of Stalingrad.” See Wolfram von Scheliha, “Stalingrad in der sowjetischen Erinnerung,” in Jahn, ed., *Stalingrad erinnern*, 24-32, esp. 25f.

<sup>13</sup> Thus trend cannot be discerned in GDR historiography, Stalingrad remained a central battle of the war, even if in later years, Moscow and Kursk were evaluated as equally important.

<sup>14</sup> *Neues Deutschland*, June 22, 1971, 3. This is something I only detected in the coverage of *Neues Deutschland*, I didn’t come across archival evidence for this shift as a conscientious change in SED propaganda.

of the Eastern Front war under Honecker. It could also be taken as a sign of subtle distancing from, if not disrespect for, Ulbricht's legacy on the eve of his political career.

The following detailed analysis of the genesis of the official memory of "Barbarossa" and Stalingrad rests on the joint reading of relevant *Neues Deutschland* issues and selected documents from the SED and DSF archives. As it spans the entire period of communist rule in East Germany, it will be possible to demonstrate the instrumental role the Eastern Front memory played for the SED in its incessant quest for legitimacy. The narrative of an organic, historically generated German-Soviet friendship not only complemented the GDR's antifascist founding ideology but it represents the other founding narrative of the SED state.<sup>15</sup> The following paragraphs also illustrate the nearly-perfect instrumentalization of history for political purposes by the communists. Moreover, the analysis of these well-thought-through appropriations and re-appropriations of the past to and on the present reflect the turbulent history of Cold War relations between the Soviet Union and the two German states. For, in reality, the past was more than a rhetorical tool; it was the silent third party on every negotiation table, as Adenauer had observed after his return from Moscow in 1955.

Keeping the memory of the war against the Soviet Union alive in East German society was for the SED a matter of legitimizing its political power and it thus had feasible, real-life consequences: for only this part of the history of World War II

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<sup>15</sup> Scholars of GDR history so far have ignored this fact or subsumed the narrative of German-Soviet friendship under the antifascist myth. Monika Gibas, for example, has hinted at it as "aspect of the East German founding myth." Gibas, "'Auferstanden aus Ruinen,'" 207.

contained the ideological ingredients for the establishment of the “other Germany.” The SED leading this “other Germany,” declared the project of German-Soviet friendship its *raison d’être*. Thus far, historians consider antifascism as *the* “founding myth” of the GDR.<sup>16</sup> This study proposes to widen and deepen the perspective. If, as previously discussed, historians mean by “political myth” a narrative forged by the political elite in order to endow a community with a sense of belonging and identity, I suggest to consider the ideological-political assertion of an unbreakable friendship between the former arch-enemies a second, equally central founding myth.<sup>17</sup> The SED leaders deduced the master narrative of a quasi-organic German-Soviet friendship from a view of the past based on their own veteran experience, most notably Ulbricht’s, and on the political needs of the day. The in this sense opportunistic, calculated interpretation of the Eastern Front war was to result practically in the mobilization of the masses for friendship with the Soviet Union. Propagating German-Soviet friendship – and, of course, friendship to all other nations in the “peace camp” – was thus more than a mere tactical response of the East German communists to the ideological-political necessities of the Cold War. It was the quintessence of the lessons these men believed to have learned in World War II.<sup>18</sup>

Already during the war, the KPD began to work on an opportune master narrative. Anton Ackermann has already been quoted with a list of policy principles for the KPD’s postwar agenda. Already in 1944 he had succinctly summarized the programmatic

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<sup>16</sup> See for example Danyel, „Die Opfer- und Verfolgtenperspektive als Gründungskonsens?.“ Meuschel, *Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft*, 29-122. Grunenberg, *Antifaschismus*. Münkler, “Antifaschismus und antifaschistischer Widerstand.”

<sup>17</sup> See my discussion in chapter 3.II.

<sup>18</sup> Epstein, *Last Revolutionaries*, raises this issue in a similar context, highlighting the impact individual KPD and war veterans had *as a group* on the course of East German postwar history.

importance of history for the future of the communist project: “Mobilize all means, the past included!”<sup>19</sup> Yet, the mobilization of history entailed more than its ideological instrumentalization. If the past could indeed be “mobilized” for the KPD’s project of peaceful German-Soviet relations then they expected this campaign to result in more than just pro-Soviet rhetoric. Rather, it was to serve a political cause, namely the establishment of Soviet-style (i.e. Stalinist) socialism in Germany with all its social consequences and human costs. As demonstrated earlier, with the NKFD founded shortly after the defeat in Stalingrad, the German communists in Soviet emigration had an effective organization at their disposal to propagate their truths about “Hitlergermany,” its possible salvation and likely doom. Millions of leaflets financed by the Kremlin and dropped over the German troops on the Eastern Front called for the collective desertion of the Wehrmacht to the Red Army and denounced Hitler as criminal adventurer and ruthless murderer of German soldiers. Already then, the battle of Stalingrad resumed a central role. Under the title “The Dead to the Living!” (*Die Toten an die Lebenden*), a NKFD leaflet of May/June 1943 had the dead of Stalingrad speak to their surviving comrades:

We didn’t believe it when an inner voice whispered to us: ‘Only Hitler is to be blamed for the misery of this war. He wanted it, he wants your death!’... Stalingrad has shown who Hitler is: the slayer of Germany, a military amateur, an adventurer. He is responsible for our death. The inner voice tells you, too: Away with Hitler and the war is over! ...The dead are warning you, soldier; the shadows of Stalingrad are warning you!<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Anton Ackermann, „Deutschland und die Sowjetunion.“ Handwritten outline for a lecture in the KPD party school, October 15, 1944. Quoted in Wilke, Erler, eds., „*Nach Hitler kommen wir*,“ 237-240, quote on 240.

<sup>20</sup> Backside of the Leaflet entitled “The Death to the Living,” May/June 1943, printed in *Flugblätter des Nationalkomitees Freies Deutschland*, 188. Fig. 2 in Chapter 2 shows the frontpage of this same leaflet.

Yet, most German soldiers ignored this warning and refused to desert or surrender to the Red Army. The KPD/SED later confronted their fellow-citizens with the failure of organizing an effective, genuinely German anti-Hitler-movement which could have driven Hitler from power before a total defeat. To them, this collective failure served and sufficed to justify a future historic obligation towards the Soviet Union: restitution and unconditional solidarity. In its programmatic declaration of June 11, 1945, “Call to the German People,” the KPD prepared the ground for the appropriate and thereafter canonical interpretation of the events on the Eastern Front:

The greatest and most fateful of Hitler’s war crimes was the perfidious, treacherous attack against the Soviet Union who never wanted war with Germany. ... The world is shocked and, at the same time, ill with deepest hatred against Germany in view of the unprecedented crimes, this gruesome mass-murdering which was carried out systematically by Hitlergermany. ... [The Red Army and the Western Allies] have destroyed the Hitlerarmy, smashed the Hitlerstate and thus have brought peace and liberation from the chains of the Hitlerslavery also to you, working German people. The more the conscience and the shame must burn in every German, as the German nation bears an important part of the guilt and responsibility for the war and its consequences.<sup>21</sup>

The DSF, too, propagated „Barbarossa” as the worst crime of the Hitler regime, and stressed that it was also the “most fateful blow against the vital interests of the German nation.”<sup>22</sup> This interpretation anticipated later systematic claims in SED propaganda according to which enmity with the Soviet Union in fact harmed and even neglected Germany’s national interests. For with “Operation Barbarossa,” Hitler had not only sought to destroy the Soviet Union (and had failed), but he had brought the German nation to the brink of its existence. Later on, depending on how urgently the SED needed

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<sup>21</sup> „Aufruf des Zentralkomitees der Kommunistischen Partei Deutschlands an das deutsche Volk zum Aufbau eines antifaschistisch-demokratischen Deutschlands“ (June 11, 1945), printed in Ministerium für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten der DDR, ed., *Um ein antifaschistisch-demokratisches Deutschland*, 56-63, quote on 57.

<sup>22</sup> Günter Gorski, Alfred Anderle, Günter Rosenfeld, eds., *Deutsch-sowjetische Freundschaft. Ein historischer Abriß von 1917 bis zur Gegenwart* (Berlin: Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1975), 139.

ideological reinforcement of the alliance between the GDR and the USSR, the commemorative texts in *Neues Deutschland* carried variations of the “equal suffering” theme: it was the two nations which had fought most energetically during World War II – against each other – and if they afforded the same determination to the postwar world, peace would be secured.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, soon after the war, June 22 emerged as *the* memorial-day for the commemoration of the Second World War. While the KPD/SED celebrated the “liberation” by the Red Army on May 8, and commemorated the outbreak of the war on September 1, neither of the two days was dedicated as exclusively to the events of World War II – or those events the SED deemed worth remembering – as June 22. With this focus on the attack against the Soviet Union the party subtly turned June 22 into the perceived outbreak of the entire war.<sup>24</sup> Aside from the degree to which this interpretation was inspired by genuine personal belief and ideological outlook of the SED’s antifascist propagandists, the opportunistic nature of this memory was apparent from the beginning. While in 1946, *Neues Deutschland* stressed the gruesome details of the Wehrmacht’s invasion, by 1948 the paper used the anniversary to legitimize the Soviet occupation in East Germany. In 1946, page one of *Neues Deutschland* carried a description in words and photographs of the brutal reality in the Soviet territories occupied by German troops.

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<sup>23</sup> For example, „Regierungserklärung zur 10. Wiederkehr des Tages des Überfalls der Armeen Hitlerdeutschlands auf das friedliebende Sowjetvolk,“ *Neues Deutschland*, June 22, 1951, 1. See above Chapter 5.I., III.

<sup>24</sup> See also Chapter 5. I. on the reduction of World War II to the years 1941-1945 in selected writings of Ulbricht, Abusch and Norden. The coverage in *Neues Deutschland* throughout the GDR’s existence, including on September 1 anniversaries, confirms this assumption.

The text elaborated on “June 22 and its consequences” for the Soviet and German peoples:

The consequences of June 22, 1941, the attack against Russia, are gruesome for the German people and without precedent in history. ... Immediately after the first day of the attack started the meticulously planned destruction of cities and villages, the obliteration of factories and collective farms, the robbery and devastation of museums, schools, hospitals, and churches, the mass deportation of Soviet citizens for slave labor to Germany and the bloody extermination of uncounted men, women and children of the Soviet Union.<sup>25</sup>

Two years later, the anniversary occasioned protest against “anti-communism” in the Western zones culminating in a claimed continuity from Hitler to Schumacher. For the “major lesson of June 22, 1941” was that “anti-Soviet hate campaigns are campaigns for war,” as the front-page editorial titled:

History since June 22, 1941, has taught that ‘one’ can wage war against the Soviet Union, but also that ‘one’ will lose it. ... [Today we are faced with] a new systematic anti-Soviet hate campaign in Germany. ... Anti-communism and the anti-Soviet hate campaign are, just as under Hitler, preparations for a new aggressive war against the Soviet Union. War against the socialist land ..., however, ends with the defeat of the aggressor and with catastrophe for those people who first allowed the warmongers of their own country to suppress them and then to misuse them as slaughter-victims [*Schlachtopfer*]. That is one main lesson of June 22.<sup>26</sup>

Notably, *Neues Deutschland* characterized German soldiers not as instigators of the slaughtering but as victims thereof. The motif of them having been sent to the slaughter-bench was a recurring theme in subsequent announcements remembering the war on the Eastern Front. Similarly, the main message of this 1948 editorial – the West was preparing a new war against the Soviet Union – remained largely unchanged over the next four decades. The interpretation of “Barbarossa” as worst crime in history and worst threat in the future became a static motif in the SED’s anti-Western rhetorical inventory. Even when relations between the two sides smoothed somewhat in the wake of the

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<sup>25</sup> *Neues Deutschland*, June 22, 1946, 1.

<sup>26</sup> *Neues Deutschland*, June 22, 1948, 1.



“peaceful coexistence” period and of Détente, the SED untiringly invoked the alleged threat looming from the West against the East.<sup>27</sup>

That the East German communists were to some extent successful in imbuing East Germans with this interpretation of “Barbarossa’s lessons” is aptly illustrated in the following song written by students of a school run by the SED’s youth organization Free German Youth (FDJ).<sup>28</sup> The lyrics echoed the main motives of the SED’s memory of the Eastern Front and suggest that it was indeed possible to root it rather effectively in the political culture of the young GDR:

Thousands of tanks destroyed the land,  
Behind them just death and misery,  
Miles of Soviet territory burned,  
Cities dismembered in rubble and debris.

[Chorus:] Yet, above the hatred, all the gloom,  
Rose the victorious Soviet Union.  
Brotherly she offers her helping hands,  
As well to our German lands.

Free became the farmer on his own land,  
Thanks to you, Soviet soldiers.  
With the liberated workers aligned,  
He works with plough and with spade.

... [Chorus]

Soviet tractors on our fields,  
With men of progress behind the wheel.  
Friendship with the Soviet nation we swear,  
Nothing more cherished than peace.

... [Chorus].

When the GDR was founded in October 1949, the SED had established the war against the Soviet Union as central historical reference point, with the help of which it

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Chapter 11. I.

<sup>28</sup> Lyrics and tunes printed in *Leben, Singen, Kämpfen*, 42ff. Here quoted from Gibas, „’Auferstanden aus Ruinen,’“ 206f.

sought to diffuse the bitter reality of Soviet occupation and to silence resistance against the building of socialism in East Germany. Stalingrad and the war on the Eastern Front were primarily relevant and instructive because the SED could use these events to legitimize the unconditional liaison between the GDR and the Soviet Union.

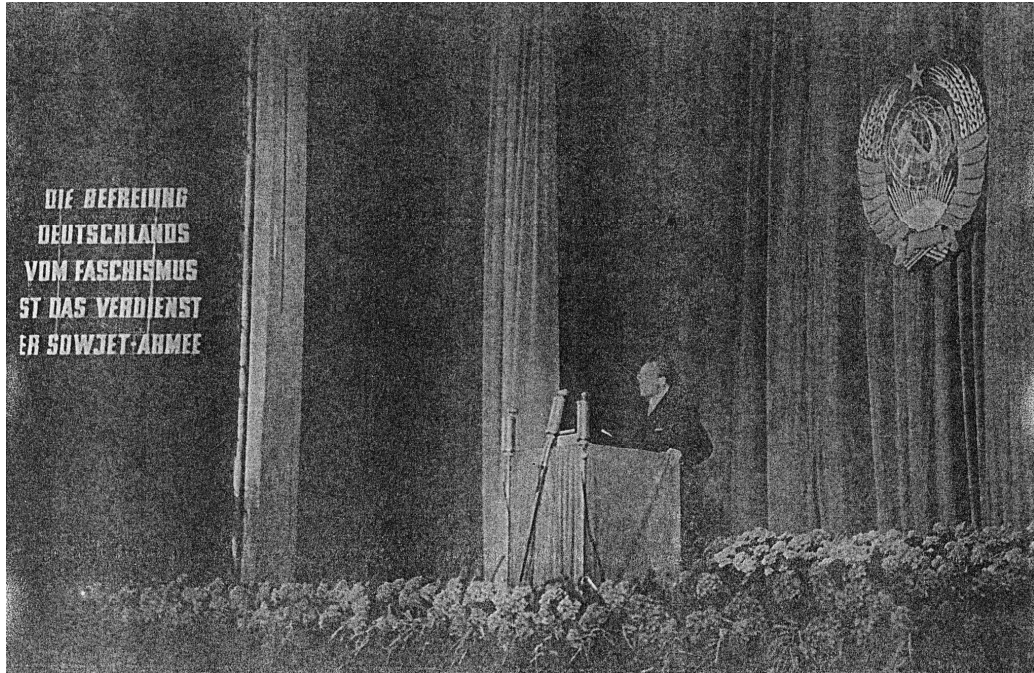
It is important to realize that the SED propagated its master narrative of recent German history, in which the Soviet Union in every respect played the leading part, not only in context of the Rites of June but also on several other ceremonial occasions. Most importantly, VE Day served to reiterate the Red Army's decisive role in defeating "Hitlergermany;"<sup>29</sup> East Germans were again and again confronted with the claim that it was the Soviet Union, its peoples and soldiers, who had suffered the most and contributed the most in the war against German fascism.<sup>30</sup> In May 1950, for instance, the GDR celebrated VE Day for the first time as official memorial-day. People got the day off and the party leadership gathered for a memorial service at the "*Sowjetische Ehrenmal*" in Berlin-Treptow – VE Day would always be celebrated at the Treptow-Memorial. Prime Minister Grotewohl gave the key note address during the central ceremony in the opera house in Berlin. The stage from which Grotewohl delivered his speech was draped with a

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<sup>29</sup> Of secondary but equally crucial importance were the memorial-day commemoration the founding of the Red Army, 23 February, and the anniversaries of the "Great socialist October Revolution," both of which were celebrated under the same motto, albeit on those occasions the SED usually stressed the military achievements and potential of the Soviet army. See, for example, the SED's Agitation Division Information „30 Jahre Sowjetarmee“ (February 18, 1947), which set the tone for all subsequent commemorations of the Red Army's founding. BA/SAPMO, DY 30 IV 2/9.02/161, fiche 1. And the 38 "*Losungen des ZK der SED zum 34. Jahrestag der Großen Sozialistischen Oktoberrevolution und zum Monat der deutsch-sowjetischen Freundschaft*," October 28, 1951, printed in *Dokumente der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei*, vol. III, 618-620. (One „slogan“ cited Thomas Mann's dictum „anti-Bolshevism – the main folly of our epoch.” Mann had written an essay under that title for the SED's theoretical organ "Einheit" in 1946, see Thomas Mann, "Der Antibolschewismus – die Grundtorheit unserer Epoche," *Einheit*, 2, 1945, 105-107).

<sup>30</sup> Gibas, "„Auferstanden aus Ruinen,”" 206ff.

curtain bearing the slogan “The liberation of Germany from fascism is the achievement of the Soviet Army.”



**Fig. 5. The Liberation of Germany from Fascism is the Soviet Union's Achievement:**  
Prime Minister Otto Grotewohl speaking at the central commemoration ceremony in the *Staatsoper* Berlin on May 8, 1950.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, not only the ritualized June 22 celebrations were intended to convey the SED's master narrative of the Eastern Front but all other national memorial days as well.<sup>32</sup> Orchestrated like this, the memory of the war against the Soviet Union became the central historical event of World War II to be commemorated and collectively remembered in the GDR.

<sup>31</sup> BA/SAPMO, Bild Y1, 1132/79.

<sup>32</sup> On October 7, the “Day of the Republic,” the SED commemorated not primarily the war but the “help and friendship” which the Soviet Union had given and continued to give so generously in its aftermath to the German nation. The founding of the GDR, the “other Germany,” was owed to the Soviet willingness to forgive the people and determination to reconstruct the country of its former enemy. See Gibas, “‘Auferstanden aus Ruinen,’” 212ff.

Already in 1951, a number of local and central ceremonies and demonstrations took place in commemoration of the tenth anniversary of “Barbarossa.” *Neues Deutschland* carried a “government declaration” on its front page flanked by an editorial by Walter Ulbricht about the “Crime of June 22” and a photograph of Moscow, “the capital of the Soviet Union, the hoard of peace – undefeated and invincible.” Yet, beyond recalling the crimes of the fascist army – the perpetrators were identified as “SS-formations” and “German troops” – on Soviet territory, the text aimed at connecting the United States as closely as possible with the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union. In fact, the texts were designed to convey the impression that it was not only Hitler but also the U.S. and Great Britain who had wanted war in 1939. For, it allegedly had been their “real aim in World War II to eliminate the German competitor [Hitler], and to annihilate the Soviet Union.”<sup>33</sup> In this construction, following in the footsteps of Zhdanov’s 1947 “two-camps” speech, it seemed logical to the “GDR government” that the “American warmongers and world conquerors” remained unsatisfied with the outcome of the war and that they now intended to “use imperialist [West] Germany for realizing their criminal aims.” In essence, the story concluded, the US was seeking to transform West Germany into the “main basis for the war of conquest against the Soviet Union.”

This aggressive instrumentalization of the Eastern Front memory for the SED’s anti-Western campaign was a constant tool in the ideological cold war with the West, most notably during the 1950s, the decade dominated by the question of remilitarization and collective security in Europe. Two more pages were dedicated to this memory in the

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<sup>33</sup> *Neues Deutschland*, June 22, 1951, 1.

*Neues Deutschland* of June 22, 1951, and the main historical tractate on page three presented “evidence” for the “shared guilt of American imperialism for the Hitlerwar” and the attack of the “peace-loving” Soviet Union.<sup>34</sup> The message of the day was underlined with pictures as well: a portrait of Stalin bearing the lines “We are for peace and we defend the cause of peace,” and a caricature depicting Truman sitting on a bomb and cracking a whip vis-à-vis a socialist worker carrying one of Stalin’s work in his hand.<sup>35</sup>

As already demonstrated, in the decade to come, the SED connected major events in the history of the GDR with the “lessons of Barbarossa,” most importantly the June uprisings in 1953, and the building of the wall in 1961. In both instances, the memory of the Eastern Front fulfilled two functions which were usually subsumed with the phrase “admonition and warning” (*Mahnung und Warnung*). Both, in June 1953 and in June 1961, the propaganda apparatus produced dozens of pamphlets and documentaries aimed at illustrating and emotionalizing the history of the war against the Soviet Union as the most gruesome, indeed singular, crime in German history. Albert Norden recalled in June 1953, a few days after the popular uprisings had erupted the SED state, the “sinister cynicism” with which Hitler’s generals planned the “annihilation of the Soviet population” – only to illustrate the terrible consequences another “Day X” in 1953 would

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<sup>34</sup> Georg Krausz, “Zum 10. Jahrestag des Hitlerschen Überfalls auf die Sowjetunion am 22. Juni 1941. Die Mitschuld des amerikanischen Imperialismus am Hitlerkrieg,” *ibid.*, 3. Krausz was head of the *Neues Deutschland*’s very own propaganda division between 1951-56, and he later became the head of the Association of German Journalists in the GDR (1957-1967). Notably, after spending years in Nazi prisons, Krausz was arrested in June 1945 by the NKVD for unclear reasons, interned until 1948, and released and rehabilitated thereafter by the SED. Despite this personal experience with Stalinism, as well as the show trials and purges which he witnessed as correspondent in Eastern Europe in the early 1950s, he was and remained a faithful, partisan journalist.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Fig. 3, Chapter 5.I.

have had, had not Soviet tanks stopped this “fascist coup.”<sup>36</sup> Similarly, the events leading up to the erection of the wall in 1961 were accompanied by a series of “Barbarossa”-texts on the occasion of its twentieth anniversary.<sup>37</sup> Yet, more instrumental than commemorating the suffering of Soviet civilians was to recall the outcome of Hitler’s crusade against the Soviet Union: his total defeat. Thus, the SED cherished the Eastern Front memory because it also carried a message of “warning” to subsequent generations and to the “class enemy.” Anyone seeking to attack and invade the Soviet Union yet again, this message went, was doomed to fail.<sup>38</sup> Just as in 1953, when Norden warned in the pages of *Neues Deutschland* that, much like in 1941-1945, “another ‘Day X’ was doomed to fail as well,”<sup>39</sup> SED propaganda in 1961 threatened the alleged enemies with death, destruction and ultimate defeat. Recalling the horrors of Stalingrad, the warnings in 1961 culminated rhetorically in the prophecy that, this time around, “the birch crosses [on the graves] of new ‘Barbarossa’-adventurers would not stand in Stalingrad but in

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<sup>36</sup> See the details of this argument above in Chapter 5. I. Norden’s text “Warum das Potsdamer Abkommen für Adenauer ein Alpdruck ist. Lehren des 22. Juni 1941,” in *Neues Deutschland*, June 21, 1953, 5.

<sup>37</sup> Again, the brutality of warfare was at the center of these articles. See for example, “Der Plan ‘Barbarossa’ und sein Fiasko,” *Neues Deutschland*, June 17, 1961, 5.

<sup>38</sup> Most importantly a published Khrushchev speech: “Jeder neue Aggressor würde Hitlers Schicksal teilen. Aus der Rede Nikita Chruschtschows auf der Moskauer Kundgebung zum 20. Jahrestag des faschistischen Überfalls auf die Sowjetunion,” in *Neues Deutschland*, June 22, 1961, 3. See also, A.I. Jeremenko, “Denkzettel für Ostlandreiter,” *Neues Deutschland*, June 17, 1961, *Beilage* no. 24, 3. (Next to the piece, an excerpt from Ulbricht’s diary about the antifascist resistance fight among German POWs was published under the remarkable title „Stimme und Gewissen der Nation,” in *ibid.*). And, A.I. Jeremenko, „Weshalb die Wehrmacht besiegt wurde,” in *Neues Deutschland*, June 21, 1961, 5f; and Günter Kertzscher, „Noch immer aktuelle Lehren des 22. Juni,” *Neues Deutschland*, June 22, 1961, 4.

<sup>39</sup> “Warum das Potsdamer Abkommen für Adenauer ein Alpdruck ist. Lehren des 22. Juni 1941,” in *Neues Deutschland*, June 21, 1953, 5.

Cologne.”<sup>40</sup> Practically, they culminated in the sealing of the inner-German borders on August 13.

In 1961, SED and DSF stepped up the propaganda surrounding the twentieth anniversary of the invasion of the Soviet Union to an unprecedented degree. A conference of GDR and Soviet historians in East Berlin discussed recent research on the “Aggression of German Imperialism against the USSR.”<sup>41</sup> Prominent historians such as Jürgen Kuscynski, Walter Bartel and Stefan Doernberg lent their voices to the SED’s orchestrated effort to connect the past with the present. DSF supported these efforts energetically. The organization staged a prominently attended one-day conference on June 21, 1961 in the DSF’s Central House in Berlin under the title “The Aggression of German Fascism Against the Soviet Union.” Among the guests were representatives of all bloc parties, relevant academic institutions and universities, the defense, interior and state security ministries, members of the AeO, several journalists from the print media and radio, a Soviet delegation and a number of personally invited persons such as Hanna Wolf, Luitpold Steidle, historians Leo Stern (1901-1982)<sup>42</sup> and Ernst Engelberg (born 1909).<sup>43</sup> The DSF’s propaganda division had prepared the day by distributing carefully

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<sup>40</sup> “Was uns der 22. Juni 1941 lehrt. Eine historische Dokumentation zum 20. Jahrestag des faschistischen Überfalls auf die Sowjetunion,” in *Neues Deutschland*, June 20, 1961, 3. On a detailed analysis of the SED propaganda around June 22, 1961, see above Chapter 5. III.

<sup>41</sup> This was the title of the seventh meeting of the “Commission of GDR and USSR Historians” held at the Institute for History, Academy of the Sciences, in Berlin, June 19-25, 1961. See the protocol in BA/SAPMO DY30 IV 2/9.09/58. For a detailed discussion of the contributions see Chapter 10. III.

<sup>42</sup> Leo Stern (the brother of the AeO initiator and *spiritus rector*, Wolf Stern), a historian specialized in economic history and the history of the workers movement, 1953-1959 rector of the Martin-Luther-University in Halle.

<sup>43</sup> See the entire list of participants in BA/SAPMO DY 32/6820. All historians present at the above-described conference of GDR and USSR historians (June 19-25, 1961) were present that day, so it seems the two events were timely coordinated in order to assure a maximum reach, prominence, and participation.

drafted instructions according to which June 22, 1961 was to clearly point out the historical “responsibilities” and “connections” deriving from June 22, 1941 and to denounce the alleged continuing threat posed by contemporary “German imperialism.” A number of “forums, papers and discussions” were organized whose “main content” was to be “the unmasking of West German militarism and neo-fascism.”<sup>44</sup> The focus was as much on the present as on the past. The wording of these instructions neatly summarized the SED’s main message and ideological agenda on June 22, 1961:

The twentieth anniversary of the fascist attack against the Soviet Union must therefore be an occasion to create clarity about the historical connections, about the criminal character of the fascist attack and the complete forlornness of any aggressive adventures in the current epoch.<sup>45</sup>

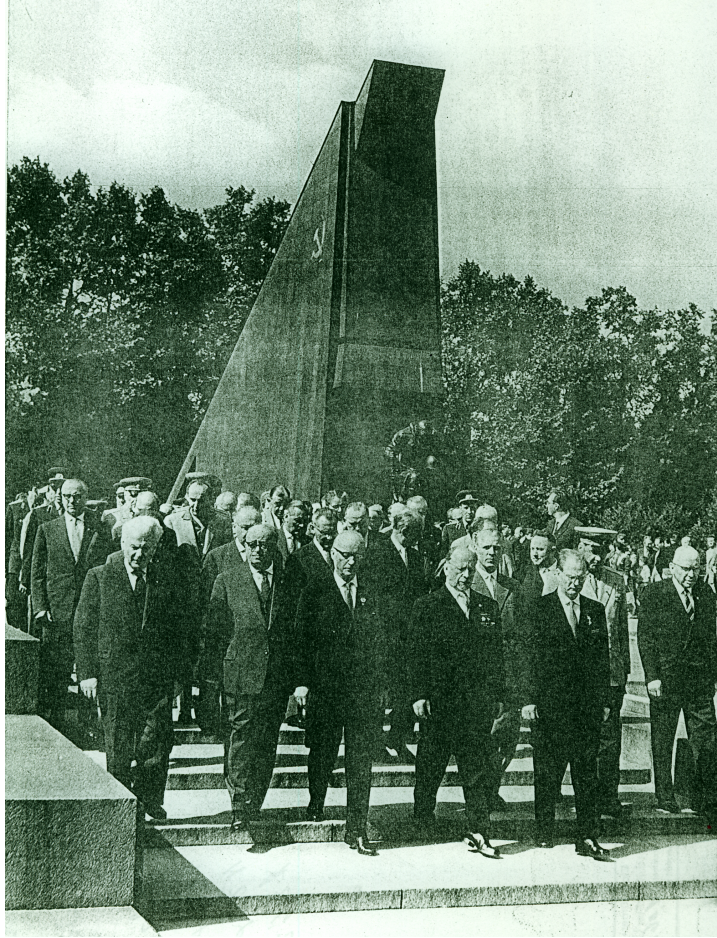
As demonstrated earlier, customized and adapted like this, the SED invoked the memory of the Eastern Front war to legitimize the building of the wall on August 13, 1961. The recurring elements of warning and admonition, of fear and threat – namely, fear of another June 22, and threat against the potential attackers – fulfilled crucial political-ideological functions in the SED’s efforts to justify the creation of the “antifascist protection wall.”

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<sup>44</sup> See the memorandum of the DSF’s Division for Agitation and Propaganda in BA/SAPMO DY 32/6820, 1-2.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 1.





**Fig. 6. Honoring the Heroes of the Soviet Union, June 22, 1961: The SED leadership at the Soviet Honorary Memorial in Berlin-Treptow: SED-Politburo member Hermann Matern, Mayor of East Berlin Friedrich Ebert, head of the People's Chamber Johannes Dieckmann, and SED ZK's General Secretary Walter Ulbricht (first row, left to right), behind Ulbricht to the right, head of the Council of Ministers, Willi Stoph<sup>46</sup>**

In 1966, the last major “Barbarossa” anniversary was celebrated under Ulbricht. In the era of the “new economic policy” aimed at winning the economic race with the Western neighbor (“*Einholen ohne Überholen*” - “catching up without overtaking,” was Ulbricht’s program at the time), the commemoration of the German-Soviet war offered an opportunity to “prove” the superiority of socialism, and, in turn, capitalism’s doom.

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<sup>46</sup> BA/SAPMO, Bild Y1, 24229.

DSF agitators received detailed instructions for the ceremonies and speeches to be held in the summer of 1966: while, in the identical wording of previous anniversaries, the attack on the Soviet Union represented “a perfidious, treacherous” act, the “most severe crime of German imperialism,” its outcome had confirmed that

from the very beginning, the aims of robbery and conquest of German imperialism stood in stark contrast to the historical laws as well as to [German imperialism’s] own political, economic and military capabilities, and with the attack against the Soviet Union [these aims] were doomed to total failure.<sup>47</sup>

In a front-page editorial, *Neues Deutschland*’s stressed that June 22, 1941 was the “blackest day in a dark time of German history” and that the Soviet Union had only been able to defeat the “militarists blinded by anticommunism” because of the “moral power and unity of millions of Soviet citizens and the superiority of the socialist system.” Only now, it was the “land of Lenin” and not the “land of Stalin” anymore, whose historical achievements were to be commemorated. And in order to underline Ulbricht’s drive to “catch up” with the West, the editorial noted that “today, the Soviet Union supersedes West Germany in the major fields of industrial production by at least the triple.”<sup>48</sup> Thus in 1966, the SED once again skilfully appropriated the historical memory of the Eastern Front war – a war which indeed had cost over twenty million Soviet lives – to the necessities of the ideological and economic rivalry between the GDR and FRG.

This is further manifested in the way the same commemoration texts refer to the climate of détente and the signals of cooperation coming from the outgoing Ludwig Erhard (CDU) administration and the incoming Grand coalition under Kurt-Georg

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<sup>47</sup> “Hinweise für Referenten anlässlich des 25. Jahrestages des Überfalls des Faschismus auf die Sowjetunion,” BA/SAPMO DY 32/92, 1f.

<sup>48</sup> “Der 22. Juni 1941,” in *Neues Deutschland*, June 22, 1966, 1.

Kiesinger (CDU) and Willy Brandt (SPD). Erhard was the first West German chancellor to issue a statement commemorating June 22, 1941 in the Federal Republic. The statement called for an “end to the postwar era” and demanded that it was time to remove the “remains of the war,” by which Erhard meant in particular German division.<sup>49</sup> *Neues Deutschland* distorted this statement by claiming that Erhard was in fact calling for an “attack against the socialist GDR:”

It is known that for Bonn ‘abolition of the German division’ means as much as ‘annexation of the GDR.’ Thus, one has the guts over there [in the West] to proclaim an attack against the socialist GDR on the anniversary day of the attack against the socialist Soviet Union.<sup>50</sup>

The years to come under Honecker’s regime saw a continuation of this anti-Western threat-and-fear-campaign based on the exploitative use of the Eastern Front memory, but never again would the rhetoric become so audaciously explicit.

As during the years since 1945, the communist narrative of the Eastern Front during the 1960s was enriched with voices from veteran antifascists. In 1966, the eye-witness and front veteran Walter Ulbricht was quoted, yet no longer in connection with his NKFD activities – whose twentieth anniversary he had celebrated in 1963<sup>51</sup> – but with a statement on the “fateful poison of anticommunism” which had brought “so much misery

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<sup>49</sup> Ludwig Ehrhard, “Der Zukunft ihr Recht geben! Überreste des Krieges wegräumen,” printed in *Bulletin des Presse- und Informationsamtes der Bundesregierung* (Bonn: Deutscher Bundesverlag, 1950-1990), no. 81, June 21, 1966, 637 (thereafter *BPI*). See my detailed discussion of this statement in Chapter 11. II.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>51</sup> See his speech “Sie kämpften mutig gegen den Nazismus,” July 12, 1963. Originally published in *Mitteilungsblatt*, no.8, August 1963. Reprinted in Ulbricht, *Ausgewählte Reden und Aufsätze*, 259-267. Ulbricht started his speech with the sentence „many of us went through the hell of two world wars,” underscoring (and exaggerating) his own veteran experience. He further used this occasion to basically argue that while the NKFD bravely led the anti-Hitler-coalition, the Western powers “who had been attacked by Hitler, tried to redirect the offensive against the Soviet Union.” This reiterated his point of an immanent second strike against the USSR. *Ibid.*, 259, 261. The speech triggered a number of angry press reactions in the West all of which were collected by Albert Norden and attached to a memo to Ulbricht, dated July 13, 1963. BA/SAPMO, DY 30 IV/A2/2.028/80, 9. (The press selection is not included in the file).

to Germany and the Germans.” This is again a good example illustrating that it was a peculiar mix of biography, ideology and calculation which inspired the political memory of the Eastern Front the GDR. Not only that the Western political establishment was “hiding the truth and objective facts” about the Wehrmacht’s war against the Soviet Union,” Ulbricht contended, it also refused to acknowledge that only “under victorious socialism nations can erect a human and democratic order” while, at the same time, only then these nations could “progress in every respect faster and better than under the conditions of capitalism’s rule.”<sup>52</sup> Ulbricht managed to connect the memory of the Eastern Front to the economic competition between the two Germanys in the 1960s. After the building of the wall, faced with the latent crisis of the planned economy and a growing consumer frustration, this memory again promised ideological self-assurance within the party and political legitimacy among the population. The SED needed historic prove of socialism’s ultimate triumph over capitalism regardless of the fact how remotely connected the history of the Eastern Front war was to the material conditions in the GDR of the mid-1960s.<sup>53</sup>

Yet, whatever limited credibility and moral authority Ulbricht possessed as a result of his well-propagandized biographical background, this capital disappeared once he was removed from power and the younger Erich Honecker took over his position in 1971 – coincidentally in the year of “Barbarossa’s” thirtieth anniversary. Honecker, born in 1912,

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<sup>52</sup> Walter Ulbricht, “Unheilvolles Gift des Antikommunismus” (excerpt from his speech on the 8<sup>th</sup> DSF congress), *Neues Deutschland*, June 22, 1966, 3.

<sup>53</sup> The most obvious connection between the Eastern Front war and East Germany’s economic state was not discussed by Ulbricht, of course: the reparations paid to the Soviet Union, the dismantling and and deportation of entire factories (and human expertise) from the Eastern zone to the USSR crippled the East German economy from the beginning.

survived the Nazi years imprisoned in KZ Brandenburg for KPD underground activities between 1935 and 1945. After his liberation by the Red Army he quickly joined the leading communists around Ulbricht, played a key role in the merger of SPD and KPD, and was one of the founders of the SED's youth organization "Free German Youth" (FDJ). As head of the ZK's Division for Security Matters, Honecker directed and oversaw the building of the wall in 1961 – a fact either unknown or long forgotten in 1971.

Even lacking the front experience, Honecker became Moscow's faithful ally at the top of the GDR. By the 1980s, Honecker's state was one of the most prosperous but also most repressive countries in the communist bloc. This was also true with regards to Honecker's politics of the past: what he lacked in personal memories and war record from the Eastern Front he compensated by relying heavily on the Soviet master narrative. Unlike Ulbricht, he travelled to Stalingrad (1975) and to the former NKFD school in Krasnogorsk (1985) to give speeches commemorating the historic battle and the antifascist fight of the German communists in the Soviet Union.<sup>54</sup> The transition from Ulbricht to Honecker therefore entailed not an alteration of the fundamental messages and lessons accorded to June 22, 1941, but rather a shift in perspective as well as a variation in style and tone.

Starting in 1971, when the Rites of June fell amidst the succession struggle between Ulbricht and Honecker (Ulbricht had already lost his post as leader of the SED, but remained chairman of the Council of the State until 1976), official commemoration of the

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<sup>54</sup> See further Chapter 11. I.

Eastern Front war became a matter of course – a de-personalized, ritualized act of rhetorical submission to the Soviet Union.<sup>55</sup> As under Ulbricht, retired Soviet generals contributed articles to *Neues Deutschland* vividly and proudly recalling the Red Army's fighting and victory. Yet, the SED now paid much less attention to the German communist movement, particularly the NKFD, in official announcements, presumably because direct personal continuities as the Ulbricht-Khrushchev Christmas meeting in Stalingrad 1942/43 could no longer be exploited.<sup>56</sup> Instead, with Honecker's takeover, eternity entered the historical memory of the Eastern Front. The commemoration propaganda from now on stressed that "the lessons of the past have been drawn forever"<sup>57</sup> and that "the heroic fight of the Soviet soldiers [was] an eternal obligation"<sup>58</sup> to their heirs in the GDR. As demonstrated above for the crucial years of 1953 and 1961, Ulbricht's politics of memory included a direct and instant appropriation of the past to the present, a blatant and unswerving instrumentalization of history's lessons to present political-

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<sup>55</sup> This fits into the general tendency under Honecker to (re-) confirm the Soviet Union's leading role and to downplay everything "German" in – if there was any – the GDR's socialist nationalism, particularly during the 1970s. See Stefan Wolle, *Die heile Welt der Diktatur. Alltag und Herrschaft in der DDR* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 1999), 45. Wolle aptly summarizes the major themes of Honecker's „double strategy” for ruling the country: on the one hand, further distancing from the imperialist enemy, seeking closer relations with the Soviet Union, increasing the “revolutionary alertness” and thereby further militarizing GDR society, enhancing role and capabilities of the state security system, and removing the last remnants of capitalism by expropriating the last private businesses in East Germany; on the other hand, Honecker showed leniency for a Westernizing youth culture, and advocated social benefit increases and consumer interest satisfaction (in order, of course, to be better prepared for the ideological-practical consequences of détente). Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> See for example *Neues Deutschland*, January 30, 1963, 5, commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the battle of Stalingrad. The only way in which Honecker related his biography to the history of the Eastern Front war was by recalling the thoughts on and following June 22, 1941 in KZ Brandenburg. A passage from his memoirs was cited for that purpose on a rare occasion in 1981. He went not without mentioning his own years on the Soviet “front,” albeit it were the years before the Nazi-takeover in Germany (1930/31). See “Vom ersten Tage an...,” *Neues Deutschland*, June 22, 1981, 5.

<sup>57</sup> “Die Lehren der Vergangenheit wurden für immer gezogen,” *Neues Deutschland*, June 22, 1971, 1.

<sup>58</sup> “Heldenmütiger Kampf der Sowjetsoldaten ist uns ewig Verpflichtung,” *Neues Deutschland*, June 23, 1971, 1.

ideological necessities, e.g. the popular unrests in June 1953, and the building of the wall in 1961. For these purposes, party propaganda gave much attention to the gruesome details of the Wehrmacht's war of annihilation, included the details of war crimes and occasionally named the perpetrators. During the Honecker era, the history of the Eastern Front was recaptured in a rather sober style, albeit not without the usual pathos. Yet, *Neues Deutschland* no longer printed photographs of destructed cities, hanged partisans or military cemeteries. Instead, the paper focussed on Soviet military might (tanks, armed soldiers, military production sights), and emphasized Soviet sufferings and sacrifices in general. Moreover, the GDR leadership not only confessed "gratitude and respect" but also "love" to the "Soviet heroes."<sup>59</sup>

Two main themes emerged from these depictions of the "lessons," best captured in the coverage of the June 22 anniversary in 1981: one was that the "eternal heroic deeds of the Soviet people" had built the "fundament for the longest peace period in Europe," the other one was that the socialist camp was to remain "alert and ready for combat" at all times as long as capitalism had not vanished from the face of the earth.<sup>60</sup> In addition, pictures of memorial services held by leading party and state officials at the Soviet Honorary Memorial in Berlin-Treptow, alongside lengthy reports listing the names and titles of those participating in the ceremonies, underlined the increasingly ritualized character of the event.

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<sup>59</sup> Otto Winzer, „30 Jahre nach dem faschistischen Überfall auf die Sowjetunion. Unser Bündnis mit der UdSSR – wichtigste Lehre des 22. Juni 1941,“ *Neues Deutschland*, June 22, 1971, 3.

<sup>60</sup> „Unvergänglich sind die Heldentaten des Sowjetvolkes, das die Naziaggressoren vernichtete und das Fundament für die längste Friedensperiode in Europa legte. Die Sowjetarmee zerschlug alle Pläne der Faschisten,“ *Neues Deutschland*, June 20/21, 1981, 9.

With Brandt's *Ostpolitik*, Détente entered West-German-Soviet relations and the SED felt prompted to react to the thaw by re-appropriating the memory of the Eastern Front war to it. Thus, in 1971, the year of the ratification of the treaties between the FRG, the USSR and Poland, an important part of "Barbarossa's" legacy had been fulfilled. Otto Winzer (1902-1975), the GDR Foreign Minister at the time, authored the main piece about the "most important lessons of June 22, 1941" in *Neues Deutschland*, putting the war into the broader historical perspective and debating the prospects for bringing lasting peace and security to the European continent. Naturally, lasting peace was only to be achieved at the side of Soviet Union. Winzer summarized and contextualized the contemporary developments by granting that

the coming into effect of the treaties of the Soviet Union and Poland with the FRG would be of extraordinary importance for an easing of tensions in Europe. Their ratification would in many ways create a new political atmosphere in Europe and would significantly improve the preconditions for solving the most important European security problems. In view of June 22, 1941, the ratification of the treaty between the Soviet Union and the FRG is a political-moral obligation whose fulfilment concurs with the peaceful interest of the people [*Volk*] in the FRG.<sup>61</sup>

Winzer's analysis blamed the Cold War entirely on the Western allies. The Soviet Union, in contrast, stood for peace and reconciliation, and the German attack against its homeland in 1941 served to underscore this analysis. At the same time, it became increasingly difficult to keep up the fear-and-threat rhetoric amidst a not only global but also inner-German climate of détente. Particularly the Brandt administration's new tone with regards to the German-Soviet past – examined in a following chapter – left little room for attacking Bonn's alleged aggressive and imperialist intentions. Winzer chose to attack former Defense Minister Franz-Josef Strauss in 1971, although Strauss had been

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<sup>61</sup> Otto Winzer, „30 Jahre nach dem faschistischen Überfall auf die Sowjetunion. Unser Bündnis mit der UdSSR – wichtigste Lehre des 22. Juni 1941,“ *Neues Deutschland*, June 22, 1971, 3.



out of the defense ministry for almost ten years and out of power on the federal stage for over two years: „For Strauss, the Second World War has not yet ended. Starting from this anti-Soviet principle, he furthers and pursues the old politics of the German finance capital which seeks hegemony over Europe.”<sup>62</sup>

It was not until ten years later, that the Rites of June were celebrated again with comparable ideological energy and ceremonial care. In 1976, the thirty-fifth anniversary, *Neues Deutschland* ignored the event altogether. The reasons remain unclear.<sup>63</sup> Only DSF remained as active as ever. They published a brochure entitled “Anti-Communism and Anti-Sovietism – Crimes against Humanity” following the “International Conference of the Communist and Workers Parties of Europe” which took place in East Berlin in late June 1976.<sup>64</sup> The text once again invoked Thomas Mann’s wartime remark that anticommunism was the “main folly of our epoch”<sup>65</sup> and once more stressed that “in 1941 the most dangerous, severest and most consequential imperialist crime” was committed against socialism with the “fascist attack” on the Soviet Union.<sup>66</sup> The brochure listed Korea, Vietnam, and Cuba as examples for further such crimes in the postwar period. Citing not-specified West German press publications, it also argued that the imperialist

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid. Most recently, Strauss had served as finance minister in the Kiesinger administration between 1966-1969.

<sup>63</sup> At the time, the SED was caught up in a discussion over party program and statute during its IX. Party Congress in May, and shortly thereafter a number of social policy decisions on the raise of wages and pensions were announced. Yet, these indeed cannot explain why there was no official interest in such a major anniversary.

<sup>64</sup> *Antikommunismus und Antisowjetismus – Verbrechen an der Menschheit. Dokument der Konferenz der kommunistischen und Arbeiterparteien Europas „Für Frieden, Sicherheit, Zusammenarbeit und sozialen Fortschritt in Europa,”* ed. Zentralvorstand der Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft (Berlin (Ost): 1976).

<sup>65</sup> Thomas Mann, “Der Antibolschewismus – die Grundtorheit unserer Epoche,” *Einheit*, no. 2, (July 1946), 105-107. See the discussion in Chapter III. 2.

<sup>66</sup> „Antikommunismus und Antisowjetismus – Verbrechen an der Menschheit,” 12.

camp saw “the communist” as “anti-person” (“*Gegenmensch*”) and thus “modern anticommunism justifies the uninhibited nuclear armament, the neutron bomb, the preparation of total nuclear war.” Worse, “the annihilation of life on earth lies within its imagination.”<sup>67</sup>

This revival of what I have earlier called a fear-and-threat campaign, stretched well into the 1980s. Indeed, the stationing of Soviet SS 20 missiles in 1979, and of U.S. Pershing II missiles in 1984, had stirred opposition from a vibrant anti-nuclear movement in several European countries and renewed fears of nuclear war.<sup>68</sup> In June 1981, the commemoration campaign contained once again assertions that Hitler’s criminal strategists had found their “heirs” among the current leading Western politicians and NATO commanders.<sup>69</sup> Less than ever before the coverage dealt with the reality of the Eastern Front war or the legacy of the Nazi occupation. Instead, it focussed on Soviet military capabilities (then and now), on the war production effort and even carried a chart comparing Soviet and German “military powers and means” during World War II. As in earlier years, the coverage in *Neues Deutschland* put emphasis on the necessity to “be alert, ready for combat” and to secure a “functioning national defense.” “Not to falter” in

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Particularly on the West German debates see Jeffrey Herf, *War by other Means. Soviet Power, West German Resistance, and the Battle of the Euromissiles* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

<sup>69</sup> „Unvergänglich sind die Heldentaten des Sowjetvolkes, das die Naziaggressoren vernichtete und das Fundament für die längste Friedensperiode in Europa legte. Die Sowjetarmee zerschlug alle Pläne der Faschisten,“ *Neues Deutschland*, June 20/21, 1981, 9. Similarly, see Olaf Groehler, „22. Juni 1941 – Anfang vom Ende der Naziaggressoren,“ *Neues Deutschland*, June 22, 1981, 5.

these efforts also meant in the SED's view "to heed one of the most important lessons of June 22, 1941."<sup>70</sup>

By 1986, the last important June 22 anniversary to be celebrated by the SED before the regime collapsed in 1989, the threat to be mastered was nothing less than to "save humankind before a nuclear inferno." *Neues Deutschland* carried this statement made by a leading official of the USSR embassy in East Berlin, and reported that a Stalingrad veteran spoke on the occasion before the film "Brotherhood in Arms" was screened at the embassy.<sup>71</sup> Unlike in previous years, the statement included a reference to the military contribution of the Western Allies to Nazi Germany's defeat, and the anti-Hitler coalition was mentioned explicitly – something unimaginable throughout most of the previous decades. A day later, on the forty-fifth anniversary of the beginning of "Operation Barbarossa," *Neues Deutschland* dedicated the entire upper front-page to the "ceremonial memorial service for the fallen Soviet heroes" and carried a large photograph depicting Honecker, Willi Stoph (1914-1999), head of the Council of Ministers, and a number of high-ranking ZK members along with the Soviet ambassador Vjacheslav Kochemasov and Petr G. Lushev, the commander-in-chief of the Soviet forces in the GDR.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid. See also the editorial „Die aktuellen des 22. Juni 1941,“ in *Neues Deutschland*, June 22, 1981, 2. See further Chapter 11.I.

<sup>71</sup> „Pressekonferenz in der Botschaft der UdSSR,“ *Neues Deutschland*, June 21/22, 1986, 2.

letarier aller Länder, vereinigt euch!

# NEUES DEUTSCHLAND

HEITSPARTEI DEUTSCHLANDS

Montag,  
23. Juni 1986  
41. Jahrgang / Nr. 146  
A-Ausgabe  
Einzelpreis 15 Pf

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## 45. Jahrestag des faschistischen Überfalls auf die UdSSR

### Gefallene sowjetische Helden wurden in Berlin feierlich geehrt

Kranzniederlegung der Partei- und Staatsführung und zahlreicher Abordnungen der Werktätigen am Treptower Ehrenmal



Gedenken vor dem sowjetischen Ehrenmal in Berlin-Treptow

Berlin (ADN). Mit einer Kranzniederlegung am Ehrenmal für die gefallenen sowjetischen Helden in Berlin-Treptow ehrte am Sonntag die Partei- und Staatsführung der DDR die Millionen sowjetischen Menschen, die bei der Befreiung vom Hitlerfaschismus ihr Leben gaben. Am 45. Jahrestag des Überfalls Nazi-deutschlands auf die Sowjetunion gedachten gemeinsam mit dem Generalsekretär des ZK der SED und Vorsitzenden des Staatrates der DDR, Erich Honecker, weitere Mitglieder der Partei- und Staatsführung, die Repräsentanten der UdSSR in der DDR sowie Tausende Werktätige aus Berliner Betrieben an traditionsreicher Stätte der gefallenen Soldaten der Roten Armee.

Zusammen mit Erich Honecker schritten an der Spitze des Zuges die Mitglieder und Kandidaten des Politbüros des ZK der SED Willi Stoph, Vorsitzender des Ministerrates, Horst Sindermann, Präsident der Volkskammer, Hermann Axen, Horst Dohlus, Werner Felke, Joachim Herrmann, Werner Jarowinsky, Heinz Kellner, Günther Kießer, Egon Krenz, Werner Krolkowski, Erich Mielke, Günter Mittag, Alfred Neumann, Günter Schabowski, Inge Lange und Gerhard Schürer, die Stellvertreter des Vorsitzenden des Staatrates Prof. Dr. Manfred Gerlach, Vorsitzender der LDPD, Gerald Götting, Vorsitzender der CDU, Prof. Dr. Heinrich Homann, Vorsitzender der NDPD, und Dr. Ernst Mecklenburg, Vorsitzender der DBD, der Präsident des Nationalrates der Nationalen Front der DDR, Prof. Dr. Dr. Lothar Kolditz, die Stellvertreter des Vorsitzenden des Ministerrates Manfred Fiegl, Hans-Joachim Heusinger, Wolfgang Bauschfuß, Horst Sölle und Dr. Herbert Weiz, weitere Mitglieder des ZK der SED und des Ministerrates, unter ihnen der Minister für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten, Oskar Fischer, Mitglieder des Präsidiums der Volkskammer und des Staatrates. Der unvergessenen Helden des Sowjetvolkes gedachten an diesem 45. Jahrestag des faschistischen Überfalls auf ihr Heimatland der Außerordentliche und Bevollmächtigte Botschafter der UdSSR in der DDR, Wjatscheslaw Kotschennasow, der Oberkommandierende der Gruppe der sowjetischen Streitkräfte in Deutschland, Armeegeneral Pjotr Luschew, das Mitglied des Ministerrates und Chef der Politischen Verwaltung der Gruppe, Generalleutnant Nikolai Moissejew, und der Vertreter des Oberkommandierenden der Vereinten Streitkräfte der Teilnehmerstaaten des Warschauer Vertrages in der NVA, Generaloberst Wladimir Mereschkow.

Eingereiht in den langen Zug hatten sich Vertreter aller Parteien und Massenorganisationen.

(Fortsetzung auf Seite 2)

Fig. 7. Commemorating the Soviet Heroes, June 22, 1986: The SED leadership pays tribute to the “fallen Soviet heroes” at the Soviet Honorary Memorial in Berlin-Treptow (*Neues Deutschland*, June 23, 1986, 1). The text lists participants and their positions.

Earlier, only the “round” anniversaries of 1951, 1961, and 1971 had prompted the paper to reserve this prominent spot on the front-page for the commemoration of the Eastern Front war. But unlike in 1951 and 1961, in particular, the coverage in 1986 was limited to reports on the ceremony. Not a single extra article addressed the historical events following the Wehrmacht attack. Neither memoir pieces nor illustrated documentaries recalling the criminal legacies of the Eastern Front war were added as had

been routinely the case before. All the reader was left with were a number of matter-of-fact reports about the central and local ceremonies dedicated to the event.<sup>72</sup>

This interesting change underscores one of the main features of the politics of memory in the Honecker era, namely the inclination to strip the past off its historical contents by obscuring differences between past and present. Metaphorically speaking, the SED invoked merely history's mantle which in turn was to descend on the present much like a veil, imbuing it with the spell of history. Far from instrumentalizing the memory of the Eastern Front for concrete policy steps, Honecker's ritualized memory was to "consolidate the present with the past."<sup>73</sup> He no longer even saw the SED fulfilling a historical mission in the sense that the "socialist revolution" which had been steered in the fighting on the Eastern Front during World War II, was to triumph over capitalism one day. Rather, in the late GDR the "legacies of the [fallen] heroes"<sup>74</sup> were being administered in the day-to-day struggle to "improve" socialism. As GDR society has often been said to have come to a standstill in course of the 1980s – with a wide-spread sense of lethargy and disillusion, and a growing retreat into private niches – the Rites of June illustrate the regime's ideological solidification as it withdrew to hollow ritual and historical symbolism.<sup>75</sup> This is not to say, that the official memorial culture under Ulbricht

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<sup>72</sup> Two articles described the memorial services at the „Memorial of Liberation Seelower Höhen,“ (where in the spring of 1945 more than 30,000 Soviet soldiers perished during the final battles of the war) and at the Soviet memorial in West-Berlin's Tiergarten. *Neues Deutschland*, June 23, 1986, 2.

<sup>73</sup> Barbara Könczöl has described this phenomenon recently for the SED's ritualized memorialization of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. Barbara Könczöl, „'Ich war, ich bin, ich werde sein.' Die SED und das Gedenken an Rosa Luxemburg und Karl Liebknecht. Eine Studie zu Sakralisierung von Politik und politischen Mythen in der DDR“ (Doctoral Thesis Manuscript, University of Leipzig, Institute for Political Science, 2007).

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Münkler, „Antifaschismus und antifaschistischer Widerstand,“ 28f.

lacked these elements. Yet, the primary function of invoking the German-Soviet war well into the 1960s was to mobilize and energize the population for the project of German-Soviet friendship with all its practical consequences, i.e. the building of socialism in 1952, the crushing of “reactionary tendencies” in 1953, the creation of a “National People’s Army” in order to prevent the “imperialists” from waging “another” Eastern war, and the building of the “antifascist protection wall” in 1961. The fear-and-threat campaign had clear and concrete purposes during the Ulbricht era, whereas since the early 1970s – with the international climate improving in the wake of détente – the memory of the Eastern Front war served primarily to reinforce and re-emphasize the need to stick with the Soviets and to properly administer the “socialist achievements” in the GDR. The farther remote the real events of the Eastern Front war grew, the easier it was for the SED to disassociate its “messages” and “lessons” from the historical content. Not only the antifascist rhetoric justifying the second dictatorship on German soil became “formulaic,”<sup>76</sup> so too did the official memory of the Eastern Front. Thus, although the GDR claimed routinely to have (better) mastered the Nazi past, the actual historical facts, at least in the official memory propaganda, became increasingly irrelevant.

#### THE OFFICIAL STALINGRAD MEMORY IN EAST GERMANY

One might assume that a historical event so powerfully connotated and emotionally laden as the battle of Stalingrad was – once established as a key metaphor in the SED’s postwar official memorial culture – there to stay. Yet, regardless of the fact that

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<sup>76</sup> Charles S. Maier, *Dissolution. The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 55.

“Stalingrad” became a *lieu de mémoire* in the collective memory of both Germanys,<sup>77</sup> the SED’s official reference to the battle, its aftermath and meaning, changed significantly over time. The East German communists remembered and appropriated one of the most cataclysmic events on the Eastern Front to their ideological-political needs only for so long as it promised to endow the East German socialist experiment with additional moral-historical legitimacy. This was the case under Ulbricht, who shared with a number of influential postwar politicians a personal memory of Stalingrad that would naturally fade as these veterans retired from the political arena. Former Wehrmacht leaders such as Wilhelm Adam, Vincenz Müller, Heinrich Homann, Luitpold Steidle and Otto Korfes stood with their personal stories and authority on the propaganda front during the founding years of the GDR. Their tales of the “reflection and return” experience in Stalingrad were to inspire and sustain the illusion of a collectively shared antifascism the SED prescribed to the whole of the East German population.

The official memory of the battle of Stalingrad was the essence of the Eastern Front memory propagated by the SED throughout the years: Stalingrad both embodied and acuminated the horrors of the war in the East. The battle had claimed tremendous losses on either side, it signalled the turning point of the war, it saw the emergence of the antifascist alliance between German communists and the Red Army, indeed of a “people’s movement against Hitler,”<sup>78</sup> and its outcome confirmed the ultimate triumph of

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<sup>77</sup> Ulrich, “Stalingrad,” 332-348.

<sup>78</sup> “Volksbewegung gegen Hitler. Zu einem Buch von Erich Weinert über das Nationalkomitee ‚Freies Deutschland’,” *Neues Deutschland*, February 2, 1958, 2.

socialism.<sup>79</sup> Moreover, by focussing the memory of the Eastern Front war on Stalingrad it was possible to address all important military issues, including the question of occupation policies, manpower and soldierly mass death. At the same time, however, one could comfortably exclude the Holocaust. The sufferings on each side were limited to “Soviet” and “German” soldiers; occasionally their sacrifices were even equated, only that the Wehrmacht’s losses had ultimately been “senseless.”<sup>80</sup>

Literature and films dealing with Stalingrad had reached a wide audience in East Germany even before the KPD/SED had put the concerted pro-Soviet propaganda in place. Theodor Plievier’s 1945 *Stalingrad* novel was one of the first and most popular literary works depicting and denouncing the seemingly senseless fighting on the Eastern Front.<sup>81</sup> In 1950, the Soviet film “The Battle of Stalingrad” was screened in East German movie theatres, initially establishing “Stalingrad” as hallmark of the Eastern Front memory in the GDR.<sup>82</sup> The date remembered in the GDR was February 3, 1943 – the day of the Sixth Army’s capitulation. In contrast, Western media coverage focussed in

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<sup>79</sup> See for example, Otto Korfes, „Zum 15. Jahrestag des Sieges der Sowjetarmee bei Stalingrad. Die unvermeidbare Niederlage des deutschen Imperialismus,“ *Neues Deutschland*, 2 February 1958, 2. „Wie vor 30 Jahre die Nacht des Faschismus hereinbrach und wie sie endete,“ *Neues Deutschland*, 30 January 1963, 5. „Der große Sieg in einer historischen Schlacht,“ *Neues Deutschland*, 2 February 1971, 5. „An der Wolga brach die Rote Armee dem Aggressor das Rückgrat,“ *Neues Deutschland*, 2 February 1983, 7.

<sup>80</sup> Otto Korfes, „Zum 15. Jahrestag des Sieges der Sowjetarmee bei Stalingrad. Die unvermeidbare Niederlage des deutschen Imperialismus,“ *Neues Deutschland*, 2 February 1958, 2.

<sup>81</sup> The second edition in 1946 sold 30,000 copies. See also above Chapter 8. III.

<sup>82</sup> A two-part, semi-documentary movie (the Soviets called it “*künstlerisch-dokumentarischer Film*”) illustrating Stalin’s role as “genius and victorious” commander-in-chief during the battle and World War II on the whole. A film analysis was provided by Lars Karl, “*Von Helden und Menschen...*” *Der Zweite Weltkrieg im sowjetischen Spielfilm und dessen Rezeption in der DDR, 1945-1965* (Dissertation Universität Tübingen, 2002), 82-91, on the perception in the GDR, 194f. The entirely positive reviews in the GDR press celebrated the work as brilliant depiction of historical truth, and the movie contributed to the further intensification of the Stalin cult in the GDR. The West German press, in contrast, criticised the movie mostly because of the depersonalised picture of the masses of soldiers who appeared to be acting only at the leaders’ will.



addition on November 22, 1942 – the day the cauldron closed around the Sixth Army. Thus, while Stalingrad symbolized the beginning of *victory* in East Germany, it was remembered as the beginning of the *end* in West Germany.<sup>83</sup>



Fig. 8. Film Poster “The Battle of Stalingrad” (1949): Poster advertising a Soviet film production depicted the motif of the Soviet Honorary Memorial in Berlin-Treptow. A Soviet soldier carries a child (salvaged Germany); under his feet crushed German tanks.

What made the memory of Stalingrad so instrumental to the SED’s quest for legitimacy during the 1940s and 1950s was its symbolic power: the Wehrmacht’s defeat inaugurated the defeat of fascism, thus of imperialism, and therefore promised the ultimate triumph of socialism. The reconstruction of the city of Stalingrad, later

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<sup>83</sup> See also Sabine Behrenbeck, „Über die Lesarten eines Menetekels. Kommentar zum Beitrag von Helmut Lethen über das Geschichtszeichen ‚Stalingrad,‘“ in Kittsteiner, ed., *Geschichtszeichen*, 181-198.

Volgograd, exemplified the resurrection and further expansion of socialism across the postwar world. In 1963, *Neues Deutschland* even commemorated the thirtieth anniversary of Hitler's ascendancy to power in 1933 in conjunction with the twentieth anniversary of Stalingrad as the "beginning" and "end" of National Socialism: "it began with fires" in 1933 – referring to the *Reichstag* fire – and "the battle on the Volga" was the "end of the arsonists – the turn towards victory of the nations."<sup>84</sup>

In the wake of de-Stalinization in the Soviet Union, Stalingrad was renamed Volgograd in 1961, and this might be one reason why the SED (already under Ulbricht) no longer propagated the Stalingrad narrative as the central event of the Eastern Front war. In 1963, twenty years after, it was the "battle on the Volga" or the "drama on the Volga" which had broken the "spell of Hitler's invincibility" (which – arguably – had already been broken before Moscow and Leningrad). The text included none of the usual pictures of house-to-house fighting in the embattled city. In 1968 and 1978, the anniversary was not mentioned at all. In contrast, the fifteenth anniversary in 1958 had been prominently commemorated as "admonition and warning," enriched with pictures of the "victorious Red Army taking the heart of the city in a storm" and a page-one photograph depicting "Stalingrad – 15 years after: newly built houses for workers of the 'Red October' factory."<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> „Wie vor 30 Jahre die Nacht des Faschismus hereinbrach und wie sie endete,“ *Neues Deutschland*, January 30, 1963, 5. The article claimed rather falsely that „from now (1943) on the end of the Hitlerarmy and of the Hitlerstate were certain.”

<sup>85</sup> Otto Korfes, „Zum 15. Jahrestag des Sieges der Sowjetarmee bei Stalingrad. Die unvermeidbare Niederlage des deutschen Imperialisms,“ *Neues Deutschland*, February 2, 1958, 1-2.

On a lower key, the tale of Stalingrad as the city rebuilt from the ruins of war remained a prominent theme in SED propaganda. Its paramilitary youth organization “Society for Sports and Technology” (GST) published a brochure in 1973 on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the battle. It encapsulates the key elements of the SED’s Stalingrad memory as it pervaded East German political culture until 1989. Its quintessential message read as follows:

The red flag ... wove over Stalingrad on February 2, 1943. It signalled: the battle in this city ... ended with a historic victory of the Red Army. ... The formerly strongest war machinery of world reaction was destroyed by the heroic defenders of Stalingrad. ... Stalingrad thereby becomes a symbol: no power on earth can annihilate socialism. ... He who raises his sword against socialism, will die by the sword.

[Today] the traces of war and destruction are ... completely removed. [People] are proud of their city. They are happy and optimistic. They contribute to the fact that socialism keeps having the stronger battalions, that the socialist countries are alert and ready for combat and protect peace reliably. Thus they fulfill the legacy of the fighters and victors of Stalingrad.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Günter Specht, *Stalingrad 1943 - Wolgograd 1972*, ed. Gesellschaft für Sport und Technik, Hauptabteilung Patriotische Erziehung (Berlin (Ost): Militärverlag der DDR, 1972), quote on backcover.

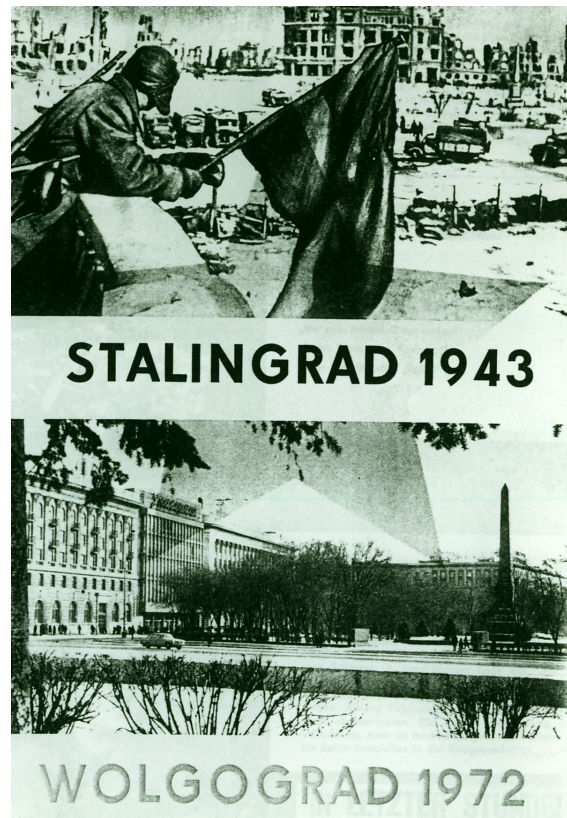


Fig. 9. The Legacy of Stalingrad Fulfilled: Brochure published by the “Society for Sports and Technology” (GST), 1973.

DSF invoked the same “legacy” again in 1983, when the organization kicked off an entire campaign to “honor the historic victory of the Soviet army in the battle of Stalingrad” forty years after: films screenings, veteran talks, discussion groups, exhibits and illustrated wall newspapers were to be prepared by every local DSF branch in the entire republic. The main theme of the campaign was “Bonded with the Victors of History.”<sup>87</sup> A detailed set of instructions from the DSF executive committee advised the

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<sup>87</sup> „Maßnahmen zur Würdigung des historischen Sieges der Sowjetarmee in der Stalingrader Schlacht,“ BA/SAPMO, DY 32/10743, 1-3. 1983 was also a „Karl-Marx-Year“ (100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death), and a special focus lay on the city partnership Volgograd – Karl-Marx-Stadt, the latter of which hosted a number of “propagandistic events on the topic ‘40 years after – Friendly relations Volgograd – Karl-Marx-Stadt,” ibid., 2. Further, a “representative photo-exhibit was displayed in the Central House of DSF in Berlin and in the House of DSF in Karl-Marx-Stadt (entitled “Stalingrad”); the films suggested to be screened in

agitators to “emphasize the current lessons of the battle of Stalingrad such as the invincibility of socialism and its armies, as well as the historically logic defeat of fascist Germany.”<sup>88</sup>

Both, the official memory of the Eastern Front war and the battle of Stalingrad were crucial ingredients of the SED’s quest for legitimacy throughout the forty years of its rule. Stalingrad has even been elevated into the pantheon of the GDR’s “founding myths.”<sup>89</sup> Yet, while the commemorative rituals and ceremonies largely remained unchanged over time, their content was changed, indeed thinned out by party agitators. What remained “useful” and thus worth preserving were the general historic “lessons” the SED drew from the war, especially the themes of socialism’s invincibility and fascism/capitalism’s doom. Rarely was there a genuine interest in the actual events on the Eastern Front. If at all it was under Ulbricht that Wehrmacht crimes against “Soviet citizens,” “soldiers” and “partisan fighters” – notably not the Holocaust – were recalled and vividly described as long as the party felt that such an emotionalized memory of the Eastern Front war contributed to a current policy decision or ideological campaign. Indeed, the Rites of June can be said to have been a major instrument in marginalizing

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addition, included “films provided by the USSR embassy” as well as “*Heißer Schnee*,” “*Man wird nicht als Soldat geboren*,” “*Sie kämpften für die Heimat*,” and “*Sterben bevor das Leben beginnt*,” *ibid.*

Curiously, the SED left this fortieth anniversary campaign largely to the DSF, there was no nation-wide coverage of the event in *Neues Deutschland*. The paper just carried a brief, very general review of the central event commemorating the battle in Volgograd. It noted that the “Red Army had contributed *one* decisive part [no longer *the* decisive part] to the liberation of Europe from the fascist tyranny.” *Neues Deutschland*, February 2, 1983, 5.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>89</sup> Behrenbeck, “Lesarten eines Menetekels,” 192. According to Behrenbeck, Stalingrad belonged „als staatlicher Gründungsmythos zum Kernbestand eines Selbstbildes als das bessere Deutschland gehört.“ *Ibid.* See also Kumpfmüller, *Stalingrad*.

the Holocaust throughout GDR history.<sup>90</sup> Further, the constant fear-and-threat rhetoric in the name of “peace” was to win and mobilize the population for the SED’s main foreign and domestic policy project, German-Soviet friendship. That the SED in fact created no more than a “myth” or an “invented friendship” has been discussed more detailed elsewhere.<sup>91</sup> For my purposes it is important to stress the central role the SED assigned to the historical events “war on the Eastern Front” and “Stalingrad” in these campaigns. And to consider, that the SED’s quest for legitimacy was inextricably connected to the quest for a popular friendship movement – as it turned out a hopeless undertaking whose failure not only latently undermined the SED’s ideological stand but also, in the long run, contributed the regime’s collapse in 1989.

## II. Rites of November: The “National Day of Mourning” in West Germany

While in the GDR, June 22 became an official day of remembrance, the same date was neglected by the political elite and largely absent from the public consciousness in West Germany until at least the 1960s.<sup>92</sup> It was not until 1966, that a West German

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<sup>90</sup> Herf has already shown how the extermination of European Jewry fit only marginally into the SED narrative of World War II which rather focused on class struggle and the Soviet Union’s central role in defeating National Socialism. Herf, *Divided Memory*, esp. 69-200.

<sup>91</sup> Nothnagle, *Building the East German Myth*, and idem, “From Buchenwald to Bismarck: Historical Myth-Building in the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1989,” *Central European History*, 26, 91-113, quote on 103. For Nothnagle, this was the “most curious aspect of the nationalist myth” in the GDR. And Behrends, *Erfundene Freundschaft*, and idem, “Sowjetische ‘Freunde’ und fremde ‘Russen.’”

<sup>92</sup> Reinhard Rürup, ed., *Der Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion 1941-1945. Eine Dokumentation* (Berlin: Aargon-Verlag, 1991), esp. „Der Umgang mit dem Erbe,” 261-281. A rather mild analysis of the reception of „Barbarossa“ in the West German press between 1951 and 1981 was given by Gerhard Schreiber, „Zur Perzeption des Unternehmens ‚Barbarossa‘ in der deutschen Presse,” Überschär/Wette, eds., „*Unternehmen Barbarossa*,” 27-42. On the reception in (East and West) German school text books see Bodo von Borries, „Vernichtungskrieg und Judenmord in den Schulbüchern beider deutscher Staaten seit 1949,” in Greven, Wrochem, *Der Krieg in der Nachkriegszeit*, 215-236, and idem, „The Third Reich in German History Textbooks since 1945,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 38 (1), 2003, 45-62. On Stalingrad in

chancellor, Ludwig Erhard of the CDU, acknowledged the twenty-fifth anniversary of “Barbarossa” with an official statement calling to “remove the remains of the war,” by which he meant most of all German division.<sup>93</sup> Yet, neither thereafter was June 22 a set date in the official commemoration calendar. Much depended on the personal historical conscience and sensitivity of the men in power. The two most important memorial days dedicated to the memory of World War II were May 8, until President Richard von Weizsäcker’s famous 1985 speech mostly remembered as the day of national defeat, and July 20, commemorating the failed assassination attempt against Hitler. In addition, June 17, the “Day of German Unity,” ever since the East German uprising in 1953 served to commemorate one of the most severe consequences of the war – Germany’s division.<sup>94</sup>

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particular, Wigbert Benz, „Stalingrad im deutschen Schulbuch und Unterricht,“ in Wette, Ueberschär, eds., *Stalingrad*, 240-246.

A similar trend was observed in West German historiography, see Rolf-Dieter Müller, Gerd R. Ueberschär, “Die deutsch-sowjetischen Beziehungen und das Unternehmen ‘Barbarossa’ 1941 im Spiegel der Geschichtsschreibung. Eine kommentierte Auswahlbibliographie,“ in Ueberschär, Wette, ed., „*Unternehmen Barbarossa*,“ 267-291 (which provides a comparative, yet quite dated overview of scholarship in FRG, GDR and USSR until 1984). More recently see Rolf-Dieter Müller, Gerd R. Ueberschär, eds., *Hitlers Krieg im Osten 1941-1945. Ein Forschungsbericht* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2000) and the commented overview by Wigbert Benz, “Die Bewältigung des Rußlandfeldzuges in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland,“ in idem, *Der Rußlandfeldzug des Dritten Reiches: Ursachen, Ziele, Wirkungen. Zur Bewältigung eines Völkermordes unter Berücksichtigung des Geschichtsunterrichts* (Frankfurt/Main: Haag & Herchen, 1988), esp. 112ff.

The shift in the 1960s coincided with a general intensification of historical debate in West Germany. As Jeffrey Herf has demonstrated, the New Left’s challenge of the troubled relationship of democracy and memory under Adenauer lead to a growing concern with the history and memory of the Holocaust. See Herf, *Divided Memory*, 334-362.

<sup>93</sup> Ludwig Ehrhard, “Der Zukunft ihr Recht geben! Überreste des Krieges wegräumen,“ printed in *BPI*, no. 81, June 21, 1966, 637.

<sup>94</sup> See for a comparative overview Margarete Myers Feinstein, *State Symbols. The Quest for Legitimacy in the FRG and GDR, 1949-1959* (Boston, Brill Academic Publishers, 2001), esp. “Celebrating the Nation: Holidays, Medals and Orders, 141-184; and Schiller, “Politische Gedenktage in Deutschland.” And on the FRG, Edgar Wolfrum, “Geschichtspolitik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1949-1989. Phasen und Kontroversen,“ *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, B 45/1998, 3-15. Behrenbeck, „Rituale des Zwiespalts.“ On the commemoration of July 20, 1944 – not an official holiday, but since 1964 annually celebrated in the federal parliament – Peter Reichel, *Politik mit der Erinnerung*, 254-268. Gerd R. Ueberschär, ed., *Der 20. Juli 1944. Bewertung und Rezeption des deutschen Widerstandes gegen das NS-Regime* (Köln: Bund-Verlag, 1994). See also the essays in the special issue of *APuZ*, B 27/2004.

Over decades, none of these three official memorial days addressed explicitly the sufferings Nazi Germany had brought upon its neighbors and the world. Accordingly, they rather circled around German civilian and military victims.<sup>95</sup> The same was initially also true for the speeches and ceremonies held on the “National Day of Mourning.” This memorial day was celebrated every November between All Souls Day and *Totensonntag*<sup>96</sup> (two religious memorial days dedicated to the deceased). Of all occasions, one could expect this one to at least have *included* a reference to the other losses, particularly to the millions of Jewish and non-Jewish civilian victims on the Eastern Front in Poland, the Baltic States and the Soviet Union. Yet, until the 1970s, the Rites of November were mainly dedicated to the German dead buried in over fifty countries around the globe: soldiers, POWs, civilian “bomb victims,” refugees, expellees, and those persecuted for their “political or religious beliefs.”<sup>97</sup> Usually the song “*The Good Comrade*”<sup>98</sup> was played – the lyrics invoking the memory of those who had not been so lucky to survive.<sup>99</sup> The

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<sup>95</sup> On VE Day in West Germany see Kirsch, “*Wir haben aus der Geschichte gelernt*,” on the July 20, and June 17 commemorations see the literature cited above in fn. 91.

<sup>96</sup> „Sunday of the Dead:“ second last Sunday before First Advent commemorating the dead.

<sup>97</sup> For a good analysis of the *Volkstrauertag* ceremonies and speeches, see Meinhold Lurz, *Kriegerdenkmäler in Deutschland* (Heidelberg: Esprint, 1987), 509ff. Lurz analysis is limited to speeches by presidents of the *Volksbund für Kriegsgräberfürsorge*.

<sup>98</sup> The lyrics of “*Der gute Kamerad*” were written by Ludwig Uhland in 1809 in Tübingen, the music composed by Friedrich Silcher. The song soon became the national mourning song for a war-torn Germany after the Napoleonic wars. See Kurt Oesterle, “Die heimliche deutsche Hymne,” *Schwäbisches Tageblatt*, November 15, 1997. The lyrics are:

*Ich hatt’ einen Kameraden,/Einen besseren find’st du nit./Die Trommel schlug zum Streite,/Er ging an meiner Seite/In gleichem Schritt und Tritt.*

*Eine Kugel kam geflogen,/Gilt’s mir oder gilt es dir? Ihn hat es weggerissen,/Er liegt mir vor den Füßen,/Als wär’s ein Stück von mir.*

*Will mir die Hand noch reichen,/Derweil ich eben lad./Kann dir die Hand nicht geben,/Bleib du im ew’gen Leben/Mein guter Kamerad!*

<sup>99</sup> Heinrich Lübke interpreted the lyrics with the following words: „This good comrade is the one whom we knew ourselves, who stood in for us at many times and who was caught by fate next to us on the front, in the bunker, in the camp, in the prison or on the streets of expulsion, a fate which might as well could have



speeches on *Volkstrauertag* were mostly dedicated to trying to make sense of these “sacrifices.” Most commonly, the varying speakers saw this “sense” manifested in the present-day dedication and duty to keep the peace; thereby the “legacy” of the millions of dead would be fulfilled.<sup>100</sup> The Holocaust was mostly circumscribed with phrases such as “people murdered by race hate”<sup>101</sup> or “those who died dreadfully in the extermination camps” as a result of “national hatred and racial paranoia.”<sup>102</sup> In November of 1986, Alfred Dregger (1920-2002), head of the CDU/CSU faction in the *Bundestag*, for the first time appropriately acknowledged the Jewish genocide by referring to the “exterminating murderers” (*Ausrottungsmorde*) at the very beginning of his speech.<sup>103</sup> Yet, the (German) victims in the “East”, not those *of* the East, were only in so far a point of concern as officials had to accept that it remained impossible to visit the graves of the “uncounted dead in the width of the East.”<sup>104</sup>

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caught us.” Heinrich Lübke, “Im Geiste der Wahrhaftigkeit,” printed in *BPI*, no. 215, November 18, 1960, 2074.

<sup>100</sup> A good example is President Heinrich Lübke’s speech in November 1960, “Im Geiste der Wahrhaftigkeit,” printed in *BPI*, no. 215, November 18, 1960, 2073-2074. To him the question of the „sense of the gruesome events ... must find its answer in the conclusion we draw from [them] for the present and the future:” Never again, Lübke warned, must people be instrumentalized as “tools of power,” never again must a dictatorship rise on German soil, and the “worth of freedom” must be grasped and cherished once and for all. In 1961, without reflecting on the twentieth anniversary but mindful of August 13, the message was similar: “Keep the peace!” was the “call that sounded from the graves of our war dead.” See Walter Trepte, “Volkstrauertag 1961. Für die Erhaltung des Friedens – Die Opfer der Toten rufen uns zu tätiger Bewährung,” printed in *BPI*, no. 217, November 18, 1961, 2025.

<sup>101</sup> See President Heinrich Lübke’s speech in November 1960, “Im Geiste der Wahrhaftigkeit,” printed in *BPI*, no. 215, November 18, 1960, 2074.

<sup>102</sup> In German „Völkerhass“ and „Rassenwahn.“ See speech by Vice Chancellor and Minister of Interior, Gerhard Schröder, “Stätten des Gedenkens – Mahnmale zum Frieden,” printed in *BPI*, no. 214, November 17, 1959, 2186.

<sup>103</sup> Alfred Dregger, „Der Friede ist das Werk der Gerechtigkeit,“ printed in *BPI*, no. 140, November 18, 1986, 1169. On the emergence of the democratic Holocaust-memory in the FRG see Herf, *Divided Memory*, 201-362.

<sup>104</sup> Such were the words of Vice Chancellor and Minister of Interior, Gerhard Schröder, on November 15, 1955, “Dem Gedenken der Toten,” printed in *BPI*, no. 215, November 15, 1955, 1805.

For the first time in 1960, a speech by a major politician, President Heinrich Lübke (1894-1972, CDU), explicitly acknowledged the sufferings of other nations, recalling that over 50 million died in World War II and including “soldiers of all nations,” “women, men, children and the elderly of all nations,” “the POWs and deported (*Verschleppten*) of all nations,” “people of all nations who became victims of the nationalist hatred in their homes or during flight and expulsion” and “all people murdered by racial hatred” in the memorial ceremony.<sup>105</sup> Yet, it took more than a decade until the Soviet Union’s fate during World War II was specifically remembered in context of the *Volkstrauertag*. While Ludwig Erhard in 1966 – for the first time at all addressing the anniversary of “Barbarossa” in a government statement – declared that the “German attack against the Soviet Union ... had brought misery and suffering over both nations” alike, it was only in 1971 that Helmut Schmidt, then Minister of Defense in the Brandt administration, questioned the Germans’ postwar self-conciliatory longing for making sense. Schmidt used the occasion of *Volkstrauertag* to stress that World War II had been a senseless war, that Hitler’s “unprovoked war of aggression” had not been “a good cause” for which it had been worth dying.<sup>106</sup> This was at the time a daring statement questioning the sense of

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<sup>105</sup> Heinrich Lübke, “Im Geiste der Wahrhaftigkeit,” printed in *BPI*, no. 215, November 18, 1960, 2074. As Reichel has pointed out, Lübke, nonetheless, was eager to reduce the circle of German perpetrators to the lowest possible number and to stress the victimization of Germans; in 1965, in a speech in Bergen-Belsen twenty years after its liberation, Lübke weighed that the number of “henchmen” had been much smaller than the number of “German victims.” He also compassionately defended the German soldiers against accusations of having participated in mass murder – it was the “perfidiousness of the national socialist regime” to “attack them from behind.” Lübke (CDU), president between 1959 and 1969, had been temporarily imprisoned by the Nazis, but later had been working for a firm that also built KZ complexes. For this involvement with Nazi crimes he was repeatedly attacked towards the end of this second term. See Reichel, *Politik mit der Erinnerung*, 130f.

<sup>106</sup> Nonetheless, Schmidt also maintained that it was no shame to have been fighting dutifully in a “wrong war.” Cf. Chapter 11.II. – Chancellor Willy Brandt himself just offered some introductory remarks on the

the German sacrifices in the war, and distinguishing them from Nazi Germany's other victims. The German dead belonged in a "different historical category" than those nationals who had died as a consequence of the war. Schmidt concluded, the death of those "Frenchmen, Poles, and Russians, Dutch and Yugoslavs," had not been "senseless" for they died "defending the freedom of their countries."<sup>107</sup> This was the first major speech on that occasion to challenge the notion that even dying for Hitler had been a sacrifice worth giving. Schmidt's distinguished statement might also be explained with the fact that he was the first and only West German chancellor to have fought on the Eastern Front.<sup>108</sup>

The first time June 22 was directly addressed during the annual Rites of November was in 1981. Vice president of the Bundestag, Annemarie Renger (born 1919, SPD), addressed the fortieth anniversary of "Barbarossa" in a long speech on November 15, 1981. Renger praised the work of the *Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge* (People's Association for German War Graves Care, *VDK*) on hundreds of soldiers' cemeteries across Europe and underscored its "humane meaning" as it offered compassion to all those who have lost loved ones in war. However, she also clarified that

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occasion, praising the reconciliatory work of the *Volksbund für Kriegsgräberfürsorge*. See *BPI*, no. 168, November 16, 1971, 1773f.

In June 1971, the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of "Barbarossa," Brandt did not address the occasion with a public announcement as Erhard had done five years earlier in 1966. That the date was far from omnipresent in the official memorial calendar is illustrated by the fact that Justice Minister Gerhard Jahn delivered a speech to newly sworn-in soldiers on June 19, 1971, without once reflecting on this historic date. See his speech "*Der Auftrag des Soldaten*" printed in *BPI*, no. 93, June 22, 1971, 977f.

<sup>107</sup> Helmut Schmidt, „Gedenken an die Opfer von Krieg und Gewaltherrschaft," printed in *BPI*, no. 168, November 16, 1971, 1774.

<sup>108</sup> Schmidt had served as Lieutenant in a tank division, and had taken part in "Operation Barbrossa" from the beginning until 1942. He had fought in the battle for Moscow and had also partaken in the siege of Leningrad. In 1942 he was ordered back to the Reich to work in Göring's Reich Air-Force Ministry as recruits training advisor. See further below, Chapter 11.II.

“World War II was incited in the name of the German people as naked war of aggression and conquest, and that the willingness to give one’s life was demanded by a regime that was in its nature criminal.”<sup>109</sup> She further stressed that on this day, the commemoration included the victims of war in all nations, soldiers and civilians alike. Supporting the VDK’s ongoing efforts to get access to German soldiers’ cemeteries in Eastern Europe, Renger sought to promote reconciliation by directly acknowledging the Soviet Union’s losses:

We know which unspeakable blood toll [*Blutzoll*] the peoples of the East had to pay and how bitter memories are which are resurfacing in light of the fortieth anniversary of the attack against the Soviet Union. And still we join in the VDK’s pledge that even there, one should not reject the humanitarian intentions of the war grave care.<sup>110</sup>

While the official memory of the Eastern Front, thus, grew more nuanced over the decades and in the wake of *Ostpolitik* came closer to acknowledging the historical facts beyond the mere appropriation of the war’s memory on current political necessities, the memory of Stalingrad as the perceivably worst outgrowth of the brutalization of warfare on the Eastern Front remained a matter of semi-official and personal, yet still collective commemoration. Especially the media communicated the Stalingrad picture in West Germany over the years, while politicians offered little public reflection.<sup>111</sup> Rather than remembering the battle of Stalingrad in ritualized public announcements, leading politicians referred to the event in passing, not without exploiting the powerful collectively cherished emotions the memory of this traumatic event continued to invoke

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<sup>109</sup> Annemarie Renger, „Verpflichtung und Wille zum Frieden,“ *BPI*, no. 106, November 17, 1981, 913f.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 914.

<sup>111</sup> A good print media analysis has been provided by Behrenbeck, „Über die Lesarten eines Menetekels, 181-198. Behrenbeck’s analysis includes quality newspapers such as *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Die Zeit*, *Bayrische Staatszeitung*, *Welt*, and *Rheinischer Merkur*. For comparison, she read the East German magazines *Vorwärts*, and *Einheit*.

throughout the postwar decades. For example, in his nationally televised speech commemorating the centenary of the founding of the German Reich in 1971 (notably also the thirtieth anniversary of “Barbarossa”), President Gustav Heinemann (SPD) recalled the disastrous road Bismarck’s Reich had taken in history:

One hundred years of German Reich – this not just means once Versailles, but twice Versailles, 1871 and 1919, and this also means Auschwitz, Stalingrad and unconditional surrender in 1945.<sup>112</sup>

By recalling these key-dates and places of recent German history in one thought, Heinemann echoed the collective memory of Stalingrad in West German society: the battle was ingrained in the collective mind just as deeply as other decisive events. Most notably, in this line of argument, the “lieux de mémoire” Auschwitz and Stalingrad appeared to be of equal relevance to German memory. These two names embodied the two poles of West German World War II memory: the first representing German guilt, the latter German suffering. In both Germanys, in general, the connection between Auschwitz and Stalingrad was neglected for most of the Cold War period.

This points to the meaning most Germans accorded to Stalingrad. The battle was *the* central metaphor for the sufferings and sacrifices of German soldiers (and Germans) in World War II, a war that often appeared to have been waged by Hitler not only against Europe and the world, but first and foremost against Germans themselves.<sup>113</sup> As others have demonstrated, the West German print and electronic media reinforced and sustained

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<sup>112</sup> Quoted in Wolfrum, *Geschichtspolitik*, 260. Heinemann (originally CDU, had left the party in protest of Adenauer’s policy of remilitarization in 1952; since 1957 SPD, President 1969-1974) earned himself a storm of public protest for putting the Bismarck Reich into the larger context of twentieth century German history and for practically placing Hitler’s Third Reich at the end of the history of the Second Reich, i.e. for arguing the *Sonderweg* thesis. In particular, his famous dictum of “the difficult fatherland Germany” and the bloody legacy of German nationalism and militarism stirred the controversy. As Wolfrum points out, “such a lesson in history the German had never been given before.” Ibid., 260f.

<sup>113</sup> Frei, „Der totale Krieg und die Deutschen,“ 290.

this “image” of Stalingrad.<sup>114</sup> Similarly, organized veterans cultivated their personal experiences as sagas of heroic self-sacrifice in the line of duty.<sup>115</sup> The war on the Eastern Front as a whole received less but similarly whitewashing attention in the media, particularly in the popular, widely-read and richly illustrated “Barbarossa” books and treaties of Paul Carell (1911-1997), a former Nazi propagandist turned publicist.<sup>116</sup>

These collectively communicated memories found two ways of expression and thus had a two-fold effect on West German society: on the one hand, the Stalingrad memory was a *political* memory in so far as it served to paint the war experience in a certain light – one which tended to marginalize the Wehrmacht’s criminal legacy and thus helped to sustain the “myth of a clean Wehrmacht.” It also gave a meaning to the fighting. It therefore enabled veterans to make sense of their past and to integrate into a receptive peace-time society. On the other hand, Stalingrad inspired what might be called a humanitarian-religiously informed memory which can best be illustrated with the story of

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<sup>114</sup> See most recently the excellent, richly illustrated exhibition catalogue *Stalingrad erinnern*, ed. Jahn. The exhibition was reviewed by von Wrochem, “Stalingrad erinnern.” A good summary is Norbert Frei, „Mythos Stalingrad. Die ‚Kriegswende‘ in der Wahrnehmung der Deutschen,“ in idem, *1945 und wir. Das Dritte Reich im Bewußtsein der Deutschen* (München: Beck, 2005), 97-106. See further very detailed Kumpfmüller, *Die Schlacht von Stalingrad*, and on the literary and popular reception see Baron, „Stalingrad als Thema der deutschsprachigen Literatur,“ and Renner, „Hirn und Herz.“

<sup>115</sup> See Detlev Vogel, “Die deutschen und österreichischen Stalingradbünde. Schritte vom Mythos zur Realität,“ in Wette, Ueberschär, eds., *Stalingrad*, 247-253. For a most recent example of this function see an interview of the current president of the *Bund ehemaliger Stalingradkämpfer* Horst Zank in the right-wing weekly paper *Junge Freiheit*, January 31, 2003.

<sup>116</sup> On Carell cf. Wigbert Benz, *Paul Carell. Ribbentrops Pressechef Paul Karl Schmidt vor und nach 1945* (Berlin: Wissenschaftliche Verlagsgesellschaft, 2005). Carell alias Paul Karl Schmidt was as Ribbentrop’s press chief responsible for translating NS policy, including the “Final Solution,” into “*Sprachregelungen*” for foreign correspondents. His postwar works on the war against “Russia” appeared in multiple editions. See further Chapter 10. II.

the famous drawing “Madonna of Stalingrad.”<sup>117</sup> The drawing was created by Lieutenant Kurt Reuber, a staff physician and Protestant pastor caught in the battle of Stalingrad during the winter of 1942/43. Reportedly, his comrades were deeply moved when they saw it for the first time. It undoubtedly offered some sense of consolation and hope to men in a desperate situation.



Fig. 10. The “Madonna of Stalingrad” (1942).

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<sup>117</sup> The Madonna hitherto has been „ignored by historians,” Perry points out. Joseph Perry, „The Madonna of Stalingrad: The (Christmas) Past and West German National Identity after World War II,” *Radical History Review*, 83 (Spring 2002), 6-27, quote on 9.

While Reuber did not survive the war (he died in Soviet captivity), the drawing is said to have been flown out of Stalingrad with the last plane to leave the embattled city. His widow donated it to a returnees organization in the 1950s. It was displayed in various exhibitions throughout the republic and soon became a fixed image in West German memorial culture. In a ceremony in 1983, fifty years after the defeat at Stalingrad, the drawing was given to the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church in (West) Berlin – the prominent historic remains symbolizing the damage done to Berlin by Allied bombings. Ever since then it is being displayed there as a “symbol of peace and security, and the links between Stalingrad, German victimhood, and the tragedy of world war forged in their rhetoric” still resonates with most visitors.<sup>118</sup>

Over the course of the years since the 1950s, the Stalingrad-Madonna became a powerful emotional symbol not only for the most (in)famous Christmas during World War II (*Kriegsweihnachten*), but also of West German society’s longing for a sense of common identity, and for (“finally”) coming to terms with the past. Eventually, this codified peculiar Stalingrad memory offered a path towards finding closure and reconciliation – not with Germany’s victims but with oneself. Referring to Stalingrad in the context of family gatherings on Christmas – regardless whether a dead or living member of the family was a Stalingrad veteran – the memories and emotions invoked by the Stalingrad-Madonna became a “means to construct a viable national identity based on

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 7.



shared suffering.” It allowed West Germans to evade the question of personal responsibility for Nazism and its crimes.<sup>119</sup>

In its published version, the drawing came along with an explicit and a meta-narrative, a “narrative of suffering and forgiveness.”<sup>120</sup> Printed on the front of a little booklet, it circled within families during Christmas time, and parents could read the inside text and a prayer on the back cover to their children.<sup>121</sup> Of special interest and significance is the inside cover text<sup>122</sup> because it splendidly exemplifies the questionable effects the Stalingrad memory had on the general (popular) reception of the Eastern Front war in West Germany. Neglecting the grandiose tragedy of the *others* which constituted the context of the battle – the war of extermination – the Stalingrad-Madonna became an uplifting symbol for “light, life, love:”

Russia, Stalingrad, winter of 1942.  
Thousands of soldiers are encircled, awaiting breakdown and death.  
The doctor Kurt Reuber draws on the backside of a Russian map  
A picture, and surprises on Christmas Eve  
His friends with this drawing.  
...  
What calm and protectiveness emerges from this Madonna of Stalingrad;  
What power and security from him who embraces both – of God!  
...  
The picture has probably the strangest frame ever given to a picture.  
On the left edge is written:  
‘1942 Christmas in the cauldron.’  
On the right edge we read the words:  
‘Light, life, love.’  
On the one side the hint  
of downfall and death.  
On the other side the message

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 8. In Germany, the drawing was therefore mostly seen as a „document of reconciliation,“ see Martin Kruse, ed., *Die Stalingrad-Madonna: Das Werk Kurt Reubers als Dokument der Versöhnung* (Hannover: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1996).

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> I thank Hedwig Richter for providing me with a copy of the booklet.

<sup>122</sup> Both, inside cover text and prayer were – as far as I was able to determine – added to the drawing after the war by pastor Theo Schmidkonz.

Of rescue and salvation.  
 What faith did this man have  
 Who in the face of death was able to say and draw such words.  
 L i g h t! Not night then  
 Will eventually prevail, but:  
 'The shine of the Lord gleams around them.'  
 L i f e! Not death then  
 Will triumph forever, but:  
 'Today your savior is born.'  
 L o v e! Not hate then  
 Has the last word, but:  
 'A child in the cradle – peace on earth.'  
 In the hell of Stalingrad  
 A piece of heaven opens up: Light, life, love!<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> The prayer on the back reads: Jesus Christ,/you are always with us,/surrounds us from all sides. /In darkness and night/give us – your light. /In fear and death/give us – your life. /In coldness and loneliness/give us – your love./ Lord/in your hand/we are secure, at home,/You, our savior and friend.

## Chapter 10

### The Crimes of the Eastern Front in the Limelight: History, Memory and Justice in the 1960s

“To record and interpret the diversity of historical reality, to describe ‘how it really was’ (Ranke), often even remains an annoying side-product for the scientist of the Eastern bloc. History is less *contemplatio* ... but first of all *agitatio*, a sharp weapon of the mind, mercilessly and brutally employed, an instrument of hate and irreconcilable enmity which forces the Soviet-communist historian to relegate himself to a highly-paid henchmen of communism.”

Andreas Hillgruber, West German Historian (1961)

“We have to write the Marxist history of World War II long awaited of us. We must turn it into a heavy and sharply burnished weapon against all falsifiers and defamers, agitators and instigators who subjectively or objectively [and] in the service of American and German imperialism pursue the ideological preparation of a third world war.”

Leo Stern, East German Historian (1959)

## **I. On Trial: The Judicial Confrontation of the Crimes on the Eastern Front in both Germanys**

This chapter shifts focus again to the political aspects of the memory of the war against the Soviet Union. It traces the changing East and West German perceptions of the war on the Eastern Front in the 1960s by focussing especially on the judicial and historiographical confrontation of Nazi and war crimes committed on the Eastern Front between 1941 and 1944. Increasingly, remembering the Eastern Front meant not just “remembering war” in terms of “finding a legitimate narrative,”<sup>1</sup> but confronting and judging the perpetrators of war crimes and crimes against humanity. These crimes included the systematic killing of about four million European Jews in the extermination camps of the *Generalgouvernement* and the mass execution of about two million Jews behind the Eastern Front lines, as well as those crimes committed against Soviet non-Jewish civilians, partisans and soldiers in the wake of the Wehrmacht’s invasion of the Soviet Union. In the SBZ/GDR, the crimes of the Eastern Front – on a depersonalized and formulaic level – had played a prominent role in the official memory ever since the communist takeover. In the Federal Republic it was only during the 1960s that the Nazi crimes against Jews, Poles, Russians and others received growing public, judicial and scholarly attention and that the apologetic discourse of *German* suffering turned gradually into a discourse of *mutual* sufferings. The triangle of history, memory and justice attained new meaning during those years as the democratic left’s call for “daring more democracy” (Willy Brandt) included addressing the burdens of the past with a focus

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<sup>1</sup> Bourke, “Introduction ‘Remembering War’,” 480.

on justice and respect for the victims instead of primarily “integrating” the guilty and accomplices as during the Adenauer years.<sup>2</sup>

The judicial and scholarly efforts to confront these legacies became particularly closely intertwined in both Germanys during the 1960s, as the following analysis shows. With the contrary political system and resulting political cultures in mind, it recaptures how these various efforts contributed to the transformation of the official Eastern Front memories as concrete historical events and facts gradually became common academic and thus at least semi-public knowledge. In how far this knowledge disseminated among the public would require a separate study. Yet since the historical events on the Eastern Front, and especially the crimes of SS and Wehrmacht, became indispensable material in the ideological Cold War between East and West Germany these events gradually and inevitably entered public debates in the FRG, while they continuously dominated much of the SED’s official commemoration and propaganda agenda in the GDR.

The years after the building of the wall marked a turning point in the genesis of the Eastern Front memory in two different ways: the SED intensified its efforts to present the “antifascist” GDR as the “better Germany” to the world, and to imbue its citizens at home – now finally unhindered and undisturbed by direct influences from the West – with a socialist identity based to a considerable degree on the recourse to history and the constant invocation of the “right lessons” learned. In the West, a changing political

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<sup>2</sup> Herf, *Divided Memory*, 267. Herf weighs this shift with the following words: “Even in the classic era of silence and of democratization through integration [during the Adenauer years], the crimes of the Nazis found a place in early West German political narratives, though not a prominent or ubiquitous one. That place nonetheless became larger and more prominent until eventually in the 1960s the connection between memory and democracy was reversed: daring more democracy eventually came to entail more, not less, national political discussion of the Holocaust and other crimes of the Nazi past.” Ibid., 268.

culture during the post-Adenauer years fostered a new interest in the Nazi past which entailed a more differentiating and probing approach to the question of German guilt in general, and the crimes of the Eastern Front in particular.<sup>3</sup>

There are only few areas in which the inner-German Cold War was fought as fiercely and relentlessly as in the area of facing the Nazi past and its legacies. By its very nature, the factually and ideologically divided Germany was caught up in a unique historical situation, namely to come to terms with a shared past under squarely opposing political circumstances in the present. Especially the East German dictatorship was able – due to the authoritarian nature of its political power – to narrate history according to the leading party’s ideological objectives, the most important of which was to put the past into the service of the present. The SED’s politics of memory involved a number of political and ideological aims all of which it sought to achieve by engaging in a constant propaganda war with the FRG about the “right lessons of the past.”

When in 1961, the wall manifested the – then perceived – final division of Germany into two separate states, the SED also intensified the ideological campaigns aimed at presenting the GDR as the “better Germany” and the FRG as the breeding ground of German neo-fascist imperialism. The Nazi past was the decisive instrument in this battle: already between 1957 and 1960, SED chief agitator Albert Norden had “released” evidence incriminating West German judges for their “bloody” record of prosecuting every thinkable “enemy of the *Volksgemeinschaft*” during the Nazi era. Every six months,

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<sup>3</sup> On the second *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* during the 1960s in general, see Detlef Siegfried, „Aufarbeitung der NS-Vergangenheit,“ in Axel Schildt, ed., *Dynamische Zeiten. Die 60er Jahre in den beiden deutschen Gesellschaften* (Hamburg: Hans Christians, 2000), 77-113. See also the essays in the more recent book by Gassert, Steinweis, eds., *Coping with the Nazi past*.

Norden held an “international press conference” to denounce “Hitler’s Blood Judges in the Service of the Adenauer-Regime,” overall about 200 West German lawyers, judges and state prosecutors on the basis of archival evidence.<sup>4</sup> This propagandistic and calculated gambling with (largely) authentic historical evidence earned the SED not the attention many of these cases might well have deserved. Rather, the way they were presented and exploited for day-to-day political purposes undermined the declared intention to contribute to the mastering of the Nazi past in the Western part of Germany. Yet, indirectly, Norden’s strategic goal to permanently damage the FRG’s reputation abroad was successful. The British public and parliament, in particular, became increasingly annoyed with Adenauer’s refusal to rid his administration of severely burdened former Nazis such as the Director of the Chancellery Hans Globke (1898-1973), and the Minister of Displaced Persons, Refugees and Victims of War, Theodor Oberländer (1905-1998, CDU). It is thus incorrect to judge Norden’s agitation exclusively as mere “disinformation campaigns” (Weinke), because campaigns aimed at unmasking former Nazis and other accomplices could only work for so long as there actually *were* influential persons to be unmasked and deserved to be held accountable.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Weinke, *Die Verfolgung von NS-Tätern im geteilten Deutschland*, 78-82. Weinke provides a thorough overview of the campaigns between 1957 and 1960, but focuses exclusively on the propagandistic side of the activities thus rendering them meaningless Cold War manoeuvres. She wholly ignores the pieces of historical truth that lay at the heart of many of these denouncement campaigns.

<sup>5</sup> On the degree of NS continuities in the West German judiciary system see Marc von Miquel, “Juristen: Richter in eigener Sache,” in Frei, ed., *Karrieren im Zwielficht*, 165-214.



**Fig. 11. Unmasking West German Neo-Fascism: Albert Norden, SED's chief propagandist at one of his "international press conferences," holding up a file containing information about the Nazi past of West German Minister Theodor Oberländer, October 1959.<sup>6</sup>**

The campaigns of Albert Norden are a prime example for the political, ideological and all-German dimension of the war crimes issue. The judicial reckoning with the crimes of the Eastern Front war was more than any other part of the Nazi legacy predetermined to become entangled in the politics of memory. Thus, history, memory and justice remained irreconcilable during the 1960s for different reasons in both parts of Germany: in the West, the public memory of the Eastern Front as the most sacrificial front of the German soldier accounted for the widespread leniency in prosecuting and

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<sup>6</sup> BA/SAPMO, Bild Y1, 15641.



judging crimes committed there, especially crimes against Soviet POWs, partisans and (non-Jewish) civilians. In the East, the SED's preoccupation with gaining political and legitimating capital from the prominent and canonized memory of the Wehrmacht's war against the Soviet Union led in fact not to a more balanced judicial reckoning with Wehrmacht crimes, but merely to a politically-motivated bias towards Soviet victims.

The officially crafted and communicated memories of the Eastern Front war in East and West Germany – encapsulated in the previously described “Rites of June” in the GDR and the “Rites of November” in the FRG – undeniably exerted significant influence on the judicial reckoning with Nazi crimes and crimes of the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front. One might expect that the strong official focus on the Eastern Front war in the GDR entailed an increased interest in the prosecution of crimes committed there, especially on Soviet territory. Yet, that was, generally speaking, not the case. Although recent research has qualified claims that the East German prosecution of Nazi crimes was *only* ideologically driven and predominantly misused to silence political opponents,<sup>7</sup> when it came to the prosecution of crimes committed by members of the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front, East and West German courts proved equally disinterested – with one exception: in the SED state those trial proceedings pertaining Wehrmacht crimes involved much more often Soviet victims, particularly POWs, partisans and Soviet

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<sup>7</sup> See the report by Michael Greve summarizing recent findings in connection with the systematic cataloguing and publication of East German NS trials and how these compare to the history of the prosecution of Nazi crimes in West Germany, „Eine Fachtagung zu den ostdeutschen Strafverfahren wegen NS-Tötungsverbrechen am 25.10.2002 in Berlin,“ online available at <http://www.michael-greve.de/forschung.htm#fo> [Sept. 2006].

civilians (including Soviet Jews), than respective trials in the FRG, thus resonating the political bias of the official Eastern Front memory.<sup>8</sup>

Views of the Eastern Front war as they emerged and were publicly communicated in postwar Germany found entrance – very concretely – into judicial proceedings pertaining crimes committed there by members of the Wehrmacht. They shaped legal discussions about guilt and responsibility as well as court-room debates over the degree of “cruelty” characterizing a deed or “inescapable circumstances” which might have had led to certain crimes. Thus far, the East German Nazi and Wehrmacht trials have only been registered and catalogued; the court records themselves have not yet been the subject of historical study.<sup>9</sup> The history of West Germany’s prosecution of Nazi crimes, however, has already been written. Ruth Bettina Birn has closely examined West German court-room records and concluded that the judiciary proceedings were strongly influenced by “societal prejudices” and by “interpretations of historical facts” which mostly can be said to result from “a collective, retrospective deformation of the past.”<sup>10</sup> The “continuing identification with the values of the war years” led in practice to a lenient, tendentious and often apologetic treatment of Wehrmacht crimes in West German trials.

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<sup>8</sup> With regards to the difficulty of comparing the judicial proceedings and their legacy in East and West Germany, Weinke has recently noted that it might be impossible to come to a „methodologically clean“ conclusion. Cf. Annette Weinke, „Alliierter Angriff auf die nationale Souveränität? Die Strafverfolgung von Kriegs- und NS-Verbrechen in der Bundesrepublik, der DDR und Österreich,“ in Norbert Frei, ed., *Transnationale Vergangenheitspolitik. Der Umgang mit deutschen Kriegsverbrechern in Europa nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2006), 37-93, quote on 49, fn. 47.

<sup>9</sup> A selection of East German court documents (including indictments and verdicts) is published at <http://www1.jur.uva.nl/junsv/Lesen.htm> [Oct. 2006].

<sup>10</sup> Ruth Bettina Birn, “Wehrmacht und Wehrmachtangehörige in den deutschen Nachkriegsprozessen,” in Müller, Volkmann, *Die Wehrmacht*, 1081-1099, quote on 1083. See for the societal context and contemporary reactions, Marc von Mique “Explanation, Dissociation, Apologia: The Debate over the Criminal Prosecution of Nazi Crimes in the 1960s,” in Gassert, Steinweis, eds., *Coping with the Nazi past*, 88-113.

One scandalous but not exceptional example can be found in the files of the district court in Düsseldorf which in 1964 deliberated a case against Wehrmacht soldiers accused of having executed the Jewish population of a village in southern Russia. Routinely, war crimes committed in connection with the “partisan” warfare on the Eastern Front were justified with the hint that the “Russians” fought in a “bestial way” against the Wehrmacht. The Düsseldorf court applied this reasoning to the case at hand and concluded that the defendant had not acted “cruelly” by rounding up the Jews of the village, letting them stand on a truck under a plane over night and having them shot the next morning. The qualification of a deed as “cruel” was a precondition for declaring an act of killing murder; otherwise it was classified as manslaughter which by 1964 was already statute-barred and would therefore have rendered no punishment.<sup>11</sup> The jury – itself mostly made up of “active war participants” – accepted the explanation of the defendant about the “war in the East which had been fought with ruthless cruelty on the Russian side.”<sup>12</sup> No one questioned the validity of this claim even though the victims in this case had evidently been old men, women and children and none of the defendant’s subordinates had noted any “partisan activities.” In its decision, the court pondered that it was thinkable that “children functioned as informers for partisans” and believed that the

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<sup>11</sup> On the difficult subject of determining the nature of a crime as well as on the problem of statute of limitations, see also Michael Greve, „Täter oder Gehilfen? Zum strafrechtlichen Umgang mit NS-Gewaltverbrechern in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland,” in Ulrike Weckel, Edgar Wolfrum, eds., *„Bestien“ und „Befehlsempfänger.“ Frauen und Männer in NS-Prozessen nach 1945* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003), 194-221. Greve comes to a similar conclusion with regards to the overwhelming classification of NS-perpetrators as „subsidiaries” by West German courts: this lax attitude rested not only on “normative criteria” but also on “personal value systems and political attitudes of judges and jurors.” They all too often showed an „apologetic understanding for the perpetrators” and created an image of NS criminals which is irreconcilable with the historical facts. Ibid., 221.

<sup>12</sup> Birn, „Wehrmacht und Wehrmachtangehörige,” 1096-1097.

defendant's deeds had been inspired not by "race hatred" but by the desire to protect his troops. It was one thing that the accused *thought* his victims were Jews, but the court found that this was no proof that they actually *were* Jews.<sup>13</sup> Birn aptly concludes that the verdict – the proceedings against the corporal in question were closed – reflected a "perversion of soldierly values." The man was declared a "comradely superior" who, in the words of the verdict, had not withdrawn his "personal participation" from "unpleasant tasks."<sup>14</sup> Thus, the active personal participation in an execution was interpreted to the defendant's advantage.<sup>15</sup>

This case exemplifies how the official and popular Eastern Front memory in West Germany could pervade crucial areas of civil society, in this instance the justice system. The one-sided image of the war against the Soviet Union as the most brutal and sacrificial front German soldiers had to fight during World War II, left little room for acknowledgment of and sympathy with the sufferings of Soviet (Jewish and non-Jewish) war victims. Not the Wehrmacht was viewed as having kicked off an unprecedented military campaign aimed at the annihilation of the Soviet state and the Jewish "race," but the "Russians" were said to have caused the brutalization of warfare by fighting – not defending themselves against an attacker – in a "bestial way." The legacy of the inadequate West German judicial reckoning with Nazi and war crimes is indeed sobering

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 1097, fn. 69.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> See also the case examples for the extraordinary mild judgement of perpetrators of mass executions presented in Greve, „Täter oder Gehilfen?“, 218.

given that the Federal Republic's democratic consensus rested to a significant degree on the public acknowledgement of German guilt.<sup>16</sup>

In the GDR, a system of political justice heavily tainted the prosecution of Nazi war crimes from the beginning, and the mantle of official antifascism served as disguise for the purge of real and suspected enemies of the socialist project. Throughout the early postwar years, SED and Soviet occupation authorities routinely used the denazification campaign to incarcerate opponents and those believed to be hostile to the socialist reconstruction effort. In the Waldheim trials of 1950, the SED proved its determination to crush real and believed opposition with political terror and arbitrary justice.<sup>17</sup> Often a defendant's guilt was determined on the basis of his or her membership in one of the former Nazi organizations; evidence for individual responsibility for actual crimes was rarely presented. At the same time, the trials were used to declare an official end to the

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<sup>16</sup> This has been unequivocally emphasised by a number of historians, among them Birn, "Wehrmacht und Wehrmachtangehörige," Greve, "Täter oder Gehilfen?," Weinke, *Die Verfolgung von NS-Tätern im geteilten Deutschland*, and Miquel, "Juristen: Richter in eigener Sache," as well as by former prosecutors such as Adalbert Rückerl, *NS-Verbrechen vor Gericht* (Heidelberg: C. E. Müller, 1984), idem, *Die Strafverfolgung von NS-Verbrechen, 1945-1978. Eine Dokumentation* (Heidelberg: C. E. Müller, 1979). And Alfred Streim, "Saubere Wehrmacht? Die Verfolgung von Kriegs- und NS Verbrechern in der Bundesrepublik und der DDR," in Heer, Naumann, eds., *Vernichtungskrieg*, 569-597. Rückerl and Streim were heads of the *Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen zur Aufklärung nationalsozialistischer Verbrechen*.

<sup>17</sup> In the 3,385 Waldheim trials against 3,442 internees of Soviet "special camps" in the SBZ (Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen and Bautzen), 3,308 persons were convicted for alleged Nazi crimes. See Helge Grabitz, "Die Verfolgung von NS-Verbrechen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland und in der DDR," in Claudia Kuretsidis-Haider, ed., *Keine „Abrechnung“: NS-Verbrechen, Justiz und Gesellschaft in Europa nach 1945* (Leipzig: Akademie, 1998), 163. Of the convicted, 49 were executed, 160 received life sentences and 2,914 persons received sentences longer than 10 years. Herf, *Divided Memory*, 73. With the ten show trials held between June 20-29, 1950 in the Waldheim townhall, the SED ended symbolically the prosecution of Nazi war crimes and sought to "draw a final line under the Nazi past" in the GDR. Unlike in the secret trials before, the defendants were granted a reliable defense lawyer who in the tradition of Stalinist show trials was to propagate the "right political messages" to the audience. Weinke, *Die Verfolgung von NS-Tätern im geteilten Deutschland*, 70f.

denazification process and prosecution of Nazi war crimes in East Germany. Moreover, as Justice Minister Max Fechner (1892-1973, SED) claimed in a press commentary of the time, with the Waldheim proceedings the GDR had proven itself the only German state to have drawn “the right lessons from history.”<sup>18</sup>

Recent research has shown, however, that the prosecution of Nazi crimes in the GDR since 1950 was not only opportunistic and not just driven by political-ideological interests.<sup>19</sup> Most verdicts spoken by GDR courts after Waldheim were declared valid in post-1989 appeal trials, even if GDR judges were found to have routinely handed down the harshest possible punishments.<sup>20</sup> As discussed earlier, the question of individual guilt was secondary in SED propaganda and practice. If official historical narratives dealt with the issue at all, it was impersonal “fascist hordes” who committed crimes. The fighting working class soldier was by definition excluded from the Wehrmacht’s criminal warfare, and former members of the Nazi party and soldiers could redeem themselves by demonstrative affiliation with the socialist project. This political-ideological line was

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>19</sup> This was recently restated by Henry Leide, *NS-Verbrecher und Staatssicherheit. Die geheime Vergangenheitspolitik der DDR* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), who argues that the SED’s investigative version of antifascism was basically a „Tschekist practice aimed primarily not at prosecuting crimes but at fighting the contemporary chief enemy, the Federal Republic” (418). Although the MfS had systematically gathered a wealth of incriminating material about suspected Nazi war criminals, these cases were only selectively put on trial.

<sup>20</sup> Greve, „Eine Fachtagung zu den ostdeutschen Strafverfahren.“ Greve also provided the following detailed comparison:

	West	East
<b>Death penalty</b>	0,7 %	6 %
<b>Life in prison</b>	8 %	8 %
<b>Prison</b>	45 %	67 %
< 1 year	4.5 %	4.2 %
1-5 years	61.8 %	57.6 %
5-10 years	24 %	15 %
> 10 years	9 %	23 %
<b>No punishment</b>	46 %	19 %

paralleled by a judicial process which in spite of repeated official claims did not render a more thorough reckoning with the Nazi past than in the alleged “reactionary” West. True, compared to the FRG, the GDR tried twice as many persons per 100,000 inhabitants for Nazi crimes; by 1960, 87% of all NS-cases were already closed (55% in the West), punishments were usually harsher, and East German courts acquitted only half as many persons as courts in the West. Further differences arose from the kinds of crimes prosecuted: during the 1950s, the GDR prosecuted mainly denunciation crimes (57% compared to 10% in the FRG), while West German courts focussed on the so-called final-phase-crimes (*Endphase-Verbrechen*) (49%, 16% East).<sup>21</sup> Yet overall, the prosecution of crimes committed by members of the Wehrmacht was strikingly similar with one exception: the largest victim group in East German Wehrmacht-trials were Soviet soldiers and civilians (48%, compared to 15% in the West) which confirms the dominance of the Eastern Front memory in the official memory of World War II in the GDR.<sup>22</sup> It also can be insinuated that there was a political agenda behind many trials – or at least behind the decision to actually put a certain case on trial<sup>23</sup> – which paid tribute to

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. This means that until 1960, 46% of the perpetrators tried in the East were civilians (compared to 7 % in the West).

<sup>22</sup> Rüter’s claim that the GDR prosecuted “many more Wehrmacht crimes” than courts in the FRG seems exaggerated given that – so far – he provided no further evidence or statistics to support this assertion. See Greve, “Eine Fachtagung zu den ostdeutschen Strafverfahren,” 4.

<sup>23</sup> Until 1968, criminal police and MfS jointly signed responsible for the investigation of NS crimes, after 1968 the MfS alone decided who would be investigated, which case would be put on trial and which not. On the MfS and the prosecution of Nazi criminals see Leide, *NS-Verbrecher und Staatssicherheit*. Leide shows the extent to which the prosecution of Nazi crimes was the result of political opportunism rather than of a genuine interest in mastering the past. A good example was the “*Aktion Licht*” to identify “brown stains” in the FRG during the 1960s by unearthing relevant, i.e. incriminating, materials in archives of industrial businesses and banks. The MfS also microfilmed and utilized records deposited in other Eastern bloc countries. Much of the gathered materials were kept in order to blackmail persons when needed, many cases were not tried because their outcome, the Stasi feared, “could contradict the social conditions” (374)

the Soviet Unions prescribed role as Nazi Germany's prime victim.<sup>24</sup> Thus, only in so far as East German courts focussed on crimes committed against "Soviet citizens," war crimes were addressed more intensively in the GDR since this victim group was mostly victimized by Wehrmacht units.<sup>25</sup> Yet, a special and comprehensive reckoning with the Wehrmacht's war of extermination on the Eastern Front, as one might have expected in view of the importance of the Eastern Front in the SED's history propaganda, did not take

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as the SED wished to describe them in the GDR: a fully denazified, antifascist country that has moved beyond a dubious past.

<sup>24</sup> This concurs with the conclusions of Helge Grabitz, "Die Verfolgung von NS-Verbrechen," 161.

<sup>25</sup> Categorized by victim group, the numbers are as follows:

	West	East
Prisoners of War		
Proceedings until 1960	6.8 %	8 %
Proceedings since 1960	11.9 %	22.5 %
Resistance fighters/partisans		
Proceedings until 1960	2.8 %	4.2 %
Proceedings since 1960	4 %	27 %
Civilians		
Proceedings until 1960	32.7 %	49.1 %
Proceedings since 1960	19 %	73 %

In tendency, thus, most crime complexes (categorized by crime location, victims' nationality, ect.) were prosecuted surprisingly evenly in East and West Germany. It also seems that the GDR treated Jewish victims *not* with significantly less judicial attention as one might have believed having in mind the marginalization of the Holocaust in official GDR memory. The following statistics, also taken from the Greve report, „Eine Fachtagung zu den ostdeutschen Strafverfahren wegen NS-Tötungsverbrechen,“ underline this point:

	West	East
Crime location: foreign		
Proceedings until 1960	19 %	19 %
Proceedings since 1960	79 %	83 %
Foreign victims		
Proceedings until 1960	32 %	30 %
Proceedings since 1960	84 %	74 %
Jewish victims	West	East
Proceedings until 1960	21 %	18 %
Proceedings since 1960	72 %	65 %
Crimes of mass extermination		
Proceedings until 1960	8 %	5 %
Proceedings since 1960	56 %	52 %
„Schreibtischverbrechen“		
Proceedings until 1960	1 %	0.6 %
Proceedings since 1960	4 %	1 %



place in East Germany's court rooms. This, after all, would have entailed to prosecute those ordinary soldiers who mostly originated in the German working class and whom the SED had collectively exonerated during the founding years of the GDR.

A comparative look at the trial proceedings pertaining homicidal crimes committed in the name of National Socialism in divided Germany between 1945 and 1989/90 underlines that both German states inadequately prosecuted Nazi and war crimes after the wave of trials held under Allied auspices during the Nuremberg Interregnum had ended in 1949. Overall, between 1945 and 1989, 105,000 persons were formally investigated for Nazi and war crimes on the territory of West Germany, out of which 6,488 received a final verdict (12 death sentences, 163 life sentences, 6,198 prison terms, 114 fines); proceedings were closed against 91,466 persons or ended with acquittal; as of 1993, 8,100 proceedings were still pending. The majority of the Nazi trials in West Germany had been held before the founding of the FRG in 1949; only 912 trials involving 1,875 defendants took place between 1949 and 1990.<sup>26</sup> In East Germany, 12,881 persons received a final verdict for war crimes and crimes against humanity (127 death sentences, 271 life in prison, 3,191 longer than ten years in prison).<sup>27</sup> Out of these 12,881 verdicts, 8,055 had been handed down before December 1949, 3,308 originated in the Waldheim trials of 1950, and only 734 were handed down between 1951 and 1989. In addition,

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<sup>26</sup> See below, fn. 29.

<sup>27</sup> Günther Wieland, "Ahndung von NS-Verbrechen in Ostdeutschland 1945 bis 1990," in *Neue Justiz*, 2 (1991), 49-53.

17,175 person had been convicted by Soviet military tribunals in the Soviet zone between 1945 and 1949.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, the record is strikingly even: while 933 trials dealt with NS-crimes in the GDR between 1949 and 1989, 912 trials took place in the FRG during the period of dual statehood.<sup>29</sup> With regards to Wehrmacht crimes committed on the Eastern Front, however, the statistics diverge, respectively reflecting the political memory agenda of either side. Out of 933 trial proceedings involving 1,637 defendants accused of homicidal crimes during the Nazi era in the GDR, 86 cases dealt with Wehrmacht crimes (9%). Of these 86 cases, 41 (48%) involved Soviet victims, including seven cases of Jewish victims.<sup>30</sup> In the FRG, the numbers are similar: out of 912 trials involving 1,875 defendants, 91 cases dealt with crimes committed by members of the Wehrmacht (10%). Yet, here only fourteen trials (or 15%) pertained the killing of Soviet citizens (including 6

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>29</sup> The following information are taken from the online database “Justiz und NS-Verbrechen” at <http://www1.jur.uva.nl/junsv/>. [Oct. 2006] It is based on a project directed by law professors Christiaan Frederik Rüter’s and Dick W. de Mildt’s of the University of Amsterdam’s Law School: the multi-volume edition of all postwar German Nazi trials. See Christiaan Frederik Rüter, ed., *DDR-Justiz und NS-Verbrechen. Sammlung ostdeutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen* (Amsterdam, München: Saur, 2002 ff). The West German trials have already been published: Fritz Bauer, Karl-Dietrich Bracher, eds., *Justiz und NS-Verbrechen. Sammlung deutscher Strafurteile wegen nationalsozialistischer Tötungsverbrechen 1945 - 1999*, 35 vols. (Amsterdam: APA Holland University Press, 1968ff.).

<sup>30</sup> Crimes included: war crimes, other NS-crimes, endphase crimes, mass extermination, NS-crimes in prisons. Crime locations: USSR and German Reich, esp. POW camps.

Verdicts in those 41 cases involving Soviet victims (partly multiple defendants) were as follows:

Acquittal	3
1-5 years	6
5-10 years	11
10-20 years	10
25-30 years	1
Life in prison	11
Death penalty	5

cases of Jewish victims).<sup>31</sup> These legal statistics suggest that the official memory of the Eastern Front in the two Germanys might well have prejudiced the respective priorities of the criminal proceedings against suspected war criminals. They speak to the West German tendency to turn a blind eye on the Soviet victims of “Operation Barbarossa,” and they also reflect the East German orchestrated focus on the Soviet Union’s victimization by the Wehrmacht.<sup>32</sup>

Yet, a final thought should be given to the reasons for putting a certain case on trial or not in either Germany. While in the West at least until the early 1960s, NS trials more often came to materialize as the result of “accidental findings” than of systematic investigation, in the GDR political opportunism determined the judicial agenda – or rather, as we now know, called for cover-up and judicial inactivity. Henry Leide has recently shown that in several cases the MfS had obtained written evidence and testimony sufficient to put severe Nazi perpetrators on trail. Yet, the fear of either exposing “hidden” Nazis in the GDR thus undermining the country’s propagated image as the master of denazification, or of loosing potential informers for employment in the West,

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<sup>31</sup> The other Wehrmacht cases involved, among others, German Jews (11 cases), German civilians and soldiers, few Italian civilians and Dutch POWs. On the whole, 140 trials of all 912 NS trials in the FRG dealt with crimes against Soviet citizens (out of which 12 cases involved defendants who had been members of the Wehrmacht), two additional trials dealt with crimes against Estonian and Lithuanian victims; other mostly dealt with crimes committed by SS, SD, *Einsatzkommandos*, *Waffen-SS*, police forces and civil occupation authorities.

The verdicts in the 14 cases (involving Soviet victims, including the Estonian and Lithuanian case; all cases involved homicide) were as follows:

Acquittal	6
Closed	10
1-5 years	4
10-20 years	1
Life in prison	3

<sup>32</sup> Yet, one also should keep in mind that in practical terms it was easier for East German courts to obtain evidence on crimes against Soviet citizens than for their West German counterpart. Also here, the Cold War context should not be forgotten.

prompted the MfS to close numerous cases involving potential war criminals. One of the most notorious cases was Erwin Rogalsky-Wedekind, a *SS-Oberstammführer* who admittedly oversaw, if not participated in, the execution of “three or ten Poles” (in his words) after the Wehrmacht’s invasion of Poland and who was also suspected to have participated in massacres of Soviet civilians in Belarus. In exchange for year-long cooperation with the MfS as informer, Rogalsky-Wedekind was spared a trial in the GDR.<sup>33</sup> Or take the case of Heinrich Groth, one of the “ordinary men” who served in a police battalion during the Eastern campaign in Lithuania and admittedly participated in the “hunting down” of Jews, escaped Soviet POWs and partisans. Groth also admitted to have participated in “ten to twelve mass executions of Soviet citizens” and having killed 50 persons himself. Despite his earlier conviction for war crimes by a Soviet court, the MfS hired him as informer. As many other Stasi-informers with a (known) criminal record, Groth was to spy on former Nazi comrades in the West and to provide the MfS with evidence for the “neo-fascist” infiltration of Adenauer’s Germany. Yet to the MfS’ disappointment, it was this part of the assignment which he and most others failed to deliver.<sup>34</sup>

This “secret politics of the past,” to use Leide’s phrase, was one outrageous outcome of the SED’s policy towards Nazi perpetrators, sympathizers and bystanders offering each citizen of the GDR exculpation in exchange for loyalty to the new system. The officially proclaimed sympathy for the Soviet Union as Hitler’s main victim rendered no judicial consequences even in cases where war crimes and crimes against humanity

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<sup>33</sup> Leide, *NS-Verbrecher und Staatssicherheit*, 207-217.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 217-223.

committed on Soviet territory could have been easily put on trial and judged. Still, this scandal was nonetheless explainable within the logic of the East German communists' world view which allowed the "antifascist" ideals to be compromised if it was only in service of the continuous "antifascist" fight against the West. The politics of memory and justice in the GDR were not only inspired by a highly selective interpretation of history and its opportunistic application to the present, but also legitimized with a calculated, ostentatious empathy for the victims of Nazi crimes which made the unthinkable possible: the close cooperation of the state security apparatus with Nazi war criminals in the name of "antifascism."

The problematic political nexus between history, memory and justice can also be examined by focussing more closely on the relationship between the judicial confrontation of the Nazi past and the historical scholarship these proceedings initiated and fostered – again within very different political and academic systems in the two Germanys. After addressing the judicial confrontation of Nazi and war crimes on the Eastern Front in general, I will now turn to the historiography that some of the most prominent Nazi trials (e.g. the *Einsatzgruppen*-trial, the trials against the former head of the "Jewish Affairs" Department in the Reich Security Office, Adolf Eichmann (1906-1962), against the FRG's Minister of Displaced Persons, Refugees and Victims of War Theodor Oberländer, and the Frankfurt Trial against the Auschwitz staff) triggered in East and West Germany. The public reception and reflection of this scholarship by the political elites – a theme the following paragraphs discuss only briefly and pointedly –

will then be the focus of the final chapter which returns to the political memory of the Eastern Front war.

## II. The “Unknown War:” The Eastern Front in West German Historiography

In November 1980, shortly before the fortieth anniversary of the attack against the Soviet Union, the historian Jürgen Förster, researcher at the *Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt* in Freiburg, harshly criticized the unwillingness of West German society to realize the “special character of the Eastern war.” His eloquent analysis captured the problematic relationship between the history of the Eastern Front, its historiography and memory in the Federal Republic:

Despite the fact that German historical research has long since exposed the racial-ideological core of Hitler’s Eastern war conception, has often described the close link between the military war against the Soviet Union and the struggle of world views against the Jews, the broader public in the Federal Republic still tends to neatly disassociate the operations against the Red Army from the simultaneous mass murder of Jews, communists and prisoners of war. ... It is a distorted view of reality that only the *Einsatzgruppen*, security police and SD liquidated Jews and communist functionaries. The Wehrmacht, too, participated in the extermination of ‘Jewish Bolshevism.’ The special character of the Eastern war, in particular the close connection between the ‘fight for living space’ and the ‘final solution of the Jewish question’ is still being repressed by parts of the population in the Federal Republic.<sup>35</sup>

This was an important, courageous essay: a young West German historian confronted the political elite as well as society at large with their reluctance to face historical reality and with their ignorance towards historical research. Moreover, even among many his colleagues, Förster’s two central historical conclusions – the genocidal character of the war against “Jewish Bolshevism” and the complicity of the Wehrmacht in this war of extermination – were not yet commonly accepted at the time. Moreover, aware of the fact how “painful” the “confrontation with this part of the German past”

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<sup>35</sup> Jürgen Förster, „Zur Rolle der Wehrmacht im Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion,“ *APuZ*, 45 (1980), 3-15, quote on 3. Förster lists the works of Jäckel, Hillgruber, and Broszat to support his view.

was, especially for the elder generation, Förster wrote that the historian's task was to "strive for enlightenment." Quoting from a contemporary essay by the renowned historian Thomas Nipperdey in *Die Zeit*,<sup>36</sup> he reminded those who had lived through the war that

'[h]istory breaks through the shells [*Gehäuse*] we always build around ourselves by putting the past in front of our eyes impartially and undistorted.' History as enlightenment is still necessary, because for many soldiers and contemporaries, the memories of the summer of 1941, of this kind of warfare, have been deformed by National Socialist propaganda, and covered up with the crimes of the Red Army, particularly during their incursion into Germany, and with the sufferings [of German soldiers] in Soviet POW camps.<sup>37</sup>

This observant and sensitive analysis of West German memories of the Eastern Front and the discourse of victimization they continued to inspire, encapsulated the challenging complexity which any effort to confront the legacies of the Eastern Front war entailed. Yet, the identification of such "*Deckerinnerungen*," as Naumann has later coined this covering up of Nazi crimes with memories of Soviet crimes, invasion and occupation,<sup>38</sup> was for Förster no reason to release Germans from their responsibility to acknowledge historical truth. Rather, he called for an end to the selective remembrance of the Eastern Front resulting from the Manichaeian Cold War paradigm. For the Cold War "has not only hindered the correction of the *Feindbild* of an aggressive communism built by the Nazis, but at the same time has offered the opportunity to retrospectively justify the attack on June 22, 1941."<sup>39</sup>

Just how accurately Förster's observations described the public memory of the Eastern Front in the Federal Republic was confirmed a year later by the reactions to the

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<sup>36</sup> Thomas Nipperdey, „Geschichte als Aufklärung," *Die Zeit*, no. 9, February 22, 1980, 16.

<sup>37</sup> Förster, „Zur Rolle der Wehrmacht im Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion," 3.

<sup>38</sup> Naumann, „Nachkrieg," 16.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

15-part TV-series “The Unknown War”, a US-Soviet co-production about the war on the Eastern Front.<sup>40</sup> On September, 14, 1981, the West German public TV-station WDR aired the first part of the series under the curiously translated title “*Der unvergessene Krieg*” (The Unforgotten War). This linguistic detail betrays a deeper truth about West German memories of the Eastern Front: it *was* perceived as the most costly battlefield of World War II, and because of *what* was known (and repressed), it was indeed unforgotten.

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<sup>40</sup> Produced with Soviet cooperation after the release of the US production “The World at War” (a documentary mini-series covering the history of World War II from the causes in the 1920s to the Cold War) which the Soviet government criticized for downplaying the Soviet Union’s role in the war. Released in 1978, “The Unknown War,” based on Soviet footage, was more sympathetic to the Soviet struggle against Nazi Germany. Each episode is about 52 minutes, similar in format to The World at War. The footage was taken from over 3.5 million feet of film taken by Soviet camera crews between June 22, 1941 and May 1945. The US version was narrated by Burt Lancaster. The parts included: 1. June 22, 1941; 2. The Battle for Moscow; 3. The Siege of Leningrad; 4. To the East; 5. The Defense of Stalingrad; 6. Survival at Stalingrad; 7. The World’s Greatest Tank Battle-Kursk; 8. War in the Arctic; 9. War in the Air; 10. Partisans: The Guerrilla War; 11. Battle of the Seas; 12. Battle of the Caucasus; 13. Liberation of Ukraine; 14. Liberation of Byelorussia; 15. From the Balkans to Vienna; 16. The Liberation of Poland; 17. The Allies; 18. The Battle of Berlin; 19. The Last Battle of the Unknown War; 20. A Soldier of the Unknown War. The WDR aired only 15 of the 20 parts, leaving out those dealing with the Pacific War and the celebrations of victory in Moscow and the like after the war.





Fig. 12. The Unforgotten War: Cover of a book accompanying a TV-series aired by WDR in September of 1981.

For its screening in the GDR, the series' English title was translated as "The Decisive War" (*Der entscheidende Krieg*). As the title and the euphoric reactions to the film in the official media indicated, in East Germany its message strongly resonated the party's established narrative of the Eastern Front.<sup>41</sup> The reactions ordinary West Germans expressed in a flood of letters to the WDR (about 700 after each part) ranged from open and hostile rejection of the film's depiction of the Red Army's struggle and the conditions in the German occupied territories, to "shock" and "the wish to know more."<sup>42</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Michael Eickhoff, Wilhelm Pagels, Willy Reschl, *Der unvergessene Krieg. Hitler-Deutschland gegen die Sowjetunion, 1941-1945* (Köln: VGS, 1981), 11.

<sup>42</sup> Heinz Werner Hübner, „Der unvergessene Krieg,“ in Ueberschär, Wette, ed., „Unternehmen Barbarossa,“ 43-47, quote on 46.

On the whole, the series shattered widely-held notions that the Eastern Front war had been a necessary, even justified war.<sup>43</sup>

The longing to retrospectively legitimate “Operation Barbarossa,” described so aptly by Förster, had long been a persisting aspect of West German historiography and public discourse on the Eastern Front war. While during the 1950s, relatively little research was done on the subject, the tide of interest shifted towards the end of the 1950s. In 1958, the *Einsatzgruppen* trial in Ulm against nine former members of the *Einsatzgruppe A* and their commander, police chief of the Memel area, Bernhard Fischer-Schweder, accused of jointly murdering 4,000 Lithuanian Jews, demonstrated not only the gravity of the crimes committed on the Eastern Front but also the scandalous shortcomings of their judicial confrontation thus far. In the same year, the Justice Ministers of the *Länder* agreed to establish a central institution for the investigation of Nazi war crimes, the *Zentrale Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen zur Aufklärung nationalsozialistischer Verbrechen* in Ludwigsburg.<sup>44</sup> In 1959, a series of anti-Semitic attacks on cemeteries and the synagogue of Cologne triggered the first *Bundestag* debate about the state of West German democracy in view of the to a large extent still un-mastered Nazi past.<sup>45</sup> Last but not least, the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem (1961) and the Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt/Main (1963-

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<sup>43</sup> The message of the series was also publicized in an illustrated companion book by *New York Times* reporter (and author of a moving book on the Leningrad Siege, *900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad* (New York: Harper, 1969)), Harrison E. Salisbury, *Die Ostfront. Der unvergessene Krieg 1941-45* (Wien: Molden, 1981). Other accompanying publications included Michael Eickhoff et.al., *Der unvergessene Krieg*, and Michael Bartsch et. al., eds., *Der Krieg im Osten 1941-1945. Historische Einführung, Kommentare und Dokumente* (Köln: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1981).

<sup>44</sup> For a brief summary, see Alfred Streim, “Zur Gründung, Tätigkeit und Zukunft der Zentralen Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen zur Aufklärung von NS-Verbrechen,” in Kuretsidis-Haider, ed., *Keine „Abrechnung,”* 130-143.

<sup>45</sup> The debate is summarized in Dubiel, *Niemand ist frei von der Geschichte*, 81-91.

65) contributed significantly to the renewed interest in the criminal legacies of the Nazi regime in both Germanys.<sup>46</sup>

Both latter trials not only further fuelled public debate on the deficiency of Adenauer's "politics of the past,"<sup>47</sup> but they also inspired further historical research on Nazi and Wehrmacht crimes committed against non-Germans all over Europe. This body of scholarship in East and West Germany differs greatly as to who initiated it to which ends.<sup>48</sup> While the SED in East Germany literally ordered the historical investigation of Wehrmacht crimes on the Eastern Front in order to denounce the *Bundeswehr* as its direct heir, Western historiography widened its agenda in reaction to the public debates surrounding the above-mentioned trials, and thus reflected a general desire to approach the Nazi past in a more balanced, differentiated and nuanced way.<sup>49</sup>

In the 1950s, West German historians had occasionally addressed aspects of the history of the Eastern Front war. In contrast to the apologetic scholarship and memoir literature of the time,<sup>50</sup> the *Institut für Zeitgeschichte*, founded in 1953, published several

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<sup>46</sup> Among others Reichel, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, 151f., 158f. Reichel stresses that while the Auschwitz trial in particular was not a „political trial” it was certainly a “political event.” (171) On the discussion of the Eichmann trial in the West German press see Peter Krause, *Der Eichmann-Prozeß in der deutschen Presse* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2002). Krause also provides a brief discussion of the reactions in the GDR press, see ibd., 208-243. On the Auschwitz trial see Fritz Bauer Institut, ed., “*Gerichtstag halten über uns selbst...*” *Geschichte und Wirkung des ersten Auschwitz-Prozesses* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2001).

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Frei, *Vergangenheitspolitik*.

<sup>48</sup> An excellent starting point for this historiographical discussion was the review essay by Rolf-Dieter Müller and Gerd R. Ueberschär, „Die deutsch-sowjetischen Beziehungen.” For a general overview of the historiographical confrontation of the Nazi past in East and West Germany see Mary Fulbrook, “The Past which refuses to become history,” in idem, *German National Identity after the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 103-141.

<sup>49</sup> For an overview of the public reactions to these trials see Peter Steinbach, *Nationalsozialistische Gewaltverbrechen. Die Diskussion in der deutschen Öffentlichkeit nach 1945* (Berlin: Colloquium, 1981).

<sup>50</sup> Good examples for apologetic scholarship on the Eastern Front are the occupation studies published by the *Institut für Besatzungsfragen* in Tübingen. These studies were partly written by former participants of

studies on Hitler, the Wehrmacht leadership, and the timing and planning of “Operation Barbarossa” as a war of aggression in its journal *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*.<sup>51</sup> The exceptional character of the war against the Soviet Union could no longer be in question – at least among experts – after several documentations appeared in the same journal pertaining Nazi policies towards the Eastern occupied territories.<sup>52</sup> An important study of Hitler’s world-view demonstrated the ideological and practical consistency that led from “*Mein Kampf*” to the attack against Soviet Russia in 1941.<sup>53</sup> On the whole, however, the victimization of Soviet soldiers and civilians by the Wehrmacht during World War II was a marginal subject of historical research during the 1950s,<sup>54</sup> not least because West German historians worked in an extraordinarily complicated professional

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the occupation in Eastern Europe, most prominently by Otto Bräutigam, diplomat and head of *Grundsatzfragen* division in Alfred Rosenberg’s Ministry for Eastern Occupied Territories. See his *Überblick über die besetzten Ostgebiete während des Zweiten Weltkrieges* (Tübingen: Institut für Besatzungsfragen, 1954). Further, the memoir literature by former Wehrmacht generals belongs to this category. See for example, Franz Halder, *Hitler als Feldherr: Der ehemalige Chef des Generalstabs berichtet die Wahrheit* (München: Münchener Dom-Verlag, 1949), Heinz Guderian, *Erinnerungen eines Soldaten* (Heidelberg: Vowinkel, 1951), and Manstein, *Verlorene Siege*. Simultaneously, a number of occupation studies appeared in the US and Britain, mostly written by Russian emigrants. Despite the fact that these studies explored the experience of the Wehrmacht’s occupation in Eastern Europe in part to utilize this Nazi expertise in the “political warfare” in the Cold War, important standard works were among them, for example the meticulously research volume by Alexander Dallin, *German Rule in Russia, 1941-1945* (London: Macmillan, 1957). Dallin focussed on the Rosenberg Ministry and its occupation policies and not on Wehrmacht cooperation and complicity in war crimes.

<sup>51</sup> This scholarship established firm evidence against the preventive war theory (which was nonetheless revived by other historians and publicists thereafter). Gerhard Weinberg, “Der deutsche Entschluß zum Angriff auf die Sowjetunion,” *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* (VfZ), 1(1953), 301-318. Hans Günter Serphim, Andreas Hillgruber, “Hitlers Entschluß zum Angriff auf Rußland. (Eine Entgegnung); mit Schlußwort von G.L. Weinberg,” *VfZ*, 2 (1954), 240-254.

<sup>52</sup> Helmut Krausnick, „Zu Hitlers Ostpolitik im Sommer 1943,” *VfZ*, 2 (1954), 305-312. Idem, „Denkschrift Himmlers über die Behandlung der Fremdvölkischen im Osten (Mai 1940),“ *VfZ*, 5 (1957), 194-198. And Helmut Heiber, „Der Generalplan Ost (Dokumentation),“ *VfZ*, 6 (1958), 281-325, addendum in *VfZ*, 8 (1960), 119.

<sup>53</sup> Hugh R. Trevor-Roper, „Hitlers Kriegsziele,” in *VfZ*, 8 (1960), 121-133.

<sup>54</sup> A rare exception was the early two-volume study of the military resistance against Hitler and Wehrmacht responsibility *Vollmacht des Gewissens*. The first volume was published in 1955 with a favorable introduction by Theodor Heuss. The second volume (1965) contained a discussion of the criminal orders and the crimes against Soviet commissars and POWs. See Heinrich Uhlig, “Der verbrecherische Befehl,” in *Vollmacht des Gewissens*, vol. 2, ed. Helmut Krausnick (Frankfurt/Main: Metzner, 1965), 287-410.

and political environment: the source base was thin since most Nazi records were still in Allied hands, and East German and Soviet historians' claims that the "West" was planning another "Barbarossa," made it difficult, indeed undesirable, to address Soviet victims while at the same time being constantly accused of helping the plotter of such a campaign.<sup>55</sup>

In the wake of the Eichmann and Auschwitz trials, public and academic interest in Nazi crimes rose significantly in the Federal Republic. In particular, the expertises prepared by historians Hans Buchheim, Martin Broszat, Hans-Adolf Jacobsen and Helmut Krausnick for use in the Auschwitz trial encouraged a number of follow-up studies.<sup>56</sup> In their contributions, Martin Broszat and his colleagues focused (in accordance with the court's request) on the organisation of the SS, the police and concentration camp system, as well as on Nazi policies towards Poland and the Jews. In their preface to the first edition of their expertises in 1965, the authors contemplated the relationship between historical knowledge and memory. The similarity to Förster's analysis in 1980 is striking

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<sup>55</sup> Since Stalin's *Über den Großen Vaterländischen Krieg der Sowjetunion* (Moskau: Verlag für fremdsprachige Literatur, 1945) communist historiography repeated this supposed threat. See for example the introductory remarks in S. Golikow, *Die Sowjetarmee im Großen Vaterländischen Krieg* (Berlin (Ost): Verlag Kultur und Fortschritt, 1954), Gerhard Förster et.al., „Der Barbarossa-Plan in Politik und Kriegführung Hitler-Deutschlands 1940/41,“ *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* (Berlin (Ost), (ZfG), 7, no. 3 (1959), 529-552, or Albert Norden, *Zwischen Berlin und Moskau. Zur Geschichte der deutsch-sowjetischen Beziehungen* (Berlin: Dietz, 1954). In Norden's most explicit words „those rule in two-thirds of our fatherland who have plunged our nation into three wars against the Soviet power seeking to again wake feelings of hatred and enmity against the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics in order to prepare a new carnage. Thus, here history will not be written for history's sake but this book wants to be a weapon for those who resist national suicide, namely aggressive anti-Sovietism.” (6).

<sup>56</sup> They appeared under the title *Anatomie des SS-Staates*. Vol. 1: “Die SS, das Herrschaftsinstrument. Befehl und Gehorsam,” ed. by Hans Buchheim (Olten: Walter, 1965). Interestingly, the collection of all historical expertises produced by the *Institut für Zeitgeschichte* (IfZ) between 1958 and 1966 contains no account of the persecution of Soviet Jews under the section “Persecution of Jews in Foreign Countries.” *Gutachten des Instituts für Zeitgeschichte*, 2 vols. (Stuttgart: dva, 1966). On the context and genesis of the expertises see Irmlud Wojak, “Die Verschmelzung von Geschichte und Kriminologie. Historische Gutachten im ersten Frankfurter Auschwitz-Prozeß,” in Frei, ed., *Geschichte vor Gericht*, 29-45.

as they, too, lament Germans' "lack of insight into the reality of the Hitler regime" and their blindness for the "connection between the political system and the ideological mass crimes." Even if Broszat and his colleagues did not emphasize at that time the nexus between the Eastern Front war and the "Final Solution," they pointed to the fact that "the crimes in the concentration camps and the mass murder of the Jews were specific elements of National Socialist rule."<sup>57</sup>

Two specific expertises systematically addressed crimes committed on Soviet territory in the wake of "Operation Barbarossa," the Holocaust and the killing of Soviet POWs on the basis of the infamous "commissar order."<sup>58</sup> Jacobsen already then correctly estimated that about 3.3 million Soviet POWs were killed between 1941 and 1945, and his analysis also provided irrefutable evidence for the deep involvement of the Wehrmacht.<sup>59</sup> Krausnick's contribution detailed the execution of the "Final Solution" on Soviet territory stressing that with the decision to attack the Soviet Union, Hitler also decided to have the "Jews in his sphere of influence exterminated."<sup>60</sup>

Based on these historical facts, the Auschwitz trial contributed to a rising public awareness in the Federal Republic for the victimization of Soviet POWs by SS and Wehrmacht. This side of the Soviet war experience had not been discussed in public since the Nuremberg trials. The verdict, predominantly dealing with the organization and execution of the Jewish mass murder, included a few paragraphs on the selection and

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<sup>57</sup> Buchheim et. al., eds., *Anatomie des SS-Staates*, vol. 1, 5.

<sup>58</sup> See in particular, Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, „Kommissarbefehl und Massenexekutionen sowjetischer Kriegsgefangener,“ and Helmut Krausnick, „Judenverfolgung,“ in Martin Broszat, Hans-Adolf Jacobsen, Helmut Krausnick, eds., *Anatomie des SS-Staates*, vol. 2: „Konzentrationslager, Kommissarbefehl, Judenverfolgung,“ (Olten: Walter, 1965), 163-279, 283-448.

<sup>59</sup> Jacobsen, „Kommissarbefehl,“ 197. His estimate was later confirmed by Streit, *Keine Kameraden*.

<sup>60</sup> Krausnick, „Judenverfolgung,“ 361.

killing of Soviet POWs and “political commissars.” It stressed that these measures had been taken in accordance with the OKW’s “commissar order:”

Based on this order, political commissars selected from POW camps and other suspected POWs were ‘liquidated’ also in Auschwitz by the Einsatzkommandos of Sipo and SD. Upon their arrival the prisoners were neither ... registered nor added to the list of camp inmates. They brought their identity tags and file cards with them. After the executions the identity tags were broken in half. On the file cards it was merely noted: ‘liquidated according to OKW-order.’ The shootings of the POWs took place either in the entrance hall of the small old crematorium or at the black wall by shot in the neck. Some of the POWs were also gassed in bloc 11 or in the small crematorium. A few of the political commissars were killed with phenol injections. ... How many Russian POWs were shot, gassed or otherwise killed on the basis of the OKW-order ... in the Auschwitz concentration camp could not be determined.<sup>61</sup>

Overall however and due to the fact that the Auschwitz trial was about the mass killing of the Jews (including Soviet Jews) in Auschwitz and other extermination camps, the Soviet victimization on the whole remained a minor aspect. Yet in terms of confronting the historical reality of the Eastern Front, the expertises prepared for the Auschwitz trial marked a cornerstone not only with regards to the exceptionality of the war against the Soviet Union but also to the complicity of the Wehrmacht in crimes against Soviet citizens, military and civilian. Heinz Höhne’s landmark study of the SS pointed repeatedly to the murderous collaboration between SS and Wehrmacht troops on the Eastern Front.<sup>62</sup> And Hans-Adolf Jacobsen’s analysis drew attention to the treatment

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<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Gerhard Werle, Thomas Wandres, *Auschwitz vor Gericht. Völkermord und bundesdeutsche Straffjustiz. Mit Einer Dokumentation des Auschwitz-Urteils* (München: Beck, 1995), 116f. The GDR dispatched its own prosecutor, Friedrich Karl Kaul, to the Auschwitz trial in order to represent East Berlin’s interests in the trial. One was, according to a SED Politburo decision of November 19, 1963, to turn the trial into a “tribunal against the *I.G. Farben* company” (for having enslaved and killed KZ inmates), the other was to bring attention to fate of those Soviet POWs and “commissars” murdered in Auschwitz. While the first objective was obviously not achieved, the second found entrance into the trial proceedings: an expertise prepared by Soviet historian Nicolaj S. Alexejew and researchers at the Potsdam Institute for Military history was heard by the court and the presented documentary evidence was admitted and considered in the verdict. Alexejew’s testimony on October 30, and November 5, 1964 is described in Hermann Langbein, *Der Auschwitz-Prozeß: Eine Dokumentation*, vol. 2 (Frankfurt/Main: Verlag Neue Kritik, 1995), 966f.

<sup>62</sup> Published separatley as *Der Orden unter dem Totenkopf. Die Geschichte der SS* (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1967).

of Soviet POWs by the Wehrmacht.<sup>63</sup> Still, it remains a subject of further historical inquiry whether this knowledge in fact disseminated among the West German public during the 1960s, as it took another thirty years or so to severely shatter the “myth of the clean Wehrmacht.” Consider in addition that the fate of Soviet POWs was marginalized as long as West Germans remained preoccupied with the fate of German POWs and returnees from the Soviet Union, that is at least until the 1970s.<sup>64</sup>

Yet, the general climate of Détente since the mid-1960s facilitated historiographical balance and nuance. A cornerstone was Ernst Nolte’s work on the French, Italian and German variants of fascism which concluded on the remark that the war against the Soviet Union constituted the “most monstrous war of conquest, enslavement and annihilation known in modern history.”<sup>65</sup> Andreas Hillgruber made a similar point when he demonstrated in his *Habilitation* about *Hitler’s Strategy*, that with the attack against the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany extended the European war into a global war, and that the racial war against “Jewish Bolshevism” distinguished “Operation Barbarossa” from any previous military conflict.<sup>66</sup> Agreeing with Nolte’s above-quoted dictum, Hillgruber qualified, however, that despite this insight

the elementary importance of this fact for the character, the history and the for Germany and most parts of Europe catastrophic outcome of World War II with the manifold legacies and consequences of this event for the present are not being stressed with the necessary clarity in most historical accounts, leave

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<sup>63</sup> In Broszat et. al., eds., *Anatomie des SS-Staates*, vol. 2, 163-279.

<sup>64</sup> See most recently, Christiane Winkler, “The ‘Betrayed Generation’ – *Heimkehrer* in West German Public Discourse,” Paper at the Conference “Germany 1930-1990” (March 22–23, 2007), German Historical Institute, London. Just in 1966, Erich Maschke’s multi-volume history of German POWs during and after World War II appeared. See in particular Kurt W. Böhme, *Die deutschen Kriegsgefangenen in sowjetischer Hand* (Bielefeld: Giesecking, 1966f) (= vol. 7 of *Zur Geschichte der deutschen Kriegsgefangenen des Zweiten Weltkrieges*, ed. Erich Maschke, Bielefeld: Giesecking, 1962ff.)

<sup>65</sup> In original: “der ungeheuerlichste Eroberungs-, Versklavungs- und Vernichtungskrieg, den die moderne Geschichte kennt.” Ernst Nolte, *Der Faschismus in seiner Epoche*, 436.

<sup>66</sup> Hillgruber, *Hitlers Strategie*.



alone has it entered the conscience of the wider public in West Germany. This results from the fact that, then as now, Hitler's Eastern war has been misunderstood and misinterpreted in three ways: (1.) as 'crusade' against Stalinist Bolshevism whose barbaric excesses during the 1930s caused world-wide terror and disgust ... (2.) as purely power political event which evolved from the necessities of the European war under way since 1939 (3.) as 'national emancipation' of the European peoples between Black Sea and Finland under Germany's leadership threatened by the culturally inferior but in terms of numbers superior 'half-Asiatic' Russians in 1939/40. ...

Most soldiers of the Eastern armies and even most leading German militaries had not clearly grasped the total difference of this war with regards to its origins and principles vis-à-vis the wars on the Western Front, [which] ... on the whole were carried out as 'normal European war;' they partly didn't want to see the consequences although they knew better or could have known better.<sup>67</sup>

Placing "Operation Barbarossa" within the long-term programmatic thinking of Hitler since World War I, Hillgruber concluded that Hitler had developed and realized a "program" in order to not only reorder the European continent according to racial principles, but to gain "world dominance." This "program's" centrepiece was Germany's expansion to the East and the destruction of the Soviet Union as state. It included the realization of the in Hillgruber's view notoriously underestimated "essence of the National Socialist program:" the physical extermination of the Jewish-Bolshevist leaders of Russia and their alleged "biological basis" – the Jews of Eastern and Continental Europe.<sup>68</sup> It was this program of world dominance and physical extermination which made the Eastern war an unprecedented, indeed "new" kind of war. Towards the end of his study, Hillgruber returned to the present. Somewhat contradicting his own postulate of Hitler's singular program and practice of racial warfare against the Soviet Union, he noted that

The unprecedented level of violence that this war of total destruction unleashed, first on the Soviet and then the German side, led to a bitter struggle of nearly four years in which millions perished. It ended only with Germany's unconditional surrender in 1945. *As both sides, for different motives but with similar effect, struggled to annihilate each other*, the Eastern war became by a nearly inconceivable degree, the bloodiest in history. The nature of the struggle precluded an armistice of the kind that might

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 517.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 566f.

end a “normal” European war. It ended instead with a German capitulation whose historical consequences extend far beyond the military event.<sup>69</sup>

Hillgruber also explicitly recalled the crimes committed by the Red Army in Eastern Germany. With a view on the current state of German-Soviet relations, concluded that because of its singular character, the Eastern Front war had not yet fully “become a thing of the past.” Rather, the legacies and consequences of this to-date severest event in German-Soviet history dominated the European present, but above all and more than all other political and ideological “fronts” of the post war era, the relationship between Germany and the Soviet Union.<sup>70</sup>

In the long run, Hillgruber’s seminal study altered the way historian’s viewed Hitler’s political and military strategy, yet at first it did not inspire further investigation of the peculiarities of this new kind of war now also in the West labelled “war of extermination” – GDR historiography ever since 1945 referred to the Eastern Front war as “war of conquest and extermination” (*Raub-und Vernichtungskrieg*). Hitler continued to be viewed as the chief architect of war and genocide and mainstream Western

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<sup>69</sup> This quote is taken from an English edition of Hillgruber essays since *Hitler’s Strategie* has never been translated into English. Andreas Hillgruber, *Germany and the two World Wars* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 97 [Emphasis added]. The passage comes closest to the original conclusion of *Hitler’s Strategie* which reads as follows: *Der Charakter des Ost-Krieges, der in dem fast vierjährigen wechselseitig – aus unterschiedlicher, aber in den Konsequenzen ähnlicher Motivierung – auf die Vernichtung des Feindes gerichteten Kampf kaum vorstellbaren Ausmaßes mit den weit über 30 Millionen Opfern, zu denen neben den Toten in den Schlachten, in den Partisanenkämpfen und bei den Vertreibungen die getöteten Kriegsgefangenen und die ermordeten Juden gehören, zum blutigsten Krieg der Geschichte wurde, schloß einen Waffenstillstand im Stile der Beendigung ‚europäischer Normalkriege‘ aus.*“ Hillgruber, *Hitlers Strategie*, 577.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 578.

historiography agreed that the Eastern Front campaign was not a preventive but a purely aggressive war.<sup>71</sup>

The first major work to address the connection between Nazi war crimes and the Wehrmacht appeared in 1969. Manfred Messerschmidt's *Die Wehrmacht im NS-Staat: Zeit der Indoktrination* described the National Socialist infiltration of the Wehrmacht as part of the Nazis' attempted "inner conquest of the state."<sup>72</sup> He stressed the degree to which this attempt at ideological indoctrination succeeded among Wehrmacht officers and generals not without – on the whole – downplaying their accountability and complicity: "National Socialism was rather 'experienced' then realized,"<sup>73</sup> the National Socialist world view was – towards the end of the war – reduced to a few "key messages" aimed at securing the "spiritual unity" of the army which by then "could only be *believed* – and *had* to be believed."<sup>74</sup> Yet, this important study established beyond doubt that most Wehrmacht leaders more or less whole-heartedly supported National Socialism because they shared with it a number of military and foreign policy objectives: reconstitution of Germany's armed forces, restoration of Germany's role as central power, thus its "liberation" from the "shackles of Versailles," territorial expansionism (Eastwards), anti-

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<sup>71</sup> Joachim Fest, *Das Gesicht des Dritten Reiches. Profil einer totalitären Herrschaft* (München: Piper, 1963), and idem, *Hitler. Eine Biographie* (Frankfurt/Main: Propyläen, 1973). Heinrich Uhlig, „Das Einwirken Hitlers auf Planung und Führung des Ostfeldzuges,“ in Krausnick, ed., *Vollmacht des Gewissens*, vol. 2, 149-286, and idem, „Der verbrecherische Befehl. Eine Diskussion und ihre historisch-dokumentarischen Grundlagen,“ in *ibid.*, 287-410. Lothar Gruchmann, *Der Zweite Weltkrieg. Kriegführung und Politik* (München: dtv, 1967). Eberhard Jäckel, *Hitlers Weltanschauung. Entwurf einer Herrschaft* (Tübingen: Wunderlich, 1969), Klaus Hildebrand, *Vom Reich zum Weltreich. Hitler, NSDAP und koloniale Frage 1919-1945* (München: Fink, 1969), and idem, *Deutsche Außenpolitik 1933-1945* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1971).

<sup>72</sup> Messerschmidt, *Die Wehrmacht im NS-Staat*, 480.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 481.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 346f. [Emphasis added].

Bolshevism and anti-parliamentarianism.<sup>75</sup> Messerschmidt's treatment of the Wehrmacht's role on the Eastern Front focused largely on the propagandistic realization of Hitler's "war of world views" and on the educational measures taken to mobilize the troops for the historic "struggle of fate." The author stressed that in Russia, unlike in the wars against France and Poland, "the self-fabricated *Popanz* of the arch enemy of the Aryan man was to be destroyed, even 'exterminated,'" and thus Wehrmacht soldiers were to be endowed with a "special inner approach," with a new morale "beyond good and evil in the conventional sense."<sup>76</sup> The fight of the "master-race" against the "*Untermensch*" required a new kind of warfare and thus a new kind of military-political training. In essence, Messerschmidt concluded, "the 'inner leadership' of the Wehrmacht [the concept of military education introduced under Blomberg] was a leadership aimed at gaining agreement with the principles of National Socialism and, moreover, with a policy aimed at realizing these principles."<sup>77</sup>

This body of critical scholarship on the Eastern Front war competed with a number of popular histories on "Operation Barbarossa" of which the bestsellers by Paul Karl Schmidt published under the synonym Paul Carell became most famous. Carell published a number of accounts of the Eastern Front war in the Federal Republic glorifying the sacrificial fight of the German soldiers without ever once questioning the criminal nature

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<sup>75</sup> Messerschmidt famously termed this conglomerate of shared objectives as "*Teilidentität der Ziele*." Ibid., 1, 488.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 306.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

of the invasion and the Wehrmacht's warfare.<sup>78</sup> Carell's pre-1945 activities as Ribbentrop's press chief did not hinder him from making a remarkable career as publicist and writer after 1945. His works gave voice to those millions of readers in and even more so outside the veteran community who longed for a meaningful memory of the Eastern Front as more than "just" a failure and incriminated "war of aggression."<sup>79</sup> Nostalgia, even regret dominated the narratives – regret over missed opportunities and lost victories. Moreover, "Operation Barbarossa" appeared as a preventive war against an immanent Bolshevik attack. In the very first chapter of his first volume on *Operation Barbarossa* with the revealing title "The Surprise Succeeds (*Die Überraschung gelingt*), Carell has Ribbentrop pondering in his office: "The Führer has word that Stalin is mobilizing against us in order to attack us at a convenient moment in time. And ... the Führer has always been right so far."<sup>80</sup> Instead of citing more from his apologetic narrative, one of Carell's own reflections on the writing of the the history of "Operation Barbarossa" best captures his problematic view of the Eastern Front war which found much resonance in the West German audience. In a note of gratitude placed at the end of "*Unternehmen Barbarossa*," Carell reflected:

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<sup>78</sup> Carell was as Ribbentrop's press chief responsible for translating NS policy, including the "Final Solution," into "*Sprachregelungen*" for foreign correspondents. Among the works are the two-volume *Unternehmen Barbarossa* (Frankfurt/Main: Ullstein, 1963) which appeared in multiple editions, the most recent 9th edition in 1998; *Der Rußlandkrieg* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1967), and *Verbrannte Erde* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1966); further *Unternehmen Barbarossa im Bild: der Rußlandkrieg fotografiert von Soldaten* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1978); and *Stalingrad: Sieg und Untergang der 6. Armee* (Frankfurt/Main: Ullstein, 1993) – the title translates as „Stalingrad: Victory [*sic!*] and Doom of the 6th Army.“ On Carell see Benz, *Paul Carell*, and idem, „Der Kriegspropagandist Paul Carell. Vom Präventivkrieg der Wehrmacht zum ‚Ernstfall‘ der Bundeswehr,“ in *Bulletin für Faschismus- und Weltkriegsforschung* 28 (2006), 60-77. And Matthias Weiß, "Journalisten: Worte als Taten," in Frei, ed., *Karrieren im Zwielficht*, 241-299, esp. 268ff.

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Chapter 7. I. and II.

<sup>80</sup> Carell, *Unternehmen Barbarossa*, vol. 1: „Bis vor Moskaus Tore,“ 12f. Carell never used quotation marks for „Operation Barbarossa.“

To depict the battles of a war which was lost and inscribed in history as criminal act of aggression constitutes a difficult undertaking, almost too difficult for the chronicler of this decade. Great is the temptation to correct the decisions on the battlefield with the pen or to rage [*wüten*] in the jungle of senselessness and guilt. The author wanted neither. He wanted to report about the military events of 'Operation Barbarossa,' Hitler's war of conquest, which ended at Stalingrad.<sup>81</sup>

Thus, free of having to address the "jungle of senselessness and guilt," Carell offered an account of the war on the Eastern Front which focussed on the dutifully fighting German soldiers in a struggle against the Bolshevik threat (a threat that was perceived as still existing in 1963), and on Hitler's failures as commander-in-chief. In effect he left the reader with the impression that "without the dilettante Hitler at the top, ["Operation Barbarossa"] actually should have worked out."<sup>82</sup>

In 1967, Carell published a collection of photographs mostly taken by German soldiers between 1941 and 1944 on the Eastern Front. Formally, this book represents one early attempt to use images as documentary "evidence;" in a strange sense it thus antedated the approach taken by the initiators of the Wehrmacht exhibit in the 1990s. Intended to be consulted by the reader as a supplement to Carell's historical accounts, the photo collection was to "deepen" the narrative in order for the reader to gain a better imagination of the detailed events. The volume contains not a single picture that would suggest German soldiers were involved in criminal warfare; rather, it was them who suffered and perished. Occasionally, photos of the indigenous population serve to illustrate that war "turns homes into the front"<sup>83</sup> without ever reflecting the real extent of human suffering under German occupation. Carell's introduction underlines this by

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<sup>81</sup> Carell, *Unternehmen Barbarossa*, vol. 2I: "4000 Kilometer Front," 550.

<sup>82</sup> Weiß, "Journalisten: Worte als Taten," 270.

<sup>83</sup> Carell, *Unternehmen Barbarossa im Bild*, 118-119. An unabridged 2nd edition was published in 1991 by Ullstein (Frankfurt/Main).

equalling the suffering of soldiers, German and Soviet alike, with the sufferings that war in general inflicts on human beings:

One motif runs from the first to the last page [of the photo collection]: the image of the soldier! The German and the Russian. Not only his face changes with the years of war. Everything about him changes: the eyes, the posture, the uniform ... The German victor turns into the loser, the defeated Red Army soldiers over the years becomes the hard conqueror. But beyond all changes, the image brings out with terrifying intensity how similar the faces of the soldiers were.

This becomes especially clear when one considers the simple fact that in war there is not only shooting, driving, winning, dying and losing. [Soldiers] eat and drink, knit and nail, care for the wounded, heal and bury, ... repair and exercise. In every stage it was bureaucratized, loved, hated, good and evil were done. ... And one more thing: The country, in which war was fought, was battlefield only partially and temporarily. Humans lived there, and the soldier lived with them in the houses and cottages. Dealt and exchanged on their markets and crouched with them on their ovens during winter time.<sup>84</sup>

Carell's widely popularized illustrated narrative of the Eastern Front war portrayed the conflict as conventional war in which the military sphere remained separated from the civilian. Carell's account made no mention of the excessive plunder, destruction, humiliations and mass killings committed by German SS and Wehrmacht forces on Soviet territory. It was similarly ignorant of the actual causes and real objectives of "Operation Barbarossa" despite the fact that at this point the criminal nature and intent of this war was a well established fact and accepted truth among historians. Carell's work helped to sustain the "myth of a clean Wehrmacht" – a "myth" first and foremost referring to "Operation Barbarossa" as having been a conventional, rather innocuous military undertaking. This "myth" dominated much of the West German Eastern Front memory until the 1990s; it was shattered only in context and as a consequence of the Wehrmacht exhibits.

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 12.

Even though historiography during the 1970s and 1980s to some extent contributed to the erosion of these popular perceptions,<sup>85</sup> historical knowledge about the “special character” of the Eastern Front war had not even reached the public mind in 1980, almost forty years after the attack – despite a growing official acknowledgment and communication of this historiographical consensus on the part of government representatives and leading politicians.<sup>86</sup> Förster’s essay quoted at the outset of this

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<sup>85</sup> During the 1970s, Western historians still largely left the economic and military elites’ involvement in Nazi crimes on the Eastern Front untouched. Important exceptions were Hillgruber’s 1978 essay on the image of Russia among the Wehrmacht leadership (Andreas Hillgruber, „Das Rußland-Bild der führenden deutschen Militär vor Beginn des Angriffs auf die Sowjetunion,“ in Alexander Fischer, ed., *Rußland-Deutschland-Amerika* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1978), 296-310), and Rolf-Dieter Müller’s work on the “role of the industry in Hitler’s Eastern Empire” (Rolf-Dieter Müller, „Die Rolle der Industrie in Hitlers Ostimperium,“ in Manfred Messerschmidt, ed., *Militärsgeschichte. Probleme, Thesen, Wege* (Stuttgart: dva, 1982), and idem, „Von der Wirtschaftsallianz zum kolonialen Ausbeutungskrieg,“ in Horst Boog et. al., eds., *Das deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, vol. 4: „Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion,“ (Stuttgart: dva, 1983), 98-189). During the same decade, historians finally started to address the genocidal character of the crusade against “Jewish Bolshevism” and identified the ideological amalgamate of anti-Semitism and anti-Bolshevism as the “centrepiece of the racial-ideological program of National Socialism.” (Andreas Hillgruber, „Die ‚Endlösung‘ und das deutsche Ostimperium als Kernstück des rassenideologischen Programms des Nationalsozialismus,“ in *VfZ*, 20 (1972), 133-153.)

Krausnick and Förster shed “new light” on the Wehrmacht’s warfare on the Eastern Front by illustrating the effective execution of the criminal orders and by turning attention to the millions of Jewish and non-Jewish Soviet citizens who perished under these orders. (Helmut Krausnick, „Kommissarbefehl und ‚Gerichtsbareiterlaß Barbarossa‘ in neuer Sicht,“ *VfZ*, 25 (1977), 682-738, and Helmut Krausnick, Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm, *Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges. Die Einsatzgruppen der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD, 1938-1942* (Stuttgart: dva, 1981) – the latter of which also details cooperation and complicity of Wehrmacht units in war crimes. On the Wehrmacht the work of Förster was particularly important, see Förster, „Zur Rolle der Wehrmacht im Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion,“ in *APuZ*, 45 (1980), 3-15, and idem, „Das Unternehmen ‚Barbarossa‘ als Eroberungs- und Vernichtungsfeldzug,“ in Boog et. al., eds., *Das deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, vol. 4: „Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion,“ 413-447).

During the 1980s, which finally – and scandalously late – saw the publication of a German translation of Hilberg’s *The Destruction of the European Jews* (1960) (Raul Hilberg, *Die Vernichtung der europäischen Juden. Die Gesamtgeschichte des Holocaust* (Berlin: Olle & Wolter, 1982)), the focus shifted to the economic aspects of the Eastern Front war (esp. Müller, “Von der Wirtschaftsallianz zum kolonialen Ausbeutungskrieg,”) and Christian Streit’s and Alfred Streim’s works focussed on the suffering of Soviet POWs in German hands. Streit, *Keine Kameraden*, and Alfred Streim, *Die Behandlung sowjetischer Kriegsgefangener im ‚Fall Barbarossa‘: eine Dokumentation; unter Berücksichtigung der Unterlagen der deutschen Strafvollzugsbehörden und der Materialien der Zentralen Stelle der Landesjustizverwaltungen zur Aufklärung von NS-Verbrechen* (Heidelberg: Müller, 1981), and idem, *Sowjetische Kriegsgefangene in Hitlers Vernichtungskrieg: Berichte und Dokumente 1941-1945* (Heidelberg: Müller, 1982). See further my brief discussion of this body of scholarship and its influence on the official memory of the Eastern Front in the FRG in Chapter 11.II.

<sup>86</sup> See below, Chapter 11. II.



section speaks to this phenomenon. In 1987, publicist Ralph Giordano's powerful extended essay on the "Second Guilt" argued that Germans were not only guilty of Nazi and war crimes committed between 1933 and 1945, but that their collective refusal to address reality and dimension of these crimes – particularly in the Eastern war and particularly regarding the Wehrmacht's genocidal warfare – after 1945, constituted their second historic guilt.<sup>87</sup> And even as late as 1989, the prominent German sociologist Rainer M. Lepsius observed that there was still a wide-spread refusal among the West German public to acknowledging the sufferings inflicted on the Soviet population by Germans during World War II.<sup>88</sup>

Aside from the contrary historiographical approaches and differing collective memories of the Eastern Front war in East and West Germany, both sides referred constantly – explicitly or implicitly – to each other's views and conclusions about this part of recent German history. Throughout the four decades of German partition, German historians for example relied on edited document collections published in the other part of the country.<sup>89</sup> In terms of dealing with scholarly arguments made in the other half of

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<sup>87</sup> Giordano, *Die Zweite Schuld*.

<sup>88</sup> Lepsius, "Der Einfluß des Nationalsozialismus auf die Nachfolgestaaten des 'Großdeutschen Reiches,'" 263.

<sup>89</sup> Compare a number of GDR editions based on materials from East German, Soviet and Eastern European archives documenting the planning, preparation and execution of Hitler's wars of aggression; all editions put most emphasis on "Operation Barbarossa." For example, Dietrich Eichholtz, Wolfgang Schumann, eds., *Anatomie des Krieges. Neue Dokumente zu den Kriegszielen des faschistischen deutschen Imperialismus im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Berlin(Ost): Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1969). Erhard Moritz, ed., *Fall Barbarossa. Dokumente zur Vorbereitung der faschistischen Wehrmacht auf die Aggression gegen die Sowjetunion (1940/41)* (Berlin(Ost): Deutscher Militärverlag, 1970). Gerhart Hass, Wolfgang Schumann, eds., *Anatomie der Aggression. Neue Dokumente zu den Kriegszielen des faschistischen deutschen Imperialismus im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Berlin (Ost): Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1972). Crimes of Wehrmacht and SS against Soviet citizens were addressed in editions such as Norbert Müller, ed., *Okkupation, Raub, Vernichtung. Dokumente zur deutschen Besatzungspolitik der faschistischen Wehrmacht auf sowjetischem Territorium 1941 bis 1944* (Berlin(Ost): Deutscher

Germany, historians in the GDR routinely confronted, debated and usually refuted and denounced the positions of their “bourgeois” colleagues, who had “learned nothing from history.”<sup>90</sup> Western historiography either rejected East German research results as “Berliner smearings” of “*Gesinnungslumpen*”<sup>91</sup> on the basis of their explicit bias and political function – or ignored them altogether.<sup>92</sup> Only in the wake of de-Stalinization which also entailed a reassessment of Stalin’s role as military commander in World War II, hopes arose among West German scholars that an open dialogue about the historical

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Militärverlag, 1980) which also was published in the FRG under the title *Deutsche Besatzungspolitik in der UdSSR, 1941-1944. Dokumente* (Köln: Pahl-Rugenstein, 1980). And on the participation of the Wehrmacht in the deportation of Soviet citizens to forced labor camps in Germany see Dietrich Eichholtz, “Der ‘Generalplan Ost.’ Über eine Ausgeburt imperialistischer Denkart und Politik (mit Dokumenten),” in *Jahrbuch für Geschichte*, 26 (1982), 217-274.

Important West German editions include Walter Hubatsch, ed., *Hitlers Weisungen für die Kriegführung. Dokumente des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht* (Frankfurt/Main: Bernard & Graefe, 1962). Percy Ernst Schramm, ed., *Kriegstagebuch des Oberkommandos der Wehrmacht 1940-1945* (Frankfurt/Main: Bernard & Graefe, 1963). Henry Picker, ed., *Tischgespräche im Führerhauptquartier* (München: Goldmann, 1979). As well as vols. 6-13 (Series D) of *Akten zur deutschen und Auswärtigen Politik 1918-1945* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1950-1970) which cover the years 1937-1941.

<sup>90</sup> More detailed on this below in section 8. III. Quote by Leo Stern, “Deutschlands jüngste Geschichte im Spiegel der bürgerlichen und marxistischen Geschichtsschreibung,” *ZfG*, 4 (1955), 528-551, quote on 549.

<sup>91</sup> Thus spoke Gerhard Ritter, chair of the West German historians’ association *Verband der Historiker Deutschlands* between 1948 and 1953. The term “*Gesinnungslumpen*” is hard to translate, “ideological blackguards” best captures its meaning.

<sup>92</sup> A thorough study of the what could be called a forty-year-long historians debate between East and West German historians – an integral part of the inner-German ideological Cold War – has still to be written. A starting point (with a focus on the scholarship on the Nazi-past) is Fulbrook, “The Past which refuses to become history,” and the more general introduction by Martin Sabrow, “Gegensätzliche Geschichtsbilder – gegnerische Geschichtsbilder? Die deutsch-deutsche Historikerkonkurrenz als Wahrnehmungsgeschichte,” in Christoph Kleßmann, Hans Misselwitz, Günter Wichert, eds., *Deutsche Vergangenheiten – eine gemeinsame Herausforderung. Der schwierige Umgang mit der doppelten Nachkriegsgeschichte* (Berlin: Links, 1999), 139-160. A number of works touch on this point for example, Sabrow, ed., *Geschichte als Herrschaftsdiskurs*, idem, *Das Diktat des Konsenses. Geschichtswissenschaft in der DDR 1949-1969* (München: Oldenbourg, 2001), Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk, *Legitimation eines neuen Staates: Parteiarbeiter an der historischen Front. Geschichtswissenschaft in der SBZ/DDR 1945 bis 1961* (Berlin: Links, 1997). On various contacts between East and West German historians during the 1980s see Martin Sabrow, „Der Streit um die Verständigung. Deutsch-deutsche Historikerkontakte in den achtziger Jahren,“ in Arnd Bauerkämper, ed., *Doppelte Zeitgeschichte: deutsch-deutsche Beziehungen 1945-1990* (Bonn: Dietz, 1998), 113-130.

assessment of the Eastern Front war might become possible.<sup>93</sup> A number of memoirs by Soviet generals increasingly uncritical of Stalin's role were read with great interest among Western historians.<sup>94</sup> After a timid attempt to initiate an inner-German dialogue among historians of fascism and National Socialism was harshly suppressed by the head of the SED Politburo's Ideological Commission Kurt Hager in 1964, GDR historians were "hermetically separated" from their Western colleagues and contacts remained limited to international conferences and "reliable cadres" who could occasionally travel across the border well into the 1980s.<sup>95</sup> Following Hager's historiographical crack-down, Ulbricht instead initiated the party-official project to write a canonical multi-volume "History of the German Workers Movement" in 1965, the fifth volume of which established the SED's master narrative once and for all.<sup>96</sup>

Nonetheless, historians in East and West took notice of the research activities and writings produced on the other side. In a rare case, this interest even led to the publication and genuine discussion of a standard Soviet history of World War II by two leading West German historians, Andreas Hillgruber and Hans-Adolf Jacobsen. In 1961, they edited and commented a German translation of Boris Telpuchowski's *The History of the Great*

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<sup>93</sup> Müller, Ueberschär, „Die deutsch-sowjetischen Beziehungen,“ 271. On the brief „thaw“ in the East-West historiographical relations see Sabrow, „Gegensätzliche Geschichtsbilder – gegnerische Geschichtsbilder?,“ 149.

<sup>94</sup> For example the memoirs of the most important former Soviet commander and later defense minister, Georgi K. Schukow, *Erinnerungen und Gedanken* (Stuttgart: dva, 1969). The accounts most critical of Stalin were provided by Pjotr Grigorenko, *Der sowjetische Zusammenbruch 1941* (Frankfurt/Main: Possev, 1969) and Pjotr Grigorenko, Alexander Nekritsch, *Genickschuß. Die Rote Armee am 22. Juni 1941* (Wien, Frankfurt/Main: Europa, 1969). The latter two works openly discussed the purges of the Red Army in the 1930s and its consequences, the general unpreparedness of the Red Army for war in 1941 due to Stalin's ignorance of Hitler's true intentions and Stalin's strategic and tactical miscalculations and mistakes which, among other things, accounted for the horrendous losses during the early months of the war.

<sup>95</sup> Sabrow, „Der Streit um die Verständigung,“ 115.

<sup>96</sup> I discuss this project in detail in Chapter 5.I. and 11.I.

*Patriotic War 1941-1945*, a standard work reflecting the Soviet view of the Eastern Front.<sup>97</sup> In their introduction to Telpuchowski's work, Hillgruber and Jacobsen made some important observations about the nature of Marxist-Leninist historiography as it was practiced by their Soviet and East German colleagues. While they focussed on Soviet scholarship on the subject, their conclusions clearly aimed also at GDR historians who, in the eyes of Hillgruber and Jacobsen, duly submitted their own research agendas to the Soviet master narrative:

For a Soviet historian it basically doesn't matter whether his conclusion is true or false at the moment; all that matters is its usefulness, and that it is being believed. Behind that stands the conviction that this "belief" makes invincible. Is the asserted conclusion useful to the communist party and therefore to the realization of the constantly promised historical end-stage then it is not only justified morally but true in a 'higher, dialectical sense,' that means it reflects 'historical law and socialist Being' and 'correctly' assumes that the victory of the proletariat ... creates the societal and historical precondition for the realization of the 'entire truth.' To record and interpret the diversity of historical reality, to describe 'how it really was' (Ranke), often even remains an annoying side-product for the scientist of the Eastern bloc. History is less *contemplatio* ... but first of all *agitatio*, a sharp weapon of the mind, mercilessly and brutally employed, an instrument of hate and irreconcilable enmity which forces the Soviet-communist historian to relegate himself to a highly-paid henchmen of communism.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Telpuchowski, *Die sowjetische Geschichte des Großen Vaterländischen Krieges 1941-1945*. In their introduction to the book, Hillgruber and Jacobsen undertook the rare effort to not only give a fair overview of Soviet historiography – carefully weighing its strengths, weaknesses, tendencies, and politics – but also engaged in a serious discussion about some of the most blatant claims of Soviet historians against “bourgeois” and “reactionary” scholars. In a discussion of the Teheran conference and the relevant documentary evidence, for example, Hillgruber and Jacobsen refuted Soviet claims that Stalin had never advocated the partition and permanent weakening of Germany. Stalin's famous and often-cited quote from 1945 – the “Hitlers come and go, but the German nation, the German state prevails” – is here confronted with Stalin's remarks at the Teheran conference, quoted from a conference protocol to which all Soviet historians referred in their works but without ever citing Stalin's blunt remarks: “Marshall Stalin said he believed that if Germany should be fragmented then it should be thoroughly fragmented and this was not a question of a division of Germany into five or six states and two territories as the president [Roosevelt] had suggested. Yet, he preferred the president's plan to Mr. Churchill's suggestion [to permanently separate Prussia, the ‘evil nucleus of German militarism,’ from the rest of Germany]. He [Stalin] believed that the inclusion of German territories into the framework of a larger confederation will only give the German elements the opportunity to found a large state yet again. He continued he didn't believe that they were differences between Germans; all German soldiers fought like devils, and the only exception were the Austrians.” See Hillgruber, Jacobsen, “Der Zweite Weltkrieg im Spiegel der sowjetkommunistischen Geschichtsschreibung,” in Telpuchowski, *Die sowjetische Geschichte des Großen Vaterländischen Krieges*, 73f.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

This harsh verdict about the nature of communist historiography indeed captured the main features of East German and Soviet historical research and writing. Communist, declaredly “Marxist-Leninist” historians viewed history as weapon and tool of politics in general, and of the anti-imperialist/antifascist class-struggle in particular. However, the scholarship on the Eastern Front war – despite its political bias, direction and instrumentalization – has produced a number of historical studies which, based on authentic documentary evidence, contributed to the reconstruction of events happening on the Eastern Front that Western historians decided to ignore for a long time.<sup>99</sup>

Specifically, and resulting directly from the materialist Marxist-Leninist view of history, this body of scholarship focussed on the economic aspects of the war against the Soviet Union: its planned and executed exploitation, and the enslavement and resultant killing of millions of people. As the following section demonstrates, these were the “truths” East German historians as “the guardians of the moral flame”<sup>100</sup> of antifascism in the GDR were instructed and willing to describe, while others, such as the mass murder of the Jews, or the Western front, or the non-Communist resistance, were – at least until the 1970s – relegated to the status of footnotes in World War II history.

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<sup>99</sup> As a rule and well into the 1970s, industrialists who had cooperated with National Socialism and who had profited from this alliance were largely viewed “as tools of Hitler without their own will,” as Müller and Ueberschär have noted, see their “Die deutsch-sowjetischen Beziehungen,” 269.

<sup>100</sup> Konrad Jarausch, “The failure of East German antifascism. Some Ironies of History as Politics,” *German Studies Review*, vol. 14, no.1 (February 1991), 85-102, quote on 85. A good analysis of the legacy of East German historiography on fascism is Werner Röhr, “Faschismusforschung in der DDR. Eine Problemskizze,” *Bulletin für Faschismus- und Weltkriegsforschung*, vol. 16 (2001), 3-74. See also Kappner, *Erstarrte Geschichte*.

### III. The “Decisive War:” The Eastern Front in East German Historiography

For most of the 1950s the events of the Eastern Front remained a subject more of SED propaganda than of historical research.<sup>101</sup> Contemporary events such as the June uprising in 1953, West German remilitarization and bloc integration, as well as the flood of apologetic generals’ memoirs prompted the SED to narrate the history of the Eastern Front primarily in terms of its political functionality and alleged deterring potential. This propaganda, a good example of which is Albert Norden’s 1954 book *Between Berlin and Moscow*, was not limited to presenting the population with a coherently tailored version of the Eastern Front war.<sup>102</sup> It also aimed at denouncing Adenauer’s Germany and the West, above all the United States, for plotting another attack against the Soviet Union with Hitler’s former generals and the usual suspects among the monopoly capitalists. Texts like these remembered history not in order to remember a brutal conflict happening in the past but to describe and embroider a conflict of the present.

The year 1959, the twentieth anniversary of the outbreak of World War II, was a turning point in the history of the inner-German conflict over the war’s official commemoration and historiographical confrontation. From the East German point of view, the 1950s had confirmed that the Federal Republic had become an aggressive, “neo-Fascist” state: its leaders, the “henchmen of US American imperialism” had

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<sup>101</sup> A look through the annual bibliography in the *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* for the years 1953-1959 shows how remarkably marginal the writing of contemporary history, including World War II, was during that decade. For a recent assessment of GDR historiography with a focus on scholarship on the Third Reich see Roehr, “Faschismusforschung in der DDR.” More general, Jarausch, “The failure of East German antifascism,” and Georg Iggers, “Literaturbericht: Einige Aspekte neuer Arbeiten in der DDR über die neuere Deutsche Geschichte,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 14 (1988), 542-557.

<sup>102</sup> Norden, *Zwischen Berlin und Moskau*. Another example is Abusch’s *Stalin und die Schicksalsfragen der deutschen Nation*, discussed at the beginning of Chapter 5.

remilitarized it, and Adenauer's alleged unwillingness to root out fascism and its material basis both nurtured and reflected a persisting reactionary agenda – the worst outgrowths of which seemed to materialize in a series of anti-Semitic hate crimes in 1959/60 and the ongoing anti-communist campaign. In Ulbricht's words, it was the "breeding ground" of Adenauer's "militaristic-clerical regime" on which "fascist restoration and anti-Semitism pullulated."<sup>103</sup> It was Albert Norden again who exploited the issue most effectively in a pamphlet which accused the Adenauer administration of "nurturing Anti-Semitism" and thus instigating the "hunt against the Jews."<sup>104</sup> "The SED "countered" this "*Refaschisierung*"<sup>105</sup> with an ideological offensive aimed not only at denouncing West Germany as breeding ground of neo-fascism – the Norden campaign against "Hitler's blood judges in the service of the Adenauer-regime" has already been mentioned – but also at ridiculing and undermining those West German politicians, intellectuals and publicists who most explicitly criticized these developments.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Open letter from Ulbricht to Adenauer denouncing the wave of anti-Semitic incidents in the FRG in 1959, quoted in "Vorlage an die Ideologische Kommission betrifft Auseinandersetzung mit der These von der unbewältigten Vergangenheit," December 1, 1960. BA/SAPMO, DY 30/IV 2/9.01/5, 41. For the SED agitators in the "Ideological Division," these crimes were incited by the "cold warriors" around Adenauer, i.e. "by the ministry of war and its 'Office for Strategic Warfare.'" In their perception, the West German masses were increasingly "discontent" with the "reduction of social measures by the Bonn nuclear strategists," and with the alleged growing desire to cooperate with the GDR, especially among the SPD and labor unions. "All this didn't fit in the cold warriors' nuclear armament plans and Blitzkrieg conceptions. They needed particularly at that point in time an act which diverted the West German public from the reactionary domestic and foreign policy course." Thus, the "war ministry" initiated the anti-Semitic campaign. But "this wave proved to be a boomerang. West Germany was unmasked yet again as breeding ground and carrier of anti-Semitism and revanchism." Ibid., 30.

<sup>104</sup> Cf. Reichel, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, 151. I was unable to locate the text, Reichel provides no detailed citation.

<sup>105</sup> The SED's "Sciences Division" and "Ideological Division" used this term to describe the alleged agenda of turning the FRG into a fascist state again. See the material enclosed in the "Vorlage an die Ideologische Kommission betrifft Auseinandersetzung mit der These von der unbewältigten Vergangenheit," December 1, 1960. BA/SAPMO, DY 30/IV 2/9.01/5, 37.

<sup>106</sup> The documents refer only nebulously to "politicians, publicists, historians and military people" who "propagate the thesis of the un-mastered past" in the West. One concrete author the commission dealing

Aside from the Norden campaigns, and the GDR's official attempts to instrumentalize the Eichmann and Auschwitz trials, the SED Politburo founded the "Ideological Commission" in 1960 to intensify and professionalize the ideologically and politically useful appropriation of history to the present. Placed under Kurt Hager, who also headed the SED Central Committee's "Sciences Division," one of the first projects of the commission was to react to the critical West German debate about the "unmastered past" (*unbewältigte Vergangenheit*). This debate was particularly challenging to the SED since it seemed to finally address those issues which the SED had long claimed had been left untouched by West German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* – the personal, institutional and structural continuities between Nazi Germany and the Federal Republic. Yet, instead of greeting this genuine interest in a more critical and intensive dealing with the legacies of the "Third Reich," the East German communists responded with a campaign aimed at exposing the debate as a hoax: in truth, they claimed, it was launched to "trivialize the *Refaschisierung* of West Germany," to "distort the causes of fascism's revival in West Germany," and thus to "prevent the fight against neo-fascism and its

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with the "thesis of the unmastered past" led by historian Lothar Berthold was Walter Dirks' essay „Unbewältigte Vergangenheit – demokratische Zukunft,“ (*Frankfurter Hefte*, 3 (1960), 153-158), which called for a radically new approach in confronting the Nazi past: Germans should "secularize" the catholic practice of confession (invocation of the Holy Spirit, search of conscience, regret, confession, pledge and reparation). Implicitly, this was a critique of the Adenauer's *Vergangenheitspolitik* and its negative consequences for West German democracy. See "Vorlage an die Ideologische Kommission betrifft Auseinandersetzung mit der These von der unbewältigten Vergangenheit," December 1, 1960. BA/SAPMO, DY 30/IV 2/9.01/5, 32. Theodor W. Adorno had given his famous talk on "Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit?" in 1959; it was first printed in *Bericht über die Erzieherkonferenz am 6. und 7. November 1959 in Wiesbaden*, ed. Deutscher Koordinierungsrat der Gesellschaft für Christlich-Jüdische Zusammenarbeit (Frankfurt/Main, 1960), 12-23. It was not mentioned in the commissioners memo. For a brief summary of the critical debate about the "*unbewältigte Vergangenheit*" in the Federal Republic at the time, see Reichel, *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, 145-148.



roots.”<sup>107</sup> This was a fake debate intended to “appease the masses and the international public” who were shocked about the anti-Semitic crime series of 1959. The true motive behind this “feigned critique of fascism” was rather the “rehabilitation of its imperialist backers, the current leaders in the Bonn state, and of the fascist generals,” so that they, along with the USA, “can now employ [the masses] against the socialist states.”<sup>108</sup> Yet again, it all came down to uncovering the threat of another “Barbarossa.” Hanna Wolf (1908-1999), who as head of the party academy “Karl Marx” was closely involved in the internal strategic discussions, pointedly summarized the principle goal of the campaign against the “thesis of the un-mastered past:” it was to “prove the anti-Soviet tendencies in all works on the ‘un-mastered past.’”<sup>109</sup>

Precisely at the time when the West German public started to take a more differentiated and critical interest in the history of National Socialism and its crimes, the SED waged a new propaganda war on two fronts, an ideological and an academic front: on the one hand, it further intensified the campaign against the “reactionary” and “neo-fascist” tendencies in the West plotting a new attack against the Soviet Union and the socialist camp. On the other hand, the party initiated historical research on Nazi and war crimes based on documentary evidence – the results of which would eventually have to serve the same goal. Propaganda and historiography were thus as closely linked in the GDR as historiography and politics. Writing the history of the Eastern Front always

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<sup>107</sup> The analysis was written by Günter Hortschansky, member of the working group assigned with analyzing the West German debate within Hager’s “Sciences Division,” as work basis for the “Ideological Commission.” “Vorlage an die Ideologische Kommission betrifft Auseinandersetzung mit der These von der unbewältigten Vergangenheit,” December 1, 1960. BA/SAPMO, DY 30/IV 2/9.01/5, 37, 41.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>109</sup> Lothar Berthold, “Bemerkungen zur Arbeit der Arbeitsgruppe ‘Unbewältigte Vergangenheit,’” January 1, 1961, BA/SAPMO, DY 30/IV 2/9.01/5, 74.

meant – and was intended – to confirm and reflect the SED’s official narrative, and to support the propagandistic efforts to popularize it both inside the GDR and across the wall.

On the second, the academic front, the SED’s party academy “Karl Marx” kicked off a series of conferences which focussed as much on the history of World War II as on the “falsifications” produced by Western “bourgeois” historiography. In May 1959, the “II. Scientific Meeting of the Historians’ Commission of the GDR and the USSR” dedicated to the topic “German Imperialism and the Second World War” took place at the academy in Berlin.<sup>110</sup> The assembled Soviet and East German historians reconstructed the history of the war by focussing exclusively on the Eastern Front and the communist resistance and thus duly fulfilling a detailed agenda agreed on upfront. The “scientific tasks and goals of the conference” were the following:

- 1) To uncover the role of German imperialism in preparing and launching World War II.
- 2) To unmask German imperialism’s methods with regards to the economic, military, political and ideological war preparation.
- 3) To unmask the predatory methods of warfare used by German imperialism in order to enslave the peoples and to gain world dominance.
- 4) To demonstrate the historical lawfulness of the defeat of German imperialism in World War II, the decisive role of the Soviet Union in destroying fascist Germany as well as the role of the masses in the European countries in the victorious fight against fascism.
- 5) To demonstrate the historical importance of the defeat of German imperialism in World War II in light of the profound change in the balance of power between capitalism and socialism.
- 6) To unmask the revival of militarism and imperialism in West Germany in the post-war period and the role of the USA and the other Western powers therein.<sup>111</sup>

This agenda for writing an “unmasking history” of World War II was exemplarily for a number of successor conferences hosted by the SED during the following years. The

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<sup>110</sup> Stefan Doernberg, ed., *Der Zweite Weltkrieg 1939-1945. Wirklichkeit und Fälschung* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1959), VIII.

<sup>111</sup> “Plan für die Durchführung der 2. wissenschaftlichen Tagung der Kommission der Historiker der DDR und der UdSSR im Mai 1959,” confirmed by the commission on November 20, 1958. BA/SAPMO, DY 30/IV 2/9.09/58, 1.

second point of its agenda directly reflects the priorities a Marxist-Leninist historiography on the causes of World War II was to set.

Accordingly, communist historiography on the Second World War stressed the economic and military aspects the most, while the political and ideological motives, which would have required a discussion of Hitler's popular support for his political program and racial theory, remained of minor interest. The third agenda point, to "unmask the predatory methods of warfare" employed to enslave the population in the occupied territories indicates not a historical, or a moral but a *calculated* interest in Nazi and war crimes committed against non-Germans all over Europe. Indeed, the same directive included a detailed list of issues to discuss in a conference section on "the occupation policies of German imperialism and the antifascist resistance movement in Germany and the occupied territories:" the "plunder of the occupied countries and the Soviet Union by German fascism," the exploitation of "foreign forced laborers, KZ-inmates, and POWs as slaves by the German monopoly capital," and the "fascist extermination policy in the occupied and satellite states," which refers to the Holocaust in the usual euphemistic wording.<sup>112</sup>

The published result, however, contained not a single article dedicated to either of these three crime complexes. The book emerging from this conference was entitled "The Second World War 1939-1945. Reality and Falsification."<sup>113</sup> The included ten essays on the military history of World War II offered a mix of historical argumentation and

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<sup>112</sup> "Plan für die Durchführung der 2. wissenschaftlichen Tagung der Kommission der Historiker der DDR und der UdSSR im Mai 1959," BA/SAPMO, DY 30/IV 2/9.09/58, 4.

<sup>113</sup> Doernberg, ed., *Der Zweite Weltkrieg 1939-1945*.

political confrontation. All authors narrated the official (Soviet) history of the war – in fact reduced to the “Great Patriotic War” – while at the same time constantly repudiating Western “revisionist” historiography.<sup>114</sup> Of the seven essays dealing with the military history, six focussed on the Eastern Front war, e.g. on the various aspects of the battle of Stalingrad and the “decisive role of the Soviet Union.”<sup>115</sup>

The general direction of all essays might be best exemplified by Leo Stern’s contribution to the volume. Stern was one of the most important and influential GDR historians in the 1950s. Himself an Eastern Front veteran, Stern was one of Ulbricht’s most reliable allies in the process of establishing a Marxist-Leninist historiography in the GDR. He was professor at the University of Halle between 1950 and 1966, became its rector in 1953 (until 1959) and was co-founder and co-editor of the most important East German historical periodical *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* (established in 1952). An expert on the history of the workers movement, Stern argued in his contribution to the conference volume that his Western colleagues were out to rewrite World War II history in order to justify another “crusade” against “Marxism, Leninism, and Bolshevism.” He noted that amidst the flood of publications by “former statesmen, diplomats, politicians, military writers, professional and amateur historians, and publicists,” the “actual wirepuller of the Third Reich” kept silent about the terror against German workers, the fascist mass murders in the concentration camps, the wars of plunder against Europe – as

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<sup>114</sup> The best example is Leo Stern’s essay „Revanchistische Einstellungen der Geschichte des zweiten Weltkrieges,” in *ibid.*, 1-29.

<sup>115</sup> Three leading Soviet historians present Moscow’s official view of the Great Patriotic War: P. A. Shilin, “Die entscheidende Rolle der Sowjetunion im zweiten Weltkrieg,” A. Jeromenko (a former Red Army commander and Stalingrad veteran himself), „Der historische Sieg bei Stalingrad,” and B. S. Telpuchowski, „Die grundlegende Wende im Verlauf des zweiten Weltkrieges.“

did the “profit hyenas who benefited economically from the criminal war of extermination against the Jews, Poles, Czechs, Yugoslavs and other peoples.”<sup>116</sup> Stern concluded that just as under Wilhelm II. and Hitler, these individuals “pull the wires in the background,” the only difference being that “today the West German politicians and ideologues have to serve *two* masters – the German and the American monopoly capital.”<sup>117</sup> With a cynicism and disgust rarely to be found even among the most committed GDR historians, Stern attacked the intellectual and political elites of the Federal Republic as revanchist wolves in a democratic sheep’s pelt:

The most dedicated Nazis of yesterday, the most fanatic militarists, revanchists, and imperialists of today now pose as the deeply moral democrats, as miraculously refined Europeans since the experience of 1945, as eager fighters for morality, freedom and justice, as burning admirer of occidental culture, as steadfast contender for the cause of God, the church and Christianity, as faithful guardian of the ‘unity of Western civilization,’ as crusaders against Marxism, Leninism, and Bolshevism equipped with all soldierly virtues ... Yet all of this only under the precondition that this Europe is being led by a Germany armed with the most modern weapons, nuclear arms and rockets. All war historians, memoir writers, Nazi generals and political commentators thereby more or less openly express the thought that the strategic spearhead of the ‘united Europe’ led militarily by West Germany will be directed against the Soviet Union, the socialist world system, especially against the GDR, Czechoslovakia, and Poland.

The open or concealed tendencies in the reactionary historiography on World War II are thus nothing else than the Christian-occidentally, European-liberally, democratic-progressively souped-up and only well-too-known old tendencies of German imperialism, militarism and revanchism, of the brutal reaction, of military aggression and Cold War.<sup>118</sup>

By placing West German historiography at the center of this crude conspiracy theory – in which paradoxically the FRG was both the “servant of two masters” and the leader of an impending attack – Stern dragged the history of World War II onto the purely ideological battlefield. The concrete “falsifications” he then identified constitute those historical *topoi* with which GDR historians of World War II – despite a feasible differentiation and

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<sup>116</sup> In this rare case, Stern seemed to have forgotten to mention the main group of victims – Soviet citizens.

<sup>117</sup> Stern, „Revanchistische Einstellungen der Geschichte des zweiten Weltkrieges,“ in Doernberg, ed., *Der Zweite Weltkrieg 1939-1945*, 1f. [Emphasis in original].

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 2.

professionalization of the field since the 1970s<sup>119</sup> – would continue to operate over the coming decades in their quest to confirm that only their country had learned the “right lessons of the past.” Stern listed ten “portions” of World War II history in which “reactionary falsifications” occurred and then focused on the first three, in his view the “most important ones:”

1. The pre-history of the World War II,
2. The fascist attack against the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941,
3. The so-called turning points of the World War II,
4. The role of the Soviet Army in the World War II,
5. The German resistance movement and the myth of July 20, [1944],
6. The policy of the Western powers during the World War II,
7. The antifascist fight of the peoples suppressed by Hitler fascism,
8. The collapse of Hitlergermany and the Nuremberg war crimes trials,
9. The so-called Hitler-image and the role of the SS and other Nazi-formations in World War II,
10. The so-called integration of Europe as ideological brace [*Klammer*] of the aggressive NATO-pact.<sup>120</sup>

Elaborating his first point, Stern countered the “tendency to declare Hitler as the only responsible and guilty person in order to rehabilitate *those* circles who brought him to power and whose interests he represented.”<sup>121</sup> He further criticized his Western colleagues for failing to establish that with their “policy of appeasement” the Western powers deserved to be held accountable as well. Worse, with regards to the Nazi-Soviet-Non-

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<sup>119</sup> Cf. Sabrow, „Parteiliches Wissenschaftsideal und historische Forschungspraxis. Überlegungen zum Akademie-Institut für Geschichte (1956-1989),“ in Sabrow, Walter, eds., *Historische Forschung und sozialistische Diktatur*, 195-225. Sabrow’s essay on what he calls the “instrumental historical science” in the GDR dates the „emergence of a scientific self-dynamic [*Eigendynamik*] in the early 1970s and describes that with the resignation of Walter Ulbricht and the resultant disappearance of his dogma of a “national basic conception” for the writing of history, a phase began during which the “primate of politics in the historical sciences” was not questioned on a fundamental level, but it “came to be on the defense.” In practice, for example, this entailed that historians of post-1945 East German history could begin to include the question of the Soviet role in the “democratic-antifascist revolution.” Ibid., 214f. See also Werner Bramke, “Freiräume und Grenzen eines Historikers im DDR-System. Reflexionen sechs Jahre danach,” in Karl Heinrich Pohl, ed., *Historiker in der DDR* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), 28-44. Bramke speaks for the same period of a significant „liberalisation“ and a „gradual dissolution of the theoretical and methodological solidification.” Ibid., 35.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. Stern supports his claims with extensive references to Western works.

Aggression-Pact, “there are orgies of falsifications and defamations” inspired by anti-Soviet hatred which only seek to put the blame for the “starting shot” of World War II on the Soviet Union, and to “put a political equal sign between Hitlergermany and the Soviet Union.”<sup>122</sup> Clearly referring to the arguments of Western proponents of the totalitarianism model, Stern reasoned that this pact instead served the “self-preservation” of the Soviet state, it was forced upon it by a year-long policy of isolation of England and France against the Soviet Union, and its main “historical objective” had been to “break up the global imperialist conspiracy against the Soviet Union, and to secure the Soviet people, if only for a limited time, an important military breathing space.”<sup>123</sup> This version, of course, denied that Stalin welcomed the opportunity to wipe out the Polish state, and made no mention of the extensive military, logistic and economic assistance given by the Soviets to Nazi Germany between 1939 and 1941. This, after all, would have meant to admit that the pact and its secret protocol were – in the balanced words of a leading Western World War II historian – “part of a mistaken and adventurous policy by Stalin which helped bring on a war which cost their people the most terrible losses and for which the country had not been properly prepared.”<sup>124</sup>

Stern’s second point dealt critically with the thesis of a “preventive war” and repudiated claims of a planned Soviet attack against Nazi Germany and the West. Rather, it had been the Western powers in their anti-communist and anti-Soviet delusion who had

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>124</sup> Gerhard L. Weinberg, “The Nazi-Soviet pacts of 1939: A half century later,” in idem, *Germany, Hitler, and World War II. Essay in modern German and world history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 180.

sought to “direct Hitler’s aggression onto the right track” – namely against the Soviet Union.<sup>125</sup> Finally, by denying that the battles of Moscow and Stalingrad were the decisive turning-points of the war, Western historiography neglected the Soviet Unions crucial role in the fight against Nazi Germany, and thus refused to accept that the Eastern Front was the “decisive front of World War II.” Although this was a conclusion Western historians came to share over time, Stern’s critique was inspired by what such a neglect implied in his own days: the refusal to acknowledge what the Communist world saw as its historically proven triumph after 1945. If, according to the laws of history, World War I had been the “cradle of the Soviet Revolution,” World War II was its baptism of fire for it “planted its flags in the very heart of Europe.”<sup>126</sup> This outcome seemed to have manifested once and for all the historical supremacy of socialism over capitalism – and Stern wanted history to be written accordingly.

In order to codify and popularize this interpretation of World War II, Stern thus pushed East German historians to concentrate more on writing its proper history, an area, he claimed, “we have all-too-long neglected.”<sup>127</sup> Indeed, despite a few articles on selected aspects of the Eastern war, such as the place of the “Plan Barbarossa” in the overall scheme of Hitler’s policy<sup>128</sup> or the Wehrmacht’s warfare against Soviet partisans,<sup>129</sup> and

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<sup>125</sup> Stern, „Revanchistische Einstellungen der Geschichte des zweiten Weltkrieges,“ in Doernberg, ed., *Der Zweite Weltkrieg 1939-1945. Wirklichkeit und Fälschung*, 13.

<sup>126</sup> Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion*, 361.

<sup>127</sup> Stern, „Revanchistische Einstellungen der Geschichte des zweiten Weltkrieges,“ in Doernberg, ed., *Der Zweite Weltkrieg 1939-1945*, 29.

<sup>128</sup> Stefan Doernberg, „Der Barbarossaplan in Politik und Kriegführung Hitlerdeutschlands 1940/41,“ *ZfG* 7, no. 3, 1959, 529-552.

<sup>129</sup> Heinz Kühnrich, „Die Darstellung der Partisanenbewegung in der westdeutschen Historiographie. Zu einigen Fragen des Partisanenkampfes während des zweiten Weltkrieges,“ *ZfG* 8, 1960, 7-40.



aside from the first illustrated history of the battle of Stalingrad appearing in 1960,<sup>130</sup> little original research had been done thus far. In Stern's view, only a strong focus on World War II history would enable the East German historical profession to turn an "ideological and political explosive *against* us into an explosive *for* us."<sup>131</sup> His concluding sentences can be read as programmatic statement inaugurating a new era of historical research on World War II in the GDR. It not only set the tone for the stories to be written, but also determined the direction in which historians were to take their research:

Our most urgent task is to explore the objective historical truth about various problems of World War II. We have to write the Marxist history of World War II long awaited of us. We must turn it into a heavy and sharply burnished weapon against all falsifiers and defamers, agitators and instigators who subjectively or objectively [and] in the service of American and German imperialism pursue the ideological preparation of a third world war. We can do it – we have to do it.<sup>132</sup>

The twentieth anniversary of the German attack against the Soviet Union in 1961 offered the opportunity to set this program into action. In the midst of the rising Cold War tensions over the Berlin question and faced with the continuous flight of hundreds of thousands of East Germans to the West, the SED orchestrated the official commemoration of "Operation Barbarossa" to directly relate to these current events. As already discussed in chapter 6, the SED stretched the commemoration campaign in the summer of 1961 from late June into early August, deliberately creating the impression that the building of the wall on August 13, 1961 was justified and necessary in order to

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<sup>130</sup> Bergschicker, *Stalingrad*. For a contemporary analysis of the historiography on World War II, see Gerhard Förster, „Der Stand der Erforschung der Geschichte des zweiten Weltkrieges in der DDR [Literaturbericht],“ in *ZfG* 8 (Sonderheft), 1960, 403ff. A bibliography of all relevant East German and Soviet works until 1972 was published in West Germany by Manfred Hellmann, ed., *Osteuropa in der historischen Forschung der DDR*. Vol. 2: "Bibliographie" (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1972), 211-254.

<sup>131</sup> Stern, „Revanchistische Einstellungen der Geschichte des zweiten Weltkrieges,“ in Doernberg, ed., *Der Zweite Weltkrieg 1939-1945*, 29. [Emphasis in original].

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 29.

defend the GDR (and the Eastern bloc) against Western imperialism and thus to prevent another “Barbarossa.”

In June 1961, the SED gathered once again the “Commission of the Historians of the GDR and the USSR” for a conference in Berlin, this time to present and discuss recent research on the “Aggression of German Imperialism against the USSR.”<sup>133</sup> Many professional historians shared Ulbricht’s understanding of history as “weapon.” They also seemed to agree with his ludicrous dictum that historians of his time were “dealing too much with questions of the past.” Ulbricht had made this statement („*unsere Geschichtswissenschaften befassen sich zu sehr mit Fragen der Vergangenheit*“) in 1955, the year in which the SED Politburo decreed a „reform“ of the historical sciences in the GDR.<sup>134</sup> The Politburo decree „The Improvement of Research and Teaching in the Historical Science of the German Democratic Republic” (dated July 5, 1955) declared historiography „a sharp ideological weapon“ and saw one of its main tasks in confronting the „reactionary falsification” of the German and Soviet pasts. The Politburo felt that Western accounts failed to acknowledge the historical role and achievements of the Soviet Union and the antifascist legacy of German communism. It decreed that GDR historians ought to fight the continuation of Nazi “*Ostforschung*” in the West. On the whole, the SED Politburo wanted historians to overcome the description and conceptualization of German history merely in terms of its failures (“*deutsche Geschichte*

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<sup>133</sup> This was the title of the seventh meeting of the “Commission of GDR and USSR Historians” held at the Institute for History, Academy of the Sciences, in Berlin, June 19-25, 1961. See the protocol in BA/SAPMO DY30 IV 2/9.09/58.

<sup>134</sup> Quoted in Sabrow, *Geschichte als Herrschaftsdiskurs*, 227. The Politburo decree is printed in *Dokumente der SED*, V, 337-368.

*als einzige Misere*”). Moreover, they should “educate the masses to hatred against reactionary views,” and in turn should contribute to the destruction of any remnants of the hate campaign (“*Hetze*”) against the Soviet Union.<sup>135</sup>

The agenda of the selected circle of German and Soviet historians gathered in June 1961, among Jürgen Kuczynski, Leo Stern, Hanna Wolf (1908-1999)<sup>136</sup>, Walter Bartel (1904-1992)<sup>137</sup>, Alfred Anderle (born 1925)<sup>138</sup>, and historian Stefan Doernberg (born 1924), the later director of the German Institute for Contemporary History (1962-1971), reflected the SED’s desire to properly connect the past with the present not only rhetorically but also scientifically. The participation of invited media representatives assured the appropriate public resonance. Among the themes discussed at the meeting were “The Great Patriotic war of the Soviet Union against German fascism – a just peoples’ war for the defense of the socialist state and the cause of humanity” (presented by Soviet historian Evgenij A. Boltin), “The preparation of the aggressive plans by OKW and OKH” (AeO-head Otto Korfes), and “On the participation of German antifascists in the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union” (historian Stefan Doernberg). The final

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<sup>135</sup> The Politburo decree „Die Verbesserung der Forschung und Lehre in der Geschichtswissenschaft der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik“ (July 5, 1955) is printed in *Dokumente der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, vol. 5, 337-368. The decree also initiated the publication of a historical periodical, the *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, the establishment of the Institute of History at the Academy of the Sciences, and the founding of a Museum for German History in Berlin.

<sup>136</sup> Hanna Wolf, historian and long-time rector of the party academy “Karl Marx” (1950-1983).

<sup>137</sup> A worker’s son, 1923 KPD, 1933-1935 imprisoned in Brandenburg-Görden, exile and underground, 1939 again arrested, 1939-1945 KZ Buchenwald where he was among the leaders of the illegal KPD, 1943 head of the “International Camp Committee,” after the war in various functions longtime member of the Buchenwald-Committee; 1946-1953 Wilhelm Pieck’s personal assistant, 1953 purged in wake of Franz Dählem and Noel H. Field cases, thereafter professor for modern and contemporary history at the University of Leipzig, 1957-1962 director of the German Institute for Contemporary History, 1962 tenure position at the Humboldt University .

<sup>138</sup> Anderle had joined the NSDAP as late as 1943, was taken prisoner in the Soviet Union, returned 1947; after the war SED-member, 1956-1959 lecturer at the ZK’s Institute for History, 1959-1990 University of Halle.

protocol noted that several conference contributions would be published in journals such as *Einheit* and *Militärwesen* in the GDR, and that a book would be put out as well.<sup>139</sup>

The resultant conference volume entitled “*June 1941: On the History of the Hitlerfascist Attack against the Soviet Union*” appeared the same year and the articles included focused on the Soviet Union’s role as Hitler’s prime victim and victor. They were “dedicated to the memory”<sup>140</sup> of the veterans of the antifascist struggle on the Eastern Front and in all of Europe. But the quality of the essays varied: for example, Alfred Anderle’s piece on the “Road to June 22, 1941” was the routine finger pointing against an Anti-Soviet conspiracy started in 1917, drawing a direct line from the Western rejection of the Soviet experiment to the “anti-Soviet war plans of German monopolists and *Junkers*” to Hitler’s war of extermination. One more original contribution dealt with the “Criminal Role of *IG Farben* during the Fascist Aggression against the Soviet Union.”<sup>141</sup> As the title indicates, this text was neither free of polemics nor un-biased, yet it

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<sup>139</sup> See the protocol in BA/SAPMO DY30 IV 2/9.09/58, 2f. While no conference volume seems to have been published as planned, a number of works about the Wehrmacht’s warfare in the Soviet Union were put out following the conference. Among them Alfred Anderle, Werner Basler, eds., *Juni 1941. Beiträge zur Geschichte des Hitlerfaschistischen Überfalls auf die Sowjetunion* (= *Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Geschichte der Völker der UdSSR an der Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg*, Series B, vol. 2), (Berlin: Rütten & Loening, 1961). And the following Soviet works translated into German for publication in the GDR: Grigorij Abramovic Deborin, Rolf Feicht, eds., *Die Vorbereitung und Entfesselung des zweiten Weltkrieges durch die imperialistischen Mächte* (= *Geschichte des Grossen Vaterländischen Krieges der Sowjetunion*, vol. 1, ed. Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim Zentralkomitee der Kommunistischen Partei der Sowjetunion; German edition by Hans Gossens, Walter Bartel, et.al. (Berlin (Ost): Militärverlag, 1962). Grigorij Andreevic Below, Evgenij A. Boltin, *Verbrecherische Ziele - verbrecherische Mittel. Dokumente der Okkupationspolitik des faschistischen Deutschlands auf dem Territorium der UdSSR (1941-1944)* (Moskau: Verlag für Fremdsprachliche Literatur, 1963).

<sup>140</sup> Anderle, Basler, eds., *Juni 1941*, 7.

<sup>141</sup> Siegmur Quilitzsch, “Zur verbrecherischen Rolle der IG Farben während der faschistischen Aggression gegen die Sowjetunion,” in Anderle, ed., *Juni 1941*, 157-187. In 1967, Dietrich Eichholtz voluminous „History of the German War economy“ appeared as a first comprehensive Marxist-Leninist analysis of the relationship between the German industry and the Nazi regime. See Dietrich Eichholtz, *Geschichte der deutschen Kriegswirtschaft 1939 - 1945*, 3 vols. (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1967ff.), particularly volume II: 1941-1943. Eichholtz’s work (i.e. the de-ideologized core of it) was well-received among influential

was based on a number of incriminating documents from the company archives as well as on records from the Nuremberg Tribunal. The core result of this research – that the *IG Farben* company was deeply involved in and profited from the Nazi system of economic exploitation and physical extermination – was later confirmed by studies of Western historians.<sup>142</sup>

Historical research on the war on the Eastern Front intensified not only in the wake of the conference in 1961, but also as a result of an orchestrated effort to instrumentalize the judicial proceedings against Nazi war criminals both outside the GDR, as in the case of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, and the Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt/Main, and inside the GDR as in the case of the show trial (in absence) against Theodor Oberländer, the West German Minister for Expellees and Refugees Affairs. Oberländer, who during the Nazi years contributed as “*Ostforscher*” to Hitler’s “Eastern policies” of Germanization, and to the “solution” of the “Jewish question” in Eastern Europe, was (in absence) sentenced to life in prison by the GDR Supreme Court in 1960. The verdict found that Oberländer had “in speech, writing and action propagated and supported the radical ‘Germanization’ of the Eastern European countries ... and the ‘extinction of the Jews.’” The court further declared him guilty of having personally participated in war crimes against Polish (Lemberg massacre, 1941) and Soviet civilians and POWs, communists,

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West German military historians, including Manfred Messerschmidt who furthered the critical scholarship on the Wehrmacht as director of the *Militär-geschichtliche Forschungsamt* in Freiburg. See also the review of the third edition of Eichholtz’s book by Rolf-Dieter Müller in *Militär-geschichtliche Zeitschrift*, 2 (1986), 181-186.

<sup>142</sup> Cf. Peter Hayes, *Industry and Ideology: IG Farben in the Nazi Era* (New York, 1987). See also Hayes’s review of the West German literature on the subject; the same review also included a critique of more recent *IG Farben* historiography in the GDR which, according to Hayes, was filled with “myths” and “misinterpretations.” Peter Hayes, “Zur umstrittenen Geschichte der I.G. Farbenindustrie AG,” in *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, 18 (1992), 404-417.

partisans and Jews.<sup>143</sup> Adenauer, under domestic public pressure, released the minister from his post in May of 1960, only weeks after the East German verdict. A West German court later found no sufficient evidence for his participation in war crimes, and a new trial in 1993 rescinded the 1960 verdict arguing that it was based on fraud documentary evidence.<sup>144</sup>

Whereas the evidence for crimes on the Eastern Front were largely fabricated in the Oberländer case, the GDR used the Eichmann and Auschwitz trials to place authentic historical evidence deposited in East German or Soviet archives in the best possible light not in order to contribute to the search for historical truth and justice but to “prove” a personal and structural continuity between Nazism and the Federal Republic. It was Norden again who initiated and oversaw these activities.<sup>145</sup> The trial of one of the masterminds of the “Final Solution,” Adolf Eichmann, was the first NS case in which the Ministry for State Security was closely involved, and the SED leadership sought to instrumentalize the trial for purely propagandistic reasons – in Norden’s words to “maximally acuminate the Eichmann case against the Bonn regime.”<sup>146</sup> The GDR’s efforts to be admitted to the trial as joint plaintiff failed miserably and the Jerusalem court was repelled by the limpid maneuvers of the East German legal representative Dr. Friedrich Karl Kaul (1906-1981) geared only towards gaining propagandistic capital from

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<sup>143</sup> The verdict is published in *Die Haltung der beiden deutschen Staaten zu den Nazi- und Kriegsverbrechen. Eine Dokumentation*, ed. Generalstaatsanwalt der DDR, Ministerium für Justiz (Berlin (Ost): Staatsverlag, 1965), 74f.

<sup>144</sup> Philipp-Christian Wachs, *Der Fall Theodor Oberländer (1905-1998). Ein Lehrstück deutscher Geschichte* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 1999).

<sup>145</sup> Weinke, *Die Verfolgung von NS-Tätern im geteilten Deutschland*, 151.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 152.

the trial.<sup>147</sup> The SED's Agitation Division declared the trial an absolute priority in the spring of 1960, and instructions given to the media reflected the true motives behind the GDR's "support" of the trial:

It is not only about Eichmann, but [the media] must demonstrate that Eichmann is [*sic*] the instrument of German imperialism, of fascism, which aimed at the extermination of entire nations, not only the Jewish people.

Today in Bonn, Eichmann's backers are sitting again in the key positions of the state, are leading the armed forces as generals, are, as Globke, the right hand of the Chancellor, are sitting in the justice system as blood judges – partly in higher positions than before –, in the foreign ministry, ect.

One must demonstrate the basic differences of politics in Germany: In the GDR, the economic and political roots of imperialism have been rooted out, and therefore anti-Semitism, too. ...

In Bonn, however, where the murderers of the Jews are back in post and dignity [*in Amt und Würde*], antifascists and all those opposing the repetition of the same policy of Eichmann, Globke, Heusinger, ect., are again being jailed. He who hinders the mastering of the past, cannot be the representative of the nation.<sup>148</sup>

This reading not only contains the official East German position on the Holocaust as one crime among others – and on anti-Semitism as an obsolete issue – but they also illustrate the regime's unrelenting effort to connect the past with the present for opportunistic reasons. The goal was yet again to use the opportunity to present the GDR as the better "master" of the Nazi past and to increase its international standing as the "better Germany." These efforts culminated in the publication of the „Brown Book" on „War and Nazi Criminals in the Federal Republic" in 1965, again a pamphlet produced under Albert Norden's supervision. It included (mostly authentic<sup>149</sup>) information about the Nazi

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 151-156.

<sup>148</sup> „Argumentationshinweise Nr. 22" of the „Commission of Argumentation" in the SED's Agitation Division, BA/SAPMO, DY30 IV 2/9.03/10, fiche 1, 53f.

<sup>149</sup> Commenting the third edition of the *Braunbuch* in 2002, Götz Aly to a large extent rehabilitated this pamphlet from its reputation as one of the worst examples of East German "political pornography" produced during the Cold War: "In der alten Bundesrepublik galt der Band lange als politische Pornographie. Natürlich handelte es sich dabei um Propaganda, in wenigen Ausnahmefällen sogar um Fälschungen, aber ein gedankenloses Machwerk war das Braunbuch nicht. Vielmehr erwiesen sich seine empirischen Grundlagen als äußerst beständig, die Irrtumsquote lag deutlich unter einem Prozent. ... [Der Band] dokumentiert eine Phase des binnendeutschen Kalten Krieges, gibt einen extrem parteiischen, aber in der Sache nicht falschen Einblick in die Nazikontinuitäten der alten Bundesrepublik und verschweigt jeden

past of fifteen federal ministers and state secretaries, one hundred generals and admirals of the *Bundeswehr*, about a thousand judges, lawyers, and prosecutors, 245 employees of the foreign ministry as well as about 300 members of the police and the Federal Republic's Secret Service (*Bundesnachrichtendienst*, BND).<sup>150</sup>

The attacks and “unmasking” campaigns against potentially burdened West German individuals called indeed for an “unmasking” historiography which East German historians were eager to provide. This nexus became again clear during the Auschwitz trial. This time, the GDR was admitted as joint plaintiff and the SED made every effort to learn from the failures of the Eichmann trial. On November 19, 1963, four weeks before the start of the trial, the Politburo decreed the founding of an “Auschwitz commission” which was to gather evidence for the involvement of the then largest German chemical company, *IG Farben*, in the process of killing in Auschwitz, and thus to turn the trial into a “tribunal against the *IG Farben* company.”<sup>151</sup> Based on this decree, the SED's Security Division widened the agenda in February of 1964, when the trial proceedings also touched on the Wehrmacht's participation in the mass murder. A memo to the National Defense Ministry's Political Division, which oversaw the Institute for Military History in Potsdam, detailed why the focus on Wehrmacht crimes was important and what concrete research tasks were to be fulfilled:

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Hinweis auf vergleichbare Kontinuitäten in der einstigen „DDR.“ Götz Aly, „Lob des antifaschistischen Rentners: Reprint des Braunbuchs,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, August 9, 2002.

<sup>150</sup> *Braunbuch: Kriegs- und Naziverbrecher in der Bundesrepublik. Staat, Wirtschaft, Armee, Verwaltung, Justiz, Wissenschaft*, ed. Nationalrat der Nationalen Front des Demokratischen Deutschland, Dokumentationszentrum der Staatlichen Archivverwaltung der DDR (Berlin (Ost): Staatsverlag der DDR, 1965).

<sup>151</sup> Quoted in Weinke, *Die Verfolgung von NS-Tätern im geteilten Deutschland*, 239.



The question of the participation of the fascist Wehrmacht in the mass extermination in the concentration camps plays now an important role as well. In order to generate the relevant evidence on this matter it is necessary to thoroughly work through the records of the IMT successor trial against the OKW (Case 12) which are deposited in the German Central Archive [in Potsdam] and possibly in the Institute for Military History.

What matters most is to prove that the fascist Wehrmacht helped admitting POWs in concentration camps (Commissar Order, Commando Order, ect.), that these orders were drafted in the OKW/OKH by the militarists who play a role in the Federal Republic today, that the executioners of these murderous orders are active today in the *Bundeswehr*, Federal Border Guard, etc.”<sup>152</sup>

The Institute for Military History in Potsdam was assigned with this “extremely important and urgent matter” and judging from what was published in the following years, the historians there fulfilled their assignment splendidly. Since the Wehrmacht *was* involved in various ways in the mass murder on the Eastern Front and in the *Generalgouvernement*, and since much relevant documentary evidence was deposited in the GDR and the USSR, a number of well-documented studies on the nature of warfare, the occupation regime, and the complicity of the Wehrmacht, came out since the mid-1960s. Particularly noteworthy is Norbert Müller’s work on the legacies of the Wehrmacht invasion and occupation of Eastern Europe<sup>153</sup> and Leon Herzog’s study of the “criminal activity of the Wehrmacht” in Poland between 1939 and 1945.<sup>154</sup> Both studies contained the essential facts about the nature of warfare on the Eastern Front and correctly placed the Wehrmacht campaigns and its role in the occupation of the Eastern territories at the heart of the National Socialist “living space” conception. Yet again, the authors largely

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<sup>152</sup> Letter „SED Abt. Sicherheitsfragen an Ministerium für Nationale Verteidigung,“ February 24, 1964. BA/SAPMO DY30 IV A2/12/55, 3f.

<sup>153</sup> Norbert Müller, „Zur Rolle der Wehrmachtführung bei der Planung und Vorbereitung des faschistischen Okkupationsregimes in den besetzten sowjetischen Gebieten (1940/41), *Zeitschrift für Militärgeschichte*, 6 (1967), 415-431.

<sup>154</sup> Leon Herzog, „Die verbrecherische Tätigkeit der Wehrmacht im Generalgouvernement in den Jahren 1939-1945,“ in *Zeitschrift für Militärgeschichte*, 6 (1967), 445-458.

focused on the complicit “profiteers” in German big business, and failed to even consider the complexity and concreteness of individual guilt, or the diversity of the victims’ fates.

Aside from this specialized literature, a number of general overviews<sup>155</sup> and document compilations<sup>156</sup> aimed at canonizing and popularizing the official history of World War II, its causes and main battlefield – the Eastern Front – among East Germans were published at the same time. The widely-read, illustrated “The Second World War. A Chronology in Pictures” by Heinz Bergschicker (first published in 1963)<sup>157</sup> presented the war against the Soviet Union as a brutal class war against the “home of socialism:”

“German fascism did the decisive step towards catastrophe with the attack against the Soviet Union. As the extreme embodiment of an obsolete epoch, it [fascism] challenged a future-orientated social system of whose political-moral superiority he had no imagination.”<sup>158</sup> The attack was doomed from the beginning, “*Menetekel* Moscow” and “turning point Stalingrad” figured as milestones on the predetermined path towards victory. Excerpts from documents underlined the criminal energy with which Wehrmacht

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<sup>155</sup> *Der deutsche Imperialismus und der zweite Weltkrieg. Materialien der wissenschaftlichen Konferenz der Kommission der Historiker der DDR und der UdSSR zum Thema „Der deutsche Imperialismus und der zweite Weltkrieg“ vom 14.-19. Dezember 1959 in Berlin*, ed. Leo Stern et. al., 5 vols., (Berlin-Ost: Rütten & Löning, 1960ff.). Dietrich Eichholtz, Gerhart Hass, „Zu den Ursachen des zweiten Weltkrieges und den Kriegszielen des deutschen Imperialismus,“ *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*, 15 (1967), no. 7, 1148-1170. On “Operation Barbarossa” see Gerhart Hass, ed., *Ostlandreiter ohne Chance. Beiträge zur Geschichte des faschistischen Überfalls auf die Sowjetunion* (= *Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, Schriften der Deutschen Sektion der Historiker der DDR und der UdSSR*, 2) (Berlin (Ost): Akademie-Verlag, 1963).

<sup>156</sup> Eichholtz, Schumann, eds., *Anatomie des Krieges*. Moritz, ed., *Fall Barbarossa*. Gerhard Förster, Olaf Groehler, eds., *Der zweite Weltkrieg: Dokumente* (Berlin (Ost): Militärverlag, 1972). Hass, Schumann, eds., *Anatomie der Aggression*.

<sup>157</sup> Heinz Bergschicker, *Der zweite Weltkrieg: eine Chronik in Bildern* (Berlin: Deutscher Militärverlag, 1963).

<sup>158</sup> Here quoted from Bergschicker’s more recent *Deutsche Chronik, 1933-1945* (Berlin (Ost): Verlag der Nation, 1981), 323. The 1963 edition of *Der Zweite Weltkrieg* was difficult to locate.

and SS executed the “class war.”<sup>159</sup> And Bergschicker pointedly described the ideological fundament of German “fascism” as twofold: one was the irrational “master race theory” in which the “dark-threatening creature of the ‘eternal Jew’” figured as the “necessary opponent” – necessary to fabricate the “conspiracy of world Jewry” which by itself was no more than a “useful lie” to cover up the enmity against “bourgeois democracy, class struggle and social revolution alike.” The second ideological pillar was fascism’s true fundament: “reality-based,” thus rational, anti-communism and its materialization in the attack against the Soviet Union.<sup>160</sup> The “absolute nihilation of societal progress” constituted the “actual content of fascism.”<sup>161</sup> It was within this explanatory framework, that Marxist-Leninist historiography interpreted the war against the Soviet Union as Hitler’s worst crime.

Bergschicker’s books became bestselling encyclopedias of the SED’s official World War II narrative. The interested reader could further consult his illustrated histories of the siege of Leningrad and the battle of Stalingrad which also highlighted the Soviet Union’s tragically pivotal role as Hitler’s prime victim and conqueror.<sup>162</sup> It is noteworthy, that the Stalingrad volume contained textual and visual evidence for the crimes of the Sixth Army

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<sup>159</sup> See for example the pages on the preparation and execution of the war for the „new order of Europe,“ ibd., 316ff., 362ff. Next to Nazi documents, the pages always included documents on the economic exploitation, and on the communist and Social Democratic resistance fight.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 55f.

<sup>161</sup> And it was because of the „contamination of the German people with the fascist *Ungeist* [anti-Semitism – anti-communism – anti-Sovietism] by a totalitarian, unprecedented apparatus” which let the “poison flow into the millions of brains.” Thus: “Exposed daily and everywhere to the fascist ideology, cut off from all resisting forces, and already filled with prejudiced after the previous decade-long imperialist propaganda, the great majority of the German people yielded to the wave of the brown filth which washed everything else away within a few years.” Ibid., 56f.

<sup>162</sup> Heinz Bergschicker, *Leningrad. Die Stadt, die den Tod bezwang* (Berlin: Verlag Kultur und Fortschritt, 1966). And his earlier *Stalingrad*. All of Bergschicker’s books appeared in multiple editions throughout GDR history. The sixth edition of *Der Zweite Weltkrieg* appeared as late as 1987.

on the Eastern Front, depicting for example soldiers hanging civilians and horrified Soviet women who had to witness the execution of their husbands. The narrative concludes addressing the imaginary German soldiers: “you fought for this, that is why you lost.”<sup>163</sup> Contrasted with the illustrated history of the Eastern Front war published a few years later by Carell in the West, Bergschicker’s volume came much closer to the historical truth.

It was not until the mid-1970s, that a six-volume history on “Germany in World War II” presented its causes, events, agents and contexts in a more nuanced way. The six volumes published under the direction of Gerhart Hass by the Central Institute for History in the Academy of Sciences provided the informed reader with an in-depth analysis of the war from a Marxist perspective.<sup>164</sup> While the narrative neither challenged the ruling explanatory paradigm nor the official canon of focal points, it offered glimpses into areas of German society which had thus far been ignored by GDR historians. For example, in the first volume which reconstructs Hitler’s rule until June 22, 1941 (not, as one would expect, until the actual outbreak of the war on September 1, 1939), the authors briefly hint at the extent to which (younger) German workers were influenced by fascist propaganda and how the “racial hate campaign” “awoke lowest instincts.”<sup>165</sup> The

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<sup>163</sup> Bergschicker, *Stalingrad*, 28-30. The same pages include Reichenau’s notorious order on the „Behavior of the Troops in the East“ (December 10, 1941).

<sup>164</sup> Walter Bartel, Wolfgang Schumann, eds., *Deutschland im Zweiten Weltkrieg*, 6 vols., ed. Akademie der Wissenschaften der DDR, Zentralinstitut für Geschichte, Wissenschaftsbereich Deutsche Geschichte 1917-1945, (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1974-1985).

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., vol. 1: „Vorbereitung, Entfesselung und Verlauf des Krieges bis zum 22. Juni 1941,” 78f. Another example is the explanation for Stalin’s (here admitted) hesitation to anticipate the German invasion: “he was afraid to offer the Germans the pretext for an attack. He calculated that he could postpone the confrontation with Hitlergermany by diplomatic negotiations.” Ibid., 576. The second volume contains a section on the “barbaric warfare of the Wehrmacht” which details the crimes committed by ordinary

relatively sober and rather differentiated multi-volume study became a standard work on the Second World War in the GDR, and it even found respect among Western historians.<sup>166</sup>

Routinely, the series presented the Eastern Front war as the “war of extermination” against the Soviet Union. It failed to grasp the synthesis of Hitler’s racial, political-ideological and military aims and thus offered yet another one-dimensional narrative of “Operation Barbarossa” as imperialism’s crusade against the “home of socialism.” It also ignored existing (including East German) research on the singular character of the planned mass murder of the Jews, as well as on the intricate connection between the military campaign against the Soviet Union and the culmination of the anti-Jewish policies in genocide. As Jeffrey Herf has demonstrated with regards to the SED’s official narrative of antifascism in which the mass murder of the European Jews was marginal, if not absent,<sup>167</sup> the party was well into the 1980s not only dogmatic in its refusal to acknowledge the Holocaust, but it also fell well behind the historical research and knowledge accumulated by its very own historians.

The Auschwitz trial of 1963/65, for example, had inspired the publication of the first document collection dedicated exclusively to the “crimes of Hitler fascism” against the

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soldiers (not without pointing to the OKW’s “criminal orders”) against civilians, POWs, and partisans. The section contains no reference to actions specifically targeted against Jews. Ibid., 70f. A later section on “terror and mass murder” is equally unspecific, it mentions „mass executions of humans“ or „terror against the civilian population” (even in the case of the massacres in Lemberg, Charkov, Kiev and Babi Jar). Cynically, Jews find explicit mention mostly in the enclosed Nazi documents. The “war of extermination” was, according to this narrative, directed against the Soviet Union and its citizens. Ibid., 109-134.

<sup>166</sup> Roehr, „Faschismusforschung in der DDR.”

<sup>167</sup> Herf, *Divided Memory*.

Jews of Germany and Europe.<sup>168</sup> The gruesomely illustrated volume addressed “one of the most terrible crimes in human history: the intentional and planned extermination of the German and European Jews by the Nazi rulers.” While the authors put the main focus (and blame) on the “ruling classes” and saw the Nazi leadership as the real anti-Semitic fanatics, the narrative also recalled that the German people was “forced under a mass psychosis” by the Nazis – which, however, “in no way minimized the guilt and responsibility of every single citizen, who – voluntarily, or under pressure – participated in the crimes of the fascists, accepted them or took notice of them without joining the front against the Nazi barbarians.”<sup>169</sup> This is a rare example of a reckoning with Nazism’s popular support in the GDR; moreover, the narrative even stressed that the Jewish mass murder was beyond the imperialist goals of the German monopoly capital: “In this case, murder had the primate over exploitation.”<sup>170</sup> Curiously, the military history of World War II, and even the historical place of the war on the Eastern Front, remained marginal in this narrative, and the mass murder of Jews was largely limited to the extermination camps in the *Generalgouvernement*.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Helmut Eschwege, ed., *Kennzeichen J. Bilder, Dokumente, Berichte zur Geschichte der Verbrechen des Hitlerfaschismus an den deutschen Juden 1933-1945* (with a preface by Arnold Zweig). (Berlin (Ost): Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1966).

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 9. The authors further argued that if Hitler had not crushed the communist working class movement in 1933, the Jews of Germany might have been saved: “Those who could have helped were incarcerated themselves and even earlier [than the Jews].” Ibid., 20. This is a highly unlikely scenario given the communists’ pre-war stand on anti-Semitism. As Herf has pointed out, they “were divided between a reflexive sympathy for a seemingly natural ally and a view of the Jews as part of the international capitalist antagonist. Herf, *Divided Memory*, 16.

<sup>170</sup> Eschwege, ed., *Kennzeichen J*, 18. Still, the authors declare a few pages later somewhat contradictory, the „Nazi mass crimes against Jews did not stem from the capricious brain of a dictator but ... they were an integral part of the imperialist system of rule in Germany.” Ibid., 22.

<sup>171</sup> The chronology contributed by Klaus Drobisch as appendix noted under the entry June 22, 1941: „Fascist invasion of the Soviet Union. Start of the mass murder by *Einsatzgruppen* in the occupied Soviet territories (until 1942 over 1 million murdered).” Ibid., 357.

Since the mid-1970s, German historians in general started to deal more intensely with the nature of fascism and the role of anti-Semitism in Nazi ideology. In the GDR, Kurt Pätzold's important works on the treatment of Jews in the Third Reich acknowledged, on the one hand, the singularity of the Jewish fate, but on the other hand declared Hitler's anti-Semitic program a tool of "strategy and tactics of fascist German imperialism."<sup>172</sup> His "analysis of the structure and history of fascist racial anti-Semitism" concluded that the "Nazi leaders employed their theory of an 'Aryan master race' and the 'Jewish *Untermenschentum*' primarily in the political fights in Germany." For Pätzold, whose books represented the first attempts to write a modern Marxist-Leninist history of anti-Semitism and of the Nazis' anti-Jewish measures and crimes between 1933 and 1945, the "racial doctrine was a fighting instrument" not against the Jews but "against the German working class."<sup>173</sup>

An important aspect which remained largely untouched by GDR historiography was the question of mass support for National Socialism and the degree of complacency and complicity of ordinary Germans, civilians within the Third Reich as well as soldiers at the fronts of World War II.<sup>174</sup> Probing these questions would have meant to cross the officially set boundaries for historical discourse in the GDR. Since the SED based its

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<sup>172</sup> Kurt Pätzold, *Faschismus, Rassenwahn, Judenverfolgung : eine Studie zur politischen Strategie und Taktik des faschistischen deutschen Imperialismus (1933 - 1935)* (Berlin: Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1975) and idem, ed., *Verfolgung, Vertreibung, Vernichtung: Dokumente des faschistischen Antisemitismus 1933 bis 1942* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1983). An even earlier work on the Jews in Nazi Germany was published by Klaus Drobisch et. al., eds., *Juden unterm Hakenkreuz. Verfolgung und Ausrottung der deutschen Juden 1933-1945* (Berlin (Ost): 1973).

<sup>173</sup> Pätzold, ed., *Verfolgung, Vertreibung, Vernichtung*, 8.

<sup>174</sup> Cf. Röhr, "Faschismusforschung in der DDR."

legitimacy on the claim to be the leader of the German “working class,” it had no interest to confront the significant support Hitler had received from this section of German society. Equally, it was of no use to identify the thousands and thousands of ordinary soldiers who participated in war crimes committed in the course of Hitler’s war of extermination in the Soviet Union. Thus, despite its prominent place in the SED’s overall scheme of recent history, the history of the Eastern Front as it was reconstructed and remembered in the GDR – officially and in historical works – remained nebulous. Instead of taking a sincere interest in the events of the past, which would require freedom of speech and thought, as well as the willingness to confront causes, agents and consequences of these events, the official politics of history and memory in the GDR took an ideology-driven and thus highly selective interest in the past. Rather than inquiring the past for what it was, the SED was concerned with exploiting it for what it *is* – or for what it could potentially *be* in the every-day Cold War against “German imperialism.” Thus, the “administered past” (Martin Sabrow) was “frozen” (Forzen Judd) in an official narrative and appropriated to the present as legitimizing “warning” and “historical lesson,” as emotionalizing “admonition” or mobilizing “legacy.” Well into the 1960s, East German historians systematically explored and exploited the war against the Soviet Union as a “weapon” and directed it against their West German colleagues and the Federal Republic with the declared goal to “prevent” history from being repeated.

As my analysis of East German historiography on World War II has demonstrated, in many areas professional historians resonated and reinforced the SED’s official narratives.



The historical profession and the SED's politics of memory operated in the same gear. Both agreed that history was a "sharp ideological weapon"<sup>175</sup> (Ulbricht), and that politics and historiography are "inseparably bound to each other."<sup>176</sup> Yet, since the 1970s, historical research on the Nazi past became increasingly diverse and less regulated, gaining intellectual space and analytical depth. Especially, research on the nexus between the anti-Jewish policies and the Nazi plans to exploit and enslave Eastern Europe, as well as internationally acknowledged studies of the economic aspects of Hitler's Eastern campaign for "living space" and studies of the occupation regimes eroded the one-dimensional, Hegelian view of the Nazi era and World War II as the mere background for a "Great Patriotic War" of the Soviet Union forging the triumph of liberating socialism.

Ulbricht, Honecker and other leading SED officials, however, largely ignored these politically and ideologically inconvenient results of the research they themselves had initiated by decree. As the last chapter will demonstrate, the SED's official Eastern Front memory remained formulaic and faithful to the master narrative crafted by the East German communists around Ulbricht – the historian-politician and as Eastern Front veteran both witness and writer of history – upon their return to defeated Germany. In the Federal Republic, chancellors Erhard, Brandt, Schmidt and Kohl, increasingly forced to confront their (private and) public reflections on the Eastern Front war with the emerging critical historical scholarship, communicated a more differentiating memory of the

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<sup>175</sup> Quote from the Politburo Decree „Die Verbesserung der Forschung und Lehre in der Geschichtswissenschaft der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik“ (July 5, 1955), printed in *Dokumente der Sozialistischen Einheitspartei Deutschlands*, vol. 5, 337.

<sup>176</sup> Thus, for example, the programmatic statement by the famous GDR Bismarck-biographer Ernst Engelberg, "Politik und Geschichtsschreibung. Die historische Stellung und Aufgabe der Geschichtswissenschaft in der DDR," *ZfG*, 3 (1958), 468-495, quote on 480.

German-Soviet war. Given the diversity of their biographical backgrounds, the narratives these chancellors forged contributed from varying perspectives to a more “empathic understanding of historical truth,”<sup>177</sup> namely by gradually including Germany’s many “other” victims in the official discourse about the Nazi past.

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<sup>177</sup> This is Dirk van Laak’s aptly phrased summary of the transformations in the “public use of history” and the changing views of the non-German victims of Nazism. since the 1960s. The realization of the necessity to „speak the historical truth“ was according to him a crucial precondition for „forgiveness and social peace“ emerging in FRG society since the 1970s. See his „Widerstand gegen die Geschichtsgewalt. Zur Kritik an der ‚Vergangenheitsbewältigung‘“, in Frei, van Laak, Stolleis, eds., *Geschichte vor Gericht*, 11-28.

## **Chapter 11**

### **The Past Revisited: The Eastern Front Memory in the Era of Détente and “Late Socialism”**

“The most important lesson of World War II is to prevent a new war,  
to fight against it before the weapons speak.”

Erich Honecker (1985)

“I always had a good personal relationship to Brezhnev ...; it probably rested on the fact that we both had experienced the war directly as soldiers. One knew each other’s war experiences because we had talked about them; we knew from each other that we both hated the war, and not just I feared a new war, but Brezhnev too. Brezhnev was no enemy but a respected opponent whom I understood on a human level.”

Helmut Schmidt (1996)

## I. The Politics of Memory from Ulbricht to Honecker

June 22, 1941, a key date in World War II history, was also a date which left its mark on individual biographies. The protagonists of this chapter – the political leaders in East and West Germany during the last two Cold War decades – remembered the invasion of the Soviet Union both as turning point in world history and as an unforgettable moment in their own personal histories. In their writings and speeches one can find differing recollections of that day, some of which recorded in the immediate aftermath of the war and thus laden with the vehemence of an eye-witness account, and some of which written many years later and thus clearly infused with political calculation and references to contemporary concerns. Walter Ulbricht (1893-1973), the later Chancellor Helmut Schmidt (born 1918) and Federal Presidents Walter Scheel (born 1919) and Richard von Weizsäcker (born 1920) personally experienced the war against the Soviet Union: Ulbricht, back then already in his fifties, as antifascist front agitator on the Soviet side, Schmidt, Scheel and von Weizsäcker as Wehrmacht soldiers in their early twenties. The young communist youth leader Erich Honecker (1912-1994) spent most of the Nazi years in a prison in Brandenburg-Görden outside Berlin, while later Chancellor Kurt-Georg Kiesinger (1904-1988), a member of the Nazi Party between 1933 and 1945, served in the radio division in Ribbentrop's Foreign Ministry. Willy Brandt (1913-1992), the first social democratic chancellor of the FRG, fled Germany in 1933 as young historian and journalist, was expatriated in 1938, and fought in the Norwegian resistance movement. Federal President Gustav Heinemann (1899-1976) had joined a domestic anti-Nazi movement, the *Bekennende Kirche* in the 1930s, and remained a critical pacifist protestant throughout his political career. Finally, Chancellor Helmut Kohl (born 1930)

owed his biography to what he called the “mercy of late birth.” He was the first West German leader to be born late enough to evade becoming a possible accomplice of the Nazi regime or having to fight a war in the name of National Socialism.

This last chapter returns to the political memory of the Eastern Front war and to the public speeches, statements and announcements which communicated a largely unchanging view in the GDR and a gradually changing official (and popular) memory in the Federal Republic. It is important to keep in mind that these political memories did not only represent official rhetoric or mere calculated invocations of a politically and ideologically tailored past but to varying degrees they were also texts inspired by and reflecting on diverse individual biographies. Yet, political memory is political because it relates the past to the present, drawing certain historical “lessons” and applying them on the political needs of the day. Further, it is shaped not only by the past events it recollects but by the present as well. As the previous chapter illustrated, the 1960s constituted a decade of transition and even erosion of the Eastern Front memory in the West, while in the GDR this decade saw the beginning of Ulbricht’s end and the rise of “real existing socialism” under Erich Honecker. However, the intensified judicial as well as scholarly reckonings with the criminal legacies of the Eastern Front on neither side prompted a swift correction of official references to the realities of the war against the Soviet Union. Rather the process of “internalizing” (Lepsius) the Nazi past in the West took another two decades or so, while Honecker’s politics of memory reinforced the master narrative of the Ulbricht years – albeit with significantly less enthusiasm and care for historical details such as the sufferings of the Soviet population or the activities of the NKFD. Eventually, just as the SED’s ideology of antifascism, the official memory of the war

against the Soviet Union under Honecker became formulaic and, as the following paragraphs illustrate, creating no more than a petty caricature of the unprecedented historical event it claimed to represent.

Ulbricht was a veteran of the Eastern Front war, Honecker was not. One should not overstate these biographical facts but this difference undoubtedly shaped either man's way of looking at the history of this war. Ulbricht presented himself not only as veteran of the antifascist resistance, as fighter on the victor's side but committed much time and energy to preserving this part of his biography as lasting contribution to the historical triumph of socialism over fascism. During the last decade of his regime, Ulbricht elaborately commemorated the twentieth anniversary of the battle of Stalingrad and the founding of the NKFD in 1943, arguably the one and only meaningful anti-Hitler organization rooting in the German-Soviet antifascist cooperation in the East. Further, he personally chaired and coordinated a group of historians and leading party comrades writing an eight-volume history of the German workers movement in 1965. The detailed minutes of these meetings will be briefly discussed below for they represent a superb source for the reconstruction of Ulbricht's personal view of the war against the Soviet Union. In 1966, he once again assured that the twenty-fifth anniversary of the beginning of "Operation Barbarossa" was remembered properly in the GDR. In 1971, Honecker's takeover inaugurated a new era of the official Eastern Front memory, one much less inspired and influenced by personal attachment to the events. Unlike Ulbricht who had long utilized the memory of the war against the Soviet Union to propagate an impending repetition of "Barbarossa," Honecker generalized the "lessons" to be drawn from the past

and never directly invoked the historical analogy of June 22, 1941. In his time, the socialist camp was threatened by (nuclear-armed) imperialism at present, and the war in general came to serve as a warning never to repeat history.

Ulbricht was in Moscow on June 22, 1941 which lent him the authority of the eye-witness and the aura of an antifascist of the first hour. He could thus later be hailed as the “voice and conscience of the nation.”<sup>1</sup> According to his personal diary he had learned the “terrible news that Hitler’s armies have started the attack against the Soviet Union” in the early morning hours of that day. His first thoughts went out to the “German working class who had proven incapable of thwarting Hitler fascism’s war preparations and [incapable] of preventing the invasion of the land of socialism. That was the worst part.”<sup>2</sup> This failure troubled him throughout the remainder of the war. In one of his autobiographical texts, he recalled talking to newly captured German POWs in Stalingrad in late 1942, asking them

What are you as a worker doing here in the steppe of Stalingrad? Why are you fighting against the socialist Soviet Union? Why are you killing Russian workers and peasants ... Goebbels has promised you the set lunch table. You are looking for the set table here on the Volga River. Don’t you realize that Hitler has baited you against the Soviet people so you won’t realize who is exploiting you and who is abusing you?<sup>3</sup>

Already then the exculpatory depiction of the deluded German working class was an integral part of the communist explanation for Hitler’s rise to power and ability to wage global war. In a radio address four days after the invasion had started, Ulbricht reiterated

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<sup>1</sup> *Neues Deutschland*, June 17, 1961, Beilage 24, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted under the catchy title „Voice and Conscience of the Nation“ in *Neues Deutschland*, June 17, 1961, Beilage 24, 3. See also Ulbricht’s autobiographical notes which were the basis of the quote in *Neues Deutschland*. Ulbricht, *Zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung 1933-1945. Aus Reden und Aufsätzen*, vol. 2: 1933-1946, 258ff. The section on „World War II, 1939-1941“ begins directly with the attack on June 22, 1939. He described here also how shocked he was to speak to German soldiers fully convinced of the success of “Operation Barbarossa,” and fully indoctrinated with National Socialist slogans about the inferiority of the Slavs.

<sup>3</sup> Ulbricht, „Voice and Conscience of the Nation“ in *Neues Deutschland*, June 17, 1961, Beilage 24, 3.

that it were “Hitler and [industrialist Alfried] Krupp, Göring and [industrialist Friedrich] Flick” who had “driven the German people into a shameful war against the Soviet Union, against the Soviet people who always felt connected to the working people of Germany through friendship.” And, wholeheartedly neglecting National Socialism’s popular support basis, he claimed that Hitler was chasing German soldiers into this war “without ever having asked one worker or one farmer.”<sup>4</sup> Victimized and blinded like that, Ulbricht agreed with Khrushchev with whom he had spent Christmas 1942 in Stalingrad, that Germans would give up only after they were defeated and imprisoned.<sup>5</sup> It was Stalingrad which signaled this turning point because the catastrophe inspired the founding of the NKFD among imprisoned German officers and soldiers in 1943. Ulbricht played a key-role in organizing this movement. In 1963 he praised the “German anti-Hitler-coalition” as an “important national and international event in the history of World War II. “They,” including himself, “fought courageously against Nazism,” Ulbricht summarized the ultimately futile attempts to turn the majority of the German people against Hitler. Drawing a direct line from the united-front efforts of German wartime-communism to the “antifascist” SED-regime in the GDR, he once again used the opportunity to claim that in one half of Germany “imperialism has been rooted out.”<sup>6</sup> To Ulbricht, the NKFD was so

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Ulbricht, „Was lehrt das Verhältnis zwischen Deutschland und der Sowjetunion in den letzten 24 Jahren. Rundfunkansprache [Moscow-based German radio], 26. Juni 1941,“ printed in Ulbricht, *Ausgewählte Reden und Aufsätze*, 72-75, quote on 72.

<sup>5</sup> Ulbricht, „Voice and Conscience of the Nation“ in *Neues Deutschland*, June 17, 1961, *Beilage* 24, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Ulbricht, „Sie kämpften mutig gegen den Nazismus. Aus der Rede zum 20. Jahrestag der Gründung des Nationalkomitees ‚Freies Deutschland,‘ 12. Juli 1963,“ printed in Ulbricht, *Ausgewählte Reden und Aufsätze*, 259-267, quote on 267. The speech also appeared in *Mitteilungsblatt der Arbeitsgemeinschaft ehemaliger Offiziere*, 8, 1963.



central that its founding amidst the ashes of Stalingrad could be presented as the “end of the night of fascism.”<sup>7</sup>

The prominent role of the NKFD in Ulbricht’s Eastern Front memory faded under Honecker, most obviously because the latter could not draw any personal authority from it. Ulbricht’s conception of remembering history, moreover, included writing it. To him “historical truth” was a “weapon” wisely and efficiently to be used in the ongoing class struggle.<sup>8</sup> In 1965, he therefore chaired an “authors collective” to write an eight-volume history of the German workers movement, the fifth volume of which dealt with the Nazi years and World War II. This series was published as part of a concerted effort to raise the historical, socialist and national consciousness among GDR citizens, an effort from which the SED-regime hoped to (re-)gain stability after the series of crises that had culminated in the building of the wall in 1961.<sup>9</sup> Next to prominent historians such as Albert Schreiner (1892-1979, emeritus of Leipzig University and former leading historian at the National Museum for German History) and Lothar Berthold (born 1926, head of the division “History of the German Workers Movement” at the ZK’s Institute for Marxism-Leninism), Ulbricht gathered party comrades such as Kurt Hager, head of the Politburo’s Ideological Commission, and the long-time mayor of East Berlin and former president of the DSF, Friedrich Ebert, around him. The former chair of the by then prohibited West German KPD, Max Reimann, was also a member of the “authors

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<sup>7</sup> „Wie vor 30 Jahren die Nacht des Faschismus hereinbrach und wie sie endete. Es begann mit Feuerbränden [the fire of the Reichstag 1933]. Das Ende der Brandstifter vor 20 Jahren: Schlacht an der Wolga – Wende zum Sieg der Wolga,“ in *Neues Deutschland*, January 30, 1963, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Thoms, *Walter Ulbricht*, 295f. See also my discussion of his activities as “historian” in Chapter 5. I.

<sup>9</sup> Werner Tschannerl, “Die SED-Führung und der ‘Grundriß der Geschichte des deutsche Volkes,’“ in Martin Sabrow, Peter Th, Walter, eds., *Historische Forschung und sozialistische Diktatur. Beiträge zur Geschichtswissenschaft der DDR* (Leipzig: Universitätsverlag, 1995), 110-118.

collective.” The minutes of these meetings are revealing in several respects not least because they allow a glimpse into the making of the communist master narrative in East Germany. More than just for the purpose of political propaganda, this commission literally set down to negotiate how history was to be recorded – what stories to tell, what parts to ignore – and in which way it was to be presented to the East German public.

A good example of Ulbricht mingling his personal memories with the writing of official history was his reference to the indoctrination of the Wehrmacht in the course of these historical negotiations in the Politburo. During a debate the commission had about a passage in the draft dealing with the National Socialist influence on the military after 1933, and in particular the Röhm putsch in 1934, Ulbricht intervened

Walter Ulbricht: ‘It is too complicated to explain the issue with Röhm and the *Reichswehr* comprehensively. I will say quite openly that it played an important role altogether because the leadership of the *Reichswehr* capitulated and succumbed themselves [*selber kapitulierte und sich gleichschaltete*], so that they stood on the ground of the Hitlerite imperialist policy. There were still significant differences with the leadership of the *Reichswehr*.’

(Albert Schreiner: ‘But not between Hitler and the *Reichswehr*!’)

[Ulbricht:] ‘We shouldn’t stress that so much. That is not true. I have talked to Paulus and asked him how German generals could run after such maniacs. He said: They gave us the most modern weapons that we needed, they gave us a military goal [*Kriegsziel*] and such great influence on the masses the military had never had before. That’s why we agreed.’

(Friedrich Ebert: ‘But Röhm was against it.’)

[Ulbricht:] ‘We would say Röhm was a sectarian. ... So let’s leave it as it is.’<sup>10</sup>

In the then following discussion about the ideological outlook of the Nazi regime,

Ulbricht’s and Hager’s considerations illustrate how the focus on the Soviet Union (and Hitler’s war against it) shaped their overall analysis of Nazi ideology. The in their view

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<sup>10</sup> Lothar Berthold, „Stenographische Niederschrift der Beratung der Arbeitsgruppe zur Ausarbeitung der dreibändigen [*sic*] Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung im Hause des ZK, Sitzungssaal Politbüro, am Donnerstag, dem 4.2.1965, Beginn: 10 Uhr,“ BA/SAPMO, DY30 IV A2/2.024/59, fiche 1, 43f. The title somewhat misleadingly refers to the fact that in this particular session three volumes of the eight were discussed. – Ulbricht had known Paulus as POW and had met with him before his release in 1953.

ultimate outcome of the regime's "living space" program – the invasion and conquest of the Soviet Union – determined the interpretation of the ideological path leading up to it:

U l b r i c h t: 'I want to begin with page 76, the second paragraph which reads: "One of the decisive elements of the fascist ideology was the barbarian race theory ..." This account runs until page 77. That is too schematic here. The overall [Nazi] conception is not being explained consistently on these two pages. For that reason the "people without space" [*Volk ohne Raum*]" is mentioned only on page 77. But the second paragraph on page 76 has to begin with the call for living-space. That was the starting point. With that they deceived some of the unemployed. There one must demonstrate the identity of the standpoint of the monopoly capital's interests with the broad masses who thought that only more living-space would secure better living conditions. Then the demagogy was effective. The racial hate campaign is only the next step. It [the narrative] has thus to start with living-space, with "people without space" and so on, with the concurrence of the interests of the expansionist monopoly capital and the Hitler administration, how they deceived the masses with it. Then only comes the race story [*Rassengeschichte*].

H a g e r: '... Living-space was also connected with an incredible national demagogy. The old propaganda against the Treaty of Versailles was continued, then [followed] the propaganda of "German greatness."'

U l b r i c h t: 'Here it must also be said that the race hatred also served the purpose of diverting the attention of the masses away from the fight against the plutocrats. Earlier they formulated the fight against the plutocrats and they have now turned to the Jews. One must mention the two sides.'<sup>11</sup>

According to this interpretation, anti-Sovietism had inspired the "living space" program and was the gist of Nazi ideology, not racial anti-Semitism. The view of Hitler's anti-Jewish propaganda (and ultimately policies, too) as mere tools of the fascist crusade against socialism was concurrently elaborated and sustained in the mainstream historiography on the subject in the GDR.<sup>12</sup> Thus, "Operation Barbarossa" was the most monstrous crime in human history, not the Holocaust carried out under the guise of this "Operation." The discussion then interestingly turned to the degree of popular support for the Nazi regime right before the invasion of the Soviet Union. Hager cautioned that the relatively prominently discussed antifascist fight within Germany overstated the case and brushed over the fact that there was "quite broad approval" of the attack against the Soviet Union. This approval originated in "the ideology: it will bring us advantages,"

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 44f.

<sup>12</sup> Most importantly in the works of Kurt Pätzold, cf. chapter 10. III.

Hager stated, the “ideology the Nazis had successfully disseminated among the population.” Kurt Hager (1912-1998) was an experienced KPD veteran and antifascist fighter (he was among the activists who interrupted Hitler’s first radio speech in 1933) who had been repeatedly incarcerated during the Nazi period before he was able to escape to England. He, just as Ulbricht, based his comments on his very personal memories and observations. He criticized that the draft text made no mention of the fact that “a not insignificant part of the population supported the acts against the Jews. That is not in here. Here they only talk about unease, acts of help, ect.” To Hager, this “didn’t reflect the actual situation.” So,

[only if] we get these problems straight, then we can answer the question what kind of situation we really had when the war broke out, and in particular when the attack against the Soviet Union started and how great parts of the population have behaved in it. ... Later, no one wanted to have known about it but, of course, everyone knew.<sup>13</sup>

The actual war against the Soviet Union was most controversial with regards to its outbreak and Stalin’s role in it. It was Hager who raised the question whether “one should mention the many warnings which were given in advance and which were ignored by the statesmen.” Ulbricht responded: “That is a difficult question. The fact is that the Soviet government had received information a) from its secret service, b) during the night of the attack from deserters. That is mentioned on page 66.” He then continued in a rather sloppy tone: “The joke is that Stalin didn’t react,” and added “this must not happen again.” Obviously aware of the delicacy of the subject, Ulbricht suggested to simply copy a relevant passage from a “Soviet publication which details what the mistakes then

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 70f.

were.”<sup>14</sup> In a similar way, the disputants discussed how to correctly evaluate the battle of Stalingrad as historical turning point. Historian Schreiner cautioned that one might write that “it wasn’t the turn of the war, but that the ideology of invincibility had taken a heavy blow.” Yet to Ulbricht, “this wasn’t enough.” He suggested once again to “take the wording from that [Soviet] book about the Great Patriotic War” to which someone in the round responded, “the discussed passage [already] comes from there.”<sup>15</sup> With that the “dispute” was settled.

Little dispute arose with regards to the few pages dedicated to the realities of Wehrmacht warfare on the Eastern Front, the mass murder, enslavement and torture of “Soviet citizens,” Jews included. As so often, writing the history of the Eastern Front was first and foremost a matter of recalling the antifascist fight alongside the heroic Red Army; life and death under German occupation remained a secondary issue, the Holocaust played a marginal role and the question of individual responsibility for war crimes was left out altogether.<sup>16</sup> Only historian Albert Schreiner who as a young

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 75f. The book they were referring to was a contemporary Soviet standard on the subject: *Geschichte des Großen Vaterländischen Krieges der Sowjetunion*, ed. Institut für Marxismus-Leninismus beim Zentralkomitee der Kommunistischen Partei der Sowjetunion; German edition by Hans Gossens, Walter Bartel, et. al., 6 vols (Berlin (Ost): Militärverlag, 1962-1968), here especially vols. 2-4 (covering the war in the Soviet Union). Curiously, the German edition of this master narrative was significantly altered; the SED was particularly unsatisfied with the “sections on the German antifascist fight,” the “analysis of the role of the monopoly capital” and also wished to correct or add some details on “the preparation and execution of the fascist aggression.” An “authors collective” in the GDR’s Ministry of Defense (among them Professor Walter Bartel of Humboldt University and the later famous Bismarck-biographer Ernst Engelberg) worked in revisions and additions, so that the first volume could appear in 1962, occasioning the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the “Great Socialist October Revolution.” Remarkably, the commission’s official report to the SED-Politburo (Hager) complained that „often imprecise and partly wrong information in the Soviet edition” complicated and slowed down the editorial work. See the memo to Kurt Hager, “Bericht über die Arbeit am ersten Band der ‘Geschichte des Großen Vaterländischen Krieges der Sowjetunion, 1941-1945’” [unsigned, undated, ca. 1963]. BA/SAPMO, DY 30 IV A2/2.024/4, fiche 1, 64-66.

<sup>16</sup> For a detailed discussion of these sections of the book see Chapter 5.I.

communist escaped Nazi internment in 1941 and emigrated to the US, made a general, unusually bold remark addressing this issue. He felt that the description of the “exploitation of POWs and prisoners in the concentration camps” was very “pale” (“*blaß*”). He “somewhat missed the partisanship of language” warning that if the “writer is not outraged himself about [the crimes], then he also cannot convey this to a reader who reads something like that today.” Schreiner criticized that the narrative was far from purveying a sense of “indictment of the barbarism in Nazi warfare.” In the course of his intervention, Schreiner got carried away and added with vehemence:

There are only dry numbers here. In my view, this is where the passion of language would be in place. In any case, the barbarism of German warfare also outside the camps is not treated sufficiently. The entire policy of extermination, German imperialism’s planned policy of extermination namely in Poland and the Soviet Union, is described here very unsatisfactory or not at all.<sup>17</sup>

Schreiner hastened to add to this radical critique a sentence on the necessity to further detail the antifascist struggle in the camps as if to attenuate his comments. And Ulbricht who was next to speak, picked up only this last sentence – “that is very right,” – before hastily moving on “to another question.”<sup>18</sup> Rendering no further discussion, it is unlikely that Schreiner’s critique significantly altered the tone and content of the original draft.

The above-cited passages from the discussions in the “authors collective” chaired by Ulbricht may suffice to illustrate that under his leadership the SED’s politics of memory included more than propaganda, mass agitation, media campaigns and academic agenda-setting. The Eastern Front war assumed its central role in the official memory of World War II because Ulbricht had a personal stake in it: he perceived himself as witness,

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<sup>17</sup> Lothar Berthold, „Stenographische Niederschrift der Beratung der Arbeitsgruppe zur Ausarbeitung der dreibändigen Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung,“ BA/SAPMO, DY30 IV A2/2.024/59, fiche 1, 47.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

veteran and historian of this war. Yet, even though he remained completely faithful to the Soviet-centered memory of the Second World War, his policies of economic reform and experimentation regarding the German question during the last decade of his rule, alienated Ulbricht from Moscow and furthered the ascend of his successor Erich Honecker.<sup>19</sup> Upon taking office, this young, efficient and experienced party bureaucrat (re-)assured Leonid Brezhnev of the GDR's sense of alliance with the "motherland of socialism." Moreover, he also fully succumbed his personal memories as well as his officially communicated view of recent German history to the Soviet master narrative.

To young Erich Honecker, June 22, 1941 was not a day of concern about the horrors to come in the war of ideologies waged by Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union but – at least according to his published memoirs – a moment of truth and resolve. By then serving his sixth year in a Nazi concentration camp, Honecker soberly recalled his thoughts upon receiving the news of the invasion in KZ Brandenburg-Görden:

The treacherous attack of Hitlergermany against the first socialist state of the world on June 22, 1941 and the advance of the Wehrmacht to the gates of Moscow and Leningrad greatly agitated us. During long conversations we sought to make out the reasons. One thing was clear to me from the very first day: The socialist Soviet power would smash the audacious fascist German imperialism. I was deeply convinced that the Soviet people would never succumb to the aggressor. In 1930/31, [during a stay] in Moscow and Magnitogorsk, I had gotten to know their enthusiasm, their creative energy and their unruly will to cope with everything, even with the greatest difficulties. This and the grandiose industrial potential of the USSR reassured me that the Soviet people would also pass the acid test of war and would drive the fascists out of their country.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Monika Kaiser, *Machtwechsel von Ulbricht zu Honecker: Funktionsmechanismen der SED-Diktatur in Konfliktsituationen 1962 bis 1972* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1997) and idem, „Reforming Socialism? The Changing of the Guard from Ulbricht to Honecker during the 1960s,“ in Konrad Jarausch, ed., *Dictatorship as Experience. Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR* (New York: Berghahn, 1999), 325-339.

<sup>20</sup> Erich Honecker, *Aus meinem Leben* (Berlin (Ost): Dietz, 1980), 100.

The reference to his one-year-long stay at a Comintern school in Moscow and Magnitogorsk in 1930/31<sup>21</sup> is the only piece in his biography which connected Honecker personally and historically to the Soviet Union and he used it here to underline his farsighted confidence in socialism's ultimate triumph over fascism at the outset of "Operation Barbarossa." Further references to events on the Eastern Front are scarce in his memoirs and serve to illustrate the inevitably victorious cause of the Red Army ("prison guards returning from the Eastern Front reported how much the partisans troubled the fascists in the occupied territories"<sup>22</sup>). Neither the Holocaust nor the mass murder and enslavement of the Soviet population were part of his personal memory of these years. Rather he recalled the perils of torture and forced labor as Nazi prisoner, the destructive force of Allied air raids and awaiting news of the Red Army's liberating advance into Eastern Germany.<sup>23</sup>

Accordingly, Honecker's *ex officio* announcements commemorating the war against the Soviet Union focused almost exclusively on its victorious outcome while leaving the realities of this war largely unmentioned. More than under Ulbricht, Honecker's Eastern Front memory was cherished much more for its message than for its content. "The lessons of the past were drawn forever" was the title of Honecker's first

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<sup>21</sup> In an rhapsodizing tone rather not typical of the stiff SED-chief, he recalled his fascination with the "land of Lenin:" „To me the land of Lenin was my fatherland, his party my party, his youth organization my youth organization. In the Red Army soldiers [...], albeit total strangers to me personally, I saw my brothers and comrades. I wanted to hug them and to kiss them like it is Russian custom because they represented the land of the workers and farmers, because they wore the red star on their hats which was also the emblem of the KPD. This star I had dearly cherished already as a child. It gleamed into the future." Ibid., 36. While attending classes at the Comintern school, Honecker shared a room with Anton Ackermann, during the war a member of the Group Ulbricht in Moscow, and later candidate of the SED politburo and short-time Foreign Minister of the GDR.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 100-107.



statement on the June 22, 1941 anniversary in 1971 shortly after he had succeeded Ulbricht as first secretary of the SED's ZK.<sup>24</sup> Assuring the Soviet leadership of the SED's "firm and unbreakable friendship," the new leader declared that with the "brutal attempt to destroy the socialist system in the USSR and to erect a fascist order in Europe, German imperialism and militarism [had] committed the severest crime against humanity." Yet, eventually this crusade offered the Soviet Union with the possibility to "demonstrate convincingly" its "decisive role in the defeat of Hitler fascism;" the Great Patriotic war was a "glowing example for the antifascist liberation fight of the nations:"

Under great sacrifices, bearing the main burden of the struggle against Hitler fascism, the peoples of the Soviet Union achieved a historical victory which led to a fundamental turn in the history of Europe and to a decisive shift in the global power relations. The destruction of Hitler fascism offered the historical chance to create truly democratic conditions on German soil as well. With the foundation of the German Democratic Republic this chance was used. Once and for all, the historical lessons of the disastrous past were drawn ....<sup>25</sup>

This was the quintessence of the still valid master narrative of the Eastern Front war as the crucible of the socialist revolution in East Germany. Germany's defeat in World War II was transformed into a victory of the international working class, and the socialist GDR was the material embodiment of the historical lessons learned. Yet, unlike Ulbricht, Honecker's Eastern Front memory served not as vehicle for bold historical analogies intended to explain and justify certain political decisions, it became rather an ever more general part of the World War II memory in the 1970s and 1980s. The historical propaganda under Honecker used the Eastern Front as *one* theme among others to

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<sup>24</sup> „Die Lehren der Vergangenheit wurde für immer gezogen,“ *Neues Deutschland*, June 22, 1971, 1. The statement was signed by Honecker, Ulbricht – who formally remained in power as head of the GDR's state council until later his death in August 1973 – as well as Willi Stoph, head of the council of ministers.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

reaffirm the alliance with the Soviet Union. In 1971, in the wake of Willy Brandt's *Ostpolitik* which resulted in a series of treaties between West Germany, Poland, the USSR and the GDR, invoking the past for present political purposes was thus a much less concrete undertaking. It was no longer about actually preventing "another Barbarossa" or preparing for another "Day X." Rather, in the words of GDR Foreign Minister Otto Winzer, it was about confessing that the "alliance with the USSR as the liberator of the German people" was the "most important lesson of June 22, 1941."<sup>26</sup> To learn from it meant "not to underestimate the revanchism and militarism" of the West German kind and "to prevent the tragedy from happening again" by securing "a lasting peace." His colleague, Defense Minister Heinz Hoffmann, warned that "highest alertness" was still necessary for the "scars of war [were] still visible." He claimed that the "same forces that had attacked the Soviet Union 30 years ago ... have grown once again to a looming danger in the Bonn state." Thus the "lessons of the fascist attack are still highly relevant."<sup>27</sup> Straightly contradicting the still upheld claim that the capitalist FRG represented a threat to peace, Winzer nonetheless praised the *Ostverträge* as contribution to "an easing of tensions in Europe" and claimed that "from the perspective of June 22, 1941 their ratification [was] a political-moral obligation whose fulfillment concurs with the peaceful interests of the people in the FRG."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Otto Winzer, „Unser Bündnis mit der UdSSR – wichtigste Lehre des 22. Juni 1941“, *Neues Deutschland*, June 22, 1971, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Heinz Hoffmann, „Höchste Wachsamkeit ist geboten“, *Neues Deutschland*, June 22, 1971, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Otto Winzer, „Unser Bündnis mit der UdSSR – wichtigste Lehre des 22. Juni 1941“, *Neues Deutschland*, June 22, 1971, 3.

The insubstantiality of these invocations can also be discerned with regards to the way specific events of the Eastern Front war were recalled. Official statements paid little to no attention to the fate of the civilian population, to the Wehrmacht's warfare, to the systematic killing of Jews, "partisans", Soviet POWs, and commissars. A commemorative article in June 1981 contained a table listing "forces and means employed during the war" by the Soviet and German military forces including "humans," without naming casualty numbers – not even military casualties. In contrast to East German historiography which by then had produced a number of well-documented works on the realities of warfare on the Eastern Front, official memory focused on Hitler's lie of fighting a "preventive war," on "Blitzkrieg-dreams" shattered by heroic resistance of the Red Army, and on the communist antifascist movement – only the latter was illustrated with a bizarre remark on casualties numbers: "three million Soviet communists died in the war against fascism. Five million new party members took their place."<sup>29</sup> In 1981, for the first time, SED propaganda left it to literature, to a little-known poet, to hint at the unprecedented brutality of warfare with a clumsy verse:

June 22, 1941 – 'Barbarossa'  
 Blinded by the graven image, by the racial delusion of the 'master-race-world,'  
 They took off, they wanted to ride 'towards Eastland' to conquer foreign land,  
 Like once the knights with the cross sign on the chest;  
 But not with sword and epee:  
 The black cross on tanks and fighting machines  
 Was the sign with which they fire-spittingly attacked the Soviet land,  
 And brought misery, and murder, and death to the peoples of this land,  
 Which was creating a new world promising peace to all human beings on this earth.

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<sup>29</sup> „Unvergänglich sind die Heldentaten des Sowjetvolkes, das die Naziaggressoren vernichtete und das Fundament für die längste Friedensperiode in Europe legte,“ *Neues Deutschland*, June 21-22, 1981, 9. The main „historical“ article (including the mentioned table as well as three photographs depicting Red Army soldiers, partisan units and a munitions factory under the headline “victory was forged at the front and in the rear”) was contributed by the prominent military historian Gerhard Förster.

An abundance of victims: 20 million, are they comprehensible?  
 Certainly as numbers, but each number was a human, was a life  
 Which had hope, strove forward, towards the beautiful for the people too, for life.  
 The hell which had been ignited in this country, sparked by humans of my nation.  
 Can one call *them* humans, they who acted inhumanly?  
 Where was the *human* in the nation who gave the world the geniuses of the classic era,  
 The masterly works of classical music,  
 The philosophers of world-changing ideas?

He had escaped the brown marshes, the hot wind of hell  
 to the world where he could breathe freely. –  
 The world heard the calls during the night in the Reich of darkness,  
 But their callers came into the dungeons, into the death camps,  
 The voices were to fall silent on the scaffold,  
 So that they never, never again could proclaim the truth to the nation.  
 But again and ever, ever their call was being heard  
 In the world, by the enemy and by the friends.

When the Soviet peoples then had gathered their forces,  
 Their retaliation, the great turn came,  
 They drove back the hellish creatures with the black cross  
 Until the point from which they had departed for the great raid without precedent.  
 On this long, sacrificial path Soviet troops reach the city of Weimar.  
 Their commander ordered the guardsmen to salute at Goethe's grave  
 In the name of his nation.  
 He knew: that this other, true Germany lived and would live  
 In good relations with his nation too.  
 As soon as the waft of mist of the dark worlds were dispelled  
 And the sun would shine again on our nations.<sup>30</sup>

This example of political poetry is interesting in so far as these verses translated the main motifs of the political memory of the Eastern Front into a kitschy elegy about the Soviet people's sufferings and triumphs. "They," the "humans of my nation" who rode eastwards to "conquer foreign land," are never called by what they were; the bizarre hint at Christian crusaders belittled, to say the least, the unprecedented nature of the German attack. German perpetrators – "hellish creatures" from the "dark worlds" – remained obscure beings sent by an evil empire, just as SED-politicians never referred to ordinary

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<sup>30</sup> Olaf Barutzki, „22. Juni 1941 – ‚Barbarossa,‘“ *Neues Deutschland*, June 21-22, 1981, 9. The author was a veteran antifascist who was sentenced to death by the Nazis in 1943, then "pardoned" to life in prison and liberated by the Soviets in KZ Brandenburg – the same prison Honecker was in. If this is one reason why the poem mentioned the tortured "callers" in the dark night of fascism remains unclear. Honecker made no mention of Barutzki in his memoirs.

Germans, or German soldiers when talking about Nazi crimes committed against and in the Soviet Union. Finally, the Soviet Union's "retaliation" is presented as a tale of humanity culminating in the search for the good German in Weimar. The Soviet Army made the "sun shine again" over the "other, true Germany." There, history came to a happy end.

The ludicrous way in which this poem commemorated the misery of war on the Eastern Front highlights once again how little sincere reckoning with the Nazi attack against the Soviet Union the SED's official, Soviet-oriented antifascist paradigm rendered in practise. Far from communicating a genuine concern with the complex events taking place in the Soviet Union between 1941 and 1945, SED leaders – and the works of art they inspired – created a hollow, ritualized, and in this sense politically and ideologically "usable," Eastern Front memory. Yet, despite the prominence of the subject in the SED's overall "history propaganda," Honecker himself never gave a major speech commemorating the Nazi war against the Soviet Union itself. However, a plethora of documents from the relevant propaganda divisions within the SED's Central Committee – instructions, guidelines, memoranda circulated in preparation of historical anniversaries – testify to the centrality of the Soviet story in all history-related announcements and events.<sup>31</sup> In accordance with this general line, Honecker routinely included references to

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<sup>31</sup> See for example the instructions prepared by the SED's ZK Agitation Division, "Über den 30. Jahrestag des Sieges über den Faschismus," [undated, Spring 1975], a canonical 24-pages text on the Soviet Union's leading role not only in World War II, but in the history of the antifascist, liberating class struggle of humankind against reactionary forces. In the appendix see the practical instructions, "Vorschlag für Maßnahmen zur Begehung des 30. Jahrestages der Befreiung," as well as the detailed schedule of „Zentrale Veranstaltungen zum 30. Jahrestag der Befreiung vom Hitlerfaschismus durch die Sowjetunion“ (the title, programmatically, refers only to the Soviets as the liberators). BA/SAPMO, DY 30 vorl. SED/18298. And a concurring memorandum from the same division, "Zu Grundlinien der gegnerischen Propaganda im

the Eastern Front in his memorial speeches in the former KZ Brandenburg-Görden where he regularly celebrated VE Day.<sup>32</sup> These references remained mostly very general. He granted the Soviet Union with having played the leading role in defeating Hitler. Therefore, the GDR had become its eternal friend. But Honecker, curiously, didn't refer specifically to the war against the Soviet Union in a prominent speech until 1985.<sup>33</sup> The

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Hinblick auf den 30. Jahrestag der Befreiung,“ February 20, 1975, which analyzed the Western attempts at „reducing historical truth“ by increasingly questioning the Soviet Union's decisive contribution to the defeat of Hitler, and proposed to enhance the positive propaganda about the USSR in response. BA/SAPMO, DY 30 IV 2/2.035/21, fiche 2, 129ff. Similarly, for 1985 see the material deposited in BA/SAPMO, DY 30 vorl. SED/35685, including another canonical text codifying the central role of the Soviet Union's contribution to the fight against Nazi Germany, „Aufruf zum 40. Jahrestag des Sieges über den Hitlerfaschismus und der Befreiung des deutschen Volkes.“ The text upfront mentioned the other members of the anti-Hitler-coalition, but stressed „that the Soviet people and its heroic army bore the main burden of the fight.“ Interesting also a list of TV-programs to be screened around VE Day in 1985: aside from several Soviet production and GDR-productions about the antifascist struggle, the list also contained a series on the destruction of German cities and the beginning of the occupation period, as well as on the „bourgeois resistance.“ In 1985, the East German DEFA film studios also screened the documentary „*Das Jahr 1945*,“ a depiction of the last weeks of war in 1944/45 based on footage never seen by GDR citizens: Allied troops arriving in West Germany (suggesting that it wasn't only Red Army troops who liberated Germany), and the extent of destruction postwar Germany (leaving room for the notion of not only being „liberated“ but also „defeated“ – until then a taboo in East Germany. The film reached a wide audience; in the city of Erfurt alone (around 200,000 inhabitants), 60,000 saw it in movie theaters. For details and a list of contemporary reviews see <http://www.cine-holocaust.de/cgi-bin/gdq?dfw00fbw001722.gd> [March 2007]. On VE Day as political memorial deay in general Kirsch, „*Wir haben aus der Geschichte gelernt*,“ esp. 60-70.

<sup>32</sup> In one instance, Honecker included a reference to the fortieth anniversary of the beginning of „Operation Barbarossa“ in an „election speech“ in Karl-Marx-City. On June 10, 1981, he spoke about the voters' duty to participate in the *Volkskammer* elections of that year (starting with the remarkable statement: „we all know that this is not a formal election as in a bourgeois society where promises are being made upfront only to be broken afterwards. In fact, there one doesn't need elections if afterwards others determine what has to happen anyway, or where the representatives don't remember their promises“). Towards the end of his speech praising the socialist accomplishments of the SED in recent years, Honecker reminded his listeners that „the wealth and fortune of nations can grow only in peace.“ Invoking the fortieth anniversary of the „day on which Hitlergermany attacked the Soviet Union predatorily,“ he vowed that „we will never forget what the heroes of the Great Patriotic War have achieved and sacrificed for the freedom of the nations. They fought so that such destruction and annihilation may never come again, that peace may and always will be.“ Erich Honecker, *Reden und Aufsätze*, vol. 8 (Berlin (Ost): Dietz, 1983), 202-208, quotes on 202, 206.

<sup>33</sup> I have consulted Honecker's VE Day speeches and writings between 1965 and 1989 with a focus on „Barbarossa“ anniversaries in 1966, 1971, 1976, 1981, 1986. Among the texts are „Zum 20. Jahrestag der Befreiung vom Hitlerfaschismus,“ in *Die Arbeit*, March 26, 1965. BA/SAPMO, DY 30/2324, fiche 1, 16ff. „8. Mai 1945 – historische Wende im Leben der Völker,“ manuscript for *Probleme des Friedens und Sozialismus*, April 1970. BA/SAPMO, DY 30/2324, fiche 1, 77ff. „Für immer mit der Sowjetunion verbunden,“ manuscript für *Pravda*, April 1975. BA/SAPMO, DY 30/2325, fiche 1, 21ff. „DDR fest auf

following three examples thus represent rather lengthy version's of Honecker's publicly communicated Eastern Front memory and still suffice to illustrate the degree of disinterest in the real historical events. Commemorating VE Day in 1985, Honecker wrote an article for the SED's theoretical journal *Einheit* in which he spent for the first time more than one sentence on the history of the Eastern Front. In accompanying speeches at KZ Brandenburg-Görden and Torgau (where American and Soviet troops had met in the spring of 1945), Honecker also started to stress the contribution of other nations to the Anti-Hitler-Coalition, notably the United States.<sup>34</sup> This must be viewed as part of his timely efforts to gain diplomatic recognition by Washington; Honecker is said of always having dreamt of an official invitation to the U.S. The concurrent gradual inclusion of the Holocaust in the SED's official memory – the clearest manifestation of which was the decision to rebuilt the Synagogue in Berlin on *Oranienburger Strasse* in 1988 – was also part of this effort.<sup>35</sup>

The year 1985 was a turning point in West German memory of World War II inaugurated by Richard von Weizsäcker's seminal VE Day speech to the *Bundestag* in May 1985. It also marked a shift in the SED's official memory: it returned to history, it started recalling specific facts and events especially with regards to the Eastern Front. In

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dem Weg des Sozialismus. Rede auf der Festveranstaltung zum 30. Jahrestag der Befreiung, 7. Mai 1975,“ in Erich Honecker, *Reden und Aufsätze*, vol. 3 (Berlin (Ost): Dietz, 1976), 416-428. Speech manuscript at KZ Brandenburg-Görden, April 26, 1980. BA/SAPMO, DY 30/2325, fiche 1, 91ff. „Eine welthistorische Tat, die auch das deutsche Volk befreite,“ manuscript for *Die Einheit*, March 1985. BA/SAPMO, DY 30/2326, fiche 1, 1ff.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. for example, “Die DDR verkörpert die Ideale des antifaschistischen Kampfes. Rede auf der Großkundgebung in Brandenburg anlässlich des 40. Jahrestages der Befreiung,” April 27, 1985. In Honecker, *Reden und Aufsätze*, vol. 10 (Berlin (Ost): Dietz, 1986), 593-597.

<sup>35</sup> Herf, *Divided Memory*, 363. And Angelika Timm, *Hammer, Zirkel, Davidstern: das gestörte Verhältnis der DDR zu Zionismus und Staat Israel* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1997), 296ff.

his 1985 VE Day article for *Die Einheit*, Honecker embedded the attack against the Soviet Union into the chronology of World War II, calling it for the first time by its Nazi name “Operation Barbarossa” – a “crusade like no other.” After the “brutal conquest” of Austria and Czechoslovakia, Hitler started the “criminal attack against Poland and enslaved most other European countries.” Finally, in 1941 followed the “realization of ‘plan Barbarossa,’ the attack against the Soviet Union, a crusade of torched earth like no other, aimed at removing the bastion of socialism, the vanguard of human progress.”<sup>36</sup> Yet, like in all official announcements of this kind, the Wehrmacht’s warfare, the Holocaust, the mass murder and exploitation of millions of civilians remained unspecified. Instead, Honecker pointed out that fascism “fizzled [*schmählich scheitern*] at the power and strength of the Soviet land whose people rose like one man in an unprecedented act of heroism.”<sup>37</sup> It was the victorious historical outcome which counted, this remained the main motif in Honecker’s memorial speeches.

Only once before, in May 1980, Honecker in a singular instance paid more detailed attention to victim numbers and fates:

The Second World War, which the rapacious German imperialism had launched, was the greatest known to human memory. Between 1939 and 1945, 72 states were at war, overall 110 million citizens served in armed forces. Four fifths of the world population suffered under the events of war. Had World War I cost only ten million people their lives, fifty million died during World War II. Ninety million were wounded. The Soviet people alone lost more than twenty million of its sons and daughters in this fight which determined humanity’s fate. They perished on the battlefields, were murdered in Nazi Germany’s concentration camps or by fascist special commands.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> „Eine welthistorische Tat, die auch das deutsche Volk befreite,“ manuscript for *Die Einheit*, March 1985. BA/SAPMO, DY 30/2326, fiche 1, 3.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Erich Honecker, „Wir haben die historische Chance genutzt,“ manuscript for *Die Einheit*, April 1980. BA/SAPMO, DY 30/2325, fiche 1, 109.



This is the most concrete reference to German war crimes in the Soviet Union in all of Honecker's speeches commemorating World War II. Even in texts addressing a Soviet audience he remained rather unspecific as to the kind and scale of sacrifices given by the Soviet people during the Great Patriotic War. In an article for *Pravda* on the occasion of VE Day 1985, Honecker duly paid respect to the Soviet Union's "unparalleled, eternal" achievements in the antifascist struggle, this time underscoring the ideological, anti-Soviet fervor of "Hitler fascism:"

Hitler fascism, the most reactionary and aggressive spawn of German imperialism and militarism, started World War II because it longed for world domination. With its attack against the Soviet Union it wanted to usurp her raw materials and material resources. With the help of chauvinism, pan-Germanism, the ideology of the 'master race' and the 'inferior races,' it kicked of an unparalleled project of destruction aimed at removing the Soviet Union as bastion of socialism and peace. This was, at the same time, the beginning of its end.<sup>39</sup>

Again, this was the only reference to the Eastern Front in the article – a historical place on which indeed unparalleled crimes were committed. Yet, during the 1970s and 1980s, the SED's official rhetoric never moved beyond the above-quoted statements. Similarly, as demonstrated earlier, the propagandistic coverage of "Barbarossa" anniversaries in *Neues Deutschland* became increasingly focused on ritually recalling the "lessons of the past" as they fit into the present-day needs of the SED. The past itself became ever more remote.

With regards to Stalingrad and the NKFD, however, two key motifs in Ulbricht's Eastern Front narrative, Honecker was eager to avoid the impression of being remote from this crucial past. The antifascist founding narrative of the GDR rested on the memory of the communists' struggle alongside the Red Army, and Honecker too sought

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<sup>39</sup> „Der welthistorische Sieg für den Frieden und eine glückliche Zukunft der Menschheit,“ in *Pravda*, May 7, 1985. Printed in Honecker, *Reden und Aufsätze*, vol. 10, 614-626, quote on 615.

to cultivate the historical-ideological underpinning of his regime by invoking this legacy. Yet, unlike Ulbricht, Honecker was not a veteran of the Eastern Front war; unlike Ulbricht, he had not been a witness to the battle of Stalingrad, and had played no part in organizing the NKFD behind Eastern Front lines. However, Honecker visited Stalingrad/Volgograd twice *after* the war, once in 1947 as leader of the SED's youth organization FDJ, and again as head of state in 1975 after signing a renewed "treaty of friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance" with the USSR in Moscow. On his second visit, Honecker gave a speech to workers in the tractor factory "Felix Dzerzhinsky." Here he invoked the "heroic fighters of Stalingrad" as a "shining symbol for the unparalleled heroism of the Soviet people." It was the victory at Stalingrad which "inaugurated a fundamental turn in World War II." The fighters of Stalingrad "had given the highest a human being possesses, [one's] life, for the triumph of humanity over fascist barbarism, for the triumph of communism."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> „Neue große Perspektiven für unseren Freundschaftsbund. Rede auf einem Meeting [*sic!*] im Wolgograder Traktorenwerk ‚Feliks Dzierzynski,‘“ October 13, 1975. In *Reden und Aufsätze*. Vol. 4, 61-65, quote on 61. The speech was also published in *Neues Deutschland*, October 14, 1975.



Fig. 13. Commemorating the Heroic Fighters of Stalingrad: Erich Honecker with a delegation of SED and CPSU comrades on the Mamai Heights in front of a sculpture "Standing until Death," October 1975.<sup>41</sup>

Honecker thus kept the story of Stalingrad alive: already in 1972, a widely disseminated brochure illustrated the extraordinary transformation of the embattled city of Stalingrad into Volgograd,<sup>42</sup> and a decade later the fortieth anniversary of the battle prompted a series of official acts of commemoration orchestrated by the DSF.<sup>43</sup> After all, it was the defeat of the Sixth Army at Stalingrad which had enabled German communists to recruit captured German soldiers and officers for a formal antifascist organization, the

<sup>41</sup> BA/SAPMO, Bild Y1, 18-D-2.20.

<sup>42</sup> Specht, *Stalingrad 1943 - Volgograd 1972*. See Fig. 9.

<sup>43</sup> See the decree „Maßnahmen zur Würdigung des historischen Sieges der Sowjetarmee in der Stalingrader Schlacht“ by the DSF chairing committee, December 15, 1982. BA/SAPMO DY32/10743, 1-3. The „measures“ proposed – among other things a central commemorative ceremony on January 18, 1943 in the DSF’s central house in Berlin and a number of papers on the “meaning and current lessons of Stalingrad” – were presented as the DSF’s contribution to the Karl-Marx-Year which the SED celebrated throughout the GDR in 1983 (honoring the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Marx’ death).

NKFD. In 1985, Honecker paid tribute to the legacy of the NKFD by visiting the former POW camp in Krasnogorsk just outside Moscow, the historic place at which the organization was founded in July of 1943. This visit also took place within the context of the commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of the end of World War II. In May of 1985, a “Memorial Museum of the German Antifascists” was inaugurated at the site of the NKFD’s former school with Soviet and GDR officials, and West German KPD representatives present.<sup>44</sup> Honecker was among the prominent speakers at the ceremony. Curiously, SED propaganda experts were aware of the fact that ever since Ulbricht had resigned, they had ignored the historical role of the NKFD. Already in 1982, a memorandum on the propagandistic “handling of 50 years of antifascist action” from the SED ZK’s Agitation Division warned that “it should be clarified early on” how to address the upcoming fortieth anniversary of the NKFD’s founding in 1983, “since we haven’t written much on this in recent years.”<sup>45</sup> This admission notwithstanding, Honecker in his speech at the memorial ceremony in Krasnogorsk claimed wholeheartedly the historic

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<sup>44</sup> According to *Neues Deutschland*, the Museum had been founded at the initiative of the SED and the CPSU, cf. *Neues Deutschland*, May 6, 1985, 1f.

<sup>45</sup> „Bemerkungen über die Behandlung 50 Jahre antifaschistische Aktion in unseren Medien und über die Aktivitäten des Gegners zu 50 Jahre Machtergreifung des Faschismus sowie einige eventuelle Schlußfolgerungen,“ August 13, 1982. The memo began with the remark that „our history propaganda [*Geschichtspropaganda*] in connection with these events can not satisfy at this moment.” In odd contradiction to my findings on the rather unspecific commemoration of the Eastern Front, the memo continued: “Sure, there are a plenty of historical documentaries in *Neues Deutschland*, *Junge Welt*, *Berliner Zeitung*, the local papers as well as on radio (unfortunately television has not yet done much in this area [something that changed dramatically in 1985 with the commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of the end of World War II]). Most contributions, however, are not more that reconstructions of historical facts and events. Some of them I consider very routine-like and not tailored according to the historical and current importance (war or peace) of the events of fifty years ago.” See BA/SAPMO DY 30 vorl. SED/30106, 1. In a way then, this confirms my earlier point about the decreasing direct instrumentalization of the Eastern Front for political and propagandistic purposes under Honecker. This analysis certainly described the late 1970s and early 1980s – notably a time during which the CSCE-process first inspired hopes for a lasting ease of tensions in Europe, and which then saw the reawakening of fears of war in the wake of the euro-missile crisis 1979/1983 – but not the 1950s and early 1960s when Ulbricht capitalized on “lessons of the Eastern Front” in every conceivable way.

legacy of the NKFD by declaring that the “the unity of the antifascists lives on” in the GDR.<sup>46</sup> While “Hitler fascism’s terrible crimes” had “besmirched the name of the German nation with dirt,” the “honor of our nations was saved by the German antifascists.”<sup>47</sup> His list of antifascists – the true “patriots” as he stressed – naturally included not only the communist Eastern Front veterans, but also those – like himself – who had fought inside Germany, even while incarcerated by the Nazis in concentration camps and prisons cells.



Fig. 14. A Museum for the Antifascist Patriots in Krasnogorsk, May 5, 1985: Erich Honecker during the opening ceremony for the “Memorial Museum of the German Antifascists,” to his right Herbert Mies, head of the West German KPD ; to his left Viktor Grishin, head of the CPSU in Moscow.<sup>48</sup>

All of Honecker speeches, essays and declarations dealing with the legacy of the war against the Soviet Union were extremely vague in content, rather lofty in tone and instructing in style. He mostly lectured the lessons of the past in very general terms routinely referring to present-day political developments. Most of his announcements

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<sup>46</sup> „In unserem Land lebt die Einheit der Antifaschisten fort,“ in *Reden und Aufsätze*, vol. 10, 598.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 599.

<sup>48</sup> BA/SAPMO, Bild Y1, 20-D-2.20.

addressing questions of war and peace since the 1970s have to be read in conjunction with the ups and downs of the so-called Helsinki-process which since 1973 had led gradually to the creation of a collective security system (CSCE) including both West and Eastern bloc countries. For, the lesson of World War II was peace. In Honecker's wording, the crucial message of history was that "after all the sufferings and devastations that the Second World War ignited by Hitler fascism inflicted on nations, there is nothing more important than to keep the peace and the preserve it permanently."<sup>49</sup> Depending on the current state of affairs with regards to the Helsinki-process, Honecker would use historical speeches to underline variably the GDR's avant-garde position as the first socialist state on German soil from which "never again a war will be launched,"<sup>50</sup> the Soviet Union's leading role in securing and preserving peace since World War II, or to point to the continuing threat posed by anti-communism and/or anti-Sovietism and thus the ever looming danger of history being repeated. Unlike during the Ulbricht era, the year 1941, or the date June 22, was no longer used as a metaphor for a possible future attack from the imperialist West on another "Day X." The war against the Soviet Union had moved from being *the* focal point of the SED's official memory and the rallying point of party propaganda and mass mobilization, to being *one* – albeit still the most important – battlefield of World War II. The lessons drawn from the war were no longer limited to the war against the Soviet Union.

Back in 1949 when the Cold War inaugurated a new era of enmity between the Western powers and the Soviet Union, the SED Politburo had decreed that the key

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<sup>49</sup> „In unserem Land lebt die Einheit der Antifaschisten fort,“ in *Reden und Aufsätze*, vol. 10, 600.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

message from World War II was “never again war against the Soviet Union.”<sup>51</sup> In the 1980s, after the period of Détente had ended and a new Cold War dawned since the late 1970s, this formula was used in a more generalized way. In Honecker’s words, “the most important lesson of World War II [was] to prevent a new war, to fight against it before the weapons speak”<sup>52</sup> – because it better suited the propagandistic needs of the day. Moreover, the past war naturally grew more remote, and the established postwar Soviet empire had become a global player, self-confident and seemingly unshakable. During the commemoration of the fortieth anniversary of the end of World War II in the GDR, this shift became particularly evident. Aside from stressing the need to secure peace, i.e. by stopping the renewed arms-race, a key message of the commemorative speeches and acts delivered in May of 1985 was that “1985 [was] not 1939 and not 1941.” For by 1985, “the forces of peace and of social progress are incomparably stronger than half a century ago” and the Soviet Union had become the “strongest peace state.”<sup>53</sup> 1939 and 1941 were recalled as two equally important key dates in World War II history with the latter no longer rhetorically overshadowing the former.

Despite this subtle relegation of the Eastern Front war resulting in its further obfuscation as historical event, the Soviet Union remained both Hitler’s prime victim and

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<sup>51</sup> Protocol no. 38 of the Politburo meeting on August 16, 1949, 2. BA/SAPMO DY 30/IV/2/2/38. DSF had suggested to declare February 2 as “Stalingrad Day” in honor of German POWs returning from Soviet captivity. The Politburo criticized this dedication and instead decreed the motto “never again war against the Soviet Union.”

<sup>52</sup> Erich Honecker, “Die DDR verkörpert die Ideale des antifaschistischen Kampfes.” Speech at the central ceremony in Brandenburg on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the liberation of KZ Brandenburg-Görden, April 27, 1985. Printed in Honecker, *Reden und Aufsätze*, vol. 10, 595.

<sup>53</sup> Aufruf zum 40. Jahrestag des Sieges über den Hitlerfaschismus und der Befreiung des deutschen Volkes,“ signed by the SED’s ZK, GDR State Council, GDR Council of Ministers and the GDR’s „National Council of the National Front.“ BA/SAPMO, DY 30/vorl. SED/35685, 12.

conqueror. In 1985, a plethora of televised documentaries, movies and features – for the first time in GDR media history – was to transport the main messages of the official commemorative campaign by underscoring the Soviet Union’s dominant role in the past as well as in the present. For example, DDR II, one of the two state-controlled national TV channels, aired a 15-part Soviet production entitled “Strategy of Victory” between March and May 1985.<sup>54</sup> The editors of DDR II were instructed to schedule the series for 8 pm on Tuesdays and Fridays “for political reasons,” i.e. to reach the widest possible audience. Millions would indeed tune in. SED agitators now used prime time television to effectively spread *Geschichtspropaganda*. Other evening features aired in the spring of 1985 included films on “Soviet Troops Reaching Berlin,” “We Must Remember Or It Will Happen Again” (on the liberation of KZ Sachsenhausen), “Bombs on Berlin,” and “German Antifascists in the Resistance.”<sup>55</sup>

On the other side of the wall, national public television offered viewers in the West (and many secret viewers in the East) a number of documentaries on World War II as well. For example, ARD aired a six-part documentary on “The Germans in World War II” in April and May of 1985 (Sundays and Thursdays, 8:15 pm), a series focussing on the social history of Nazi Germany. It also showed a report drawing a positive balance for the “Federal Republic of Germany After 30 Years of NATO-Alliance.” While, thus, the West German public was still remembering VE Day in terms of German suffering and total defeat –Weizsäcker’s famous 1985 speech marked only the *beginning* of a

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<sup>54</sup> See the compendium “Sendungen des Fernsehens der DDR zum 40. Jahrestag des Sieges über den Faschismus und der Befreiung des deutschen Volkes von der Nazibarbarei,” in BA/SAPMO, DY 30/vorl. SED, 35685, not numbered.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.



reorientation of this date towards its liberating aspect – the SED flooded its citizens with messages and materials still aimed at engraving the Soviet Union’s leading role in East German public memory of World War II. The Soviet victory in 1945 – not the preceding war between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union – was the decisive event in recent German history and according to the key document of the SED’s commemoration of VE Day in 1985, its significance resulted from a number of canonical facts:

it proved the historical superiority of socialism;  
 it shaped the further course of world history forging a new balance of power, transforming socialism into a global system by inspiring liberation movements around the world;  
 it signalled the “triumph of humanism, freedom and human dignity over the forces of the ‘master race,’ racism, anti-Semitism,” their “petrifying places of destruction, prisons and concentration camps with their guillotines, gas chambers and crematoria;”  
 it was the result of the sacrificial work of Soviet people thus carrying the main burden of war;  
 it was a victory of the indestructible idea of socialism, a victory of the teachings of Marx, Engels and Lenin;  
 German antifascists were among the front of victors and later assured that in the GDR the lessons of 1945 were remembered and realized;  
 and the main lesson of war was to secure peace.<sup>56</sup>

Within this context the actual events between 1941 and 1945 on the Eastern Front, were of little to no relevance at all. Much more than in earlier decades, historical details were missing from this image of the past, even more so concise statements on causes and consequences, perpetrators and victims, places and people. True, television series like “Strategy of Victory” included scenes depicting Soviet (and German) sufferings on the Eastern Front but even in this case the question of who committed the crimes for what reasons remained unanswered. The officially propagated memory of the Eastern Front war was little more than routine lip-service paid to the Soviets. As a result of the

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<sup>56</sup> These were the main points of the „Aufruf zum 40. Jahrestag des Sieges über den Hitlerfaschismus und der Befreiung des deutschen Volkes,“ signed by the SED’s ZK, GDR State Council, GDR Council of Ministers and the GDR’s „National Council of the National Front.“ BA/SAPMO, DY 30/vorl. SED/35685, 3-9. The „Aufruf“ was published on the frontpage of *Neues Deutschland*, January 11, 1985.

obfuscating contextualization of the Eastern Front war into the overall history of the Second World War, the last major anniversary remembered under the SED-regime, the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the attack in 1986, was worth only a one-page statement by the SED Politburo on the formal ceremonial agenda to be observed on June 22, 1986<sup>57</sup> – this time not a single sentence was dedicated to elaborating the “political meaning” of the anniversary – and a brief report in *Neues Deutschland* on the various wrath-laying ceremonies. Below a front-page photograph of the SED leadership “solemnly honoring the fallen Soviet heroes,” a lengthy article listed the names and organisations who participated in the ceremonies concluding that those present “once again vowed to honor and fulfil the legacy of the heroes with their deeds for all times.”<sup>58</sup> Else the reader received no historical background information on the event which was at the center of these ceremonies.<sup>59</sup>

## II. From *Ostpolitik* to “Conservative Turn:” Revisiting the Eastern Front

It is often claimed that the end of the Adenauer era inaugurated a new phase in West German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. After a transitional phase under chancellors Ludwig Erhard and Kurt-Georg Kiesinger, historians have pointed to Willy Brandt’s chancellorship and the legacy of the 1968 movement as turning points in the political

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<sup>57</sup> „45. Jahrestag des Überfalls Hitlerdeutschlands auf die Sowjetunion. Beschluß des Politbüros des ZK vom 9.6.1986,“ BA/SAPMO, DY30 J IV 2/2R, 116, 99-100.

<sup>58</sup> “Gefallene sowjetische Helden wurden in Berlin feierlich geehrt,” *Neues Deutschland*, June 23, 1986, 1f, quote on 2.

<sup>59</sup> Another article on page 2 dealt with the memorial service and “peace meeting” at the “Memorial Site of the Liberation Seelower Höhen” included a one basic fact about the events that took place there in the spring of 1945: about 30,000 Soviet soldiers perished in one of the fiercest battles of the last days of the war. “Friedenstreffen auf den Seelower Höhen. Helden der Sowjetunion gedacht,” *Neues Deutschland*, June 23, 1986, 2.

culture of the Bonn republic.<sup>60</sup> With that change in political culture, scholars have also noted transformations in the “public use of history.”<sup>61</sup> By publicly communicating a more “empathic understanding of historical truth” which opened West German memorial culture to the sufferings of non-German victims of Nazism, the new generation of politicians ascending with Brandt created a crucial precondition for “forgiveness and social peace.”<sup>62</sup> It was a milestone on the road towards the full “normative internalization” of the Nazi past into West German memory. In the long run, National Socialism was “overcome” because it was the historical event of reference (“*Bezugseignis*”) which had kept the “greatest relevance for the self-reflection of the political system.”<sup>63</sup>

While these observations hold true for the memory of the Holocaust, they certainly need qualification with regards to the Eastern Front war, its legacy and political memory. The context of the Cold War constituted the principal foil on which this memory emerged. It was the perception of the Soviet Union as ongoing threat in the East alongside the concurring “militant anti-communism” (Helmut Dubiel) which long hindered an empathetic and historically truthful understanding of the history of the Eastern Front. Yet, on the upside, the anticommunist stand of the early Federal Republic

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<sup>60</sup> See most recently Konrad Jarausch, „Critical Memory and Civil Society: The Impact of the 1960's on German Debates about the Past,” and Habbo Knoch, “The Return of the Images: Photographs of the Nazi Crimes and the West German Public in the ‘Long 1960s,’” both in Gassert, Steinweis, eds., *Coping with the Nazi past*, 19-87.

<sup>61</sup> Herf, *Divided Memory*, 344ff. Edgar Wolfrum, „Die Suche nach dem ‚Ende der Nachkriegszeit.‘ Krieg und NS-Diktatur in öffentlichen Geschichtsbildern der ‚alten‘ Bundesrepublik“, in Cornelißen, Klinkhammer, Schwentker, eds., *Erinnerungskulturen*, 183-197. Lepsius, „Das Erbe des Nationalsozialismus.“

<sup>62</sup> van Laak „Widerstand gegen die Geschichtsgewalt,” 22.

<sup>63</sup> Lepsius, „Das Erbe des Nationalsozialismus,” 251.

helped initially to forge the anti-totalitarian, in essence democratic, consensus of the young democracy, and thus constituted one of its founding principles. It was an important element in the formation of a West German collective identity, and dominated the political culture during and even beyond the Adenauer years. On the downside, however, the continuous inability of the West German political establishment to self-critically reflect the fact that for years a „militant anticommunism“ in the West – much as the dogmatic antifascism of the SED in the East – had hindered an “effective moral confrontation with the Nazi legacy,” was “*the* moral drama of the postwar period.”<sup>64</sup> This was (West) Germany’s “second guilt.”<sup>65</sup> The “*Feindbild*” of the Soviets drew heavily on the ideological and emotional residues of Nazi propaganda against “Jewish Bolshevism” and therefore long hampered a sincere reckoning with the legacy of the Nazi attack against the Soviet Union.<sup>66</sup> Anyone expressing sympathy for Soviet victims during World War II, thus acknowledging the unprecedented suffering Nazi Germany had inflicted on peoples in the Soviet Union, and therefore also to some extent acknowledging understanding for its present security concerns, potentially risked being denounced as communist henchman.

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<sup>64</sup> Dubiel, *Niemand ist frei von der Geschichte*, 171f. [Emphasis added ]. See also Peter Jahn, “Rußlandbild und Antikommunismus in der bundesdeutschen Gesellschaft der Nachkriegszeit,” in Quinkert, „*Wir sind die Herren dieses Landes*,“ 223-235. And Rürup, *Der Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion*, 261-280.

<sup>65</sup> Giordano, *Zweite Schuld*.

<sup>66</sup> Sophinette Becker, „Der Umgang der Deutschen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland mit Krieg und Verbrechen in der Sowjetunion,“ in Dietrich Goldschmidt, ed., *Frieden mit der Sowjetunion – eine unerledigte Aufgabe* (Gütersloh: Verlagshaus Mohn, 1989), 358-374. On the anti-Soviet/anti-Russian *Feindbild* – best translated as image of an enemy – see Jahn, “Rußlandbild und Antikommunismus,“ and idem, „’Russenfurcht’ und Antibolschewismus: Zur Entstehung und Wirkung von Feindbildern,“ in Jahn, Rürup, eds., *Erobern und Vernichten*, 47-64.

Yet, with *Détente* and the ascend of “*Neue Ostpolitik*” this context changed significantly, making it now politically desirable to work towards understanding and cooperation with the Soviet Union.<sup>67</sup> During the later 1960s the public perception of the legacies of “Operation Barbarossa” changed significantly albeit not yet fundamentally.<sup>68</sup> Memory increasingly mattered in the political arena; it was a prerequisite for the transformation of diplomatic relations with Germany’s Eastern neighbors: “Memory of a terrible past was indispensable for serving West German policy in the present.”<sup>69</sup>

It was one of the core principles of Brandt’s *Ostpolitik* to acknowledge the fact that the solution of the German question was only possible in cooperation *with* the Soviet Union, not *without* or *against* her will.<sup>70</sup> This fundamental shift in West German foreign policy also entailed a different approach towards the burdens of the troubled German-Soviet past. However, the discourse over the Eastern Front legacy did not change overnight. It rather took another two decades to firmly root the acknowledgment of German crimes on Soviet soil in West German political memory.<sup>71</sup> Although tone and content of

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<sup>67</sup> On „Neue Ostpolitik“ see most importantly Peter Bender, *Die „Neue Ostpolitik“ und ihre Folgen. Vom Mauerbau bis zur Vereinigung* (München: dtv, 1995), and William E. Griffith, *The Ostpolitik of the Federal Republic of Germany* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978). See also Dennis L. Bark, David R. Gress, *A History of West Germany*, vol. 2: “Democracy and its Discontents, 1963-1991” (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992), 166-223.

<sup>68</sup> Wolfrum, „Die Suche nach dem ‚Ende der Nachkriegszeit,‘ 183-197, esp. 188f.

<sup>69</sup> Herf, *Divided Memory*, 346. See further on the question of memory and foreign policy Berger, „The power of memory and the memories of power.“

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Egon Bahr’s famous speech on July 15, 1963 in Tutzinger entitled “Wandlung durch Annäherung,” printed in *Deutschland Archiv* 6 (1978), No. 8, 862-865, esp. 862.

<sup>71</sup> As late as 1989, the sociologist Lepsius noted that “the recognition of the war crimes committed against Russian [*sic*] POWs and against the civilian population in the East progresses only slowly.” The process of their “normative incorporation” into German memory had just started then. Lepsius, “Das Erbe des Nationalsozialismus,” 263. In 1987, the prominent military historian Wolfram Wette published an essay in the weekly paper *Die Zeit* under the programmatic title “The oppressed burden of 1941:” Wolfram Wette, “Erobern, zerstören, auslöschen. Die verdrängte Last von 1941: Der Rußland Feldzug war ein Raub - und

statements regarding the German invasion altered even before Brandt – it was under Ludwig Erhard that the Federal Republic officially commemorated the attack against the Soviet Union for the first time in 1966 – this was a change in degree, not in kind. The historical facts, contexts and consequences of the Eastern Front war still remained largely unaddressed, politicians still avoided referring to concrete events and facts such as occupation policies or Wehrmacht crimes. At most they came around to acknowledging that the horrific crimes were still alive in Soviet memory and occasionally spoke about unhealed wounds and unfading scarves.

It should be clarified upfront that the purpose of this excursus into West German political culture is not to accuse the political establishment of ahistorical shortsightedness and moral failure while keeping silent about the Soviets' undemocratic policies, totalitarian aspirations and violent practices pursued within the fortified borders of its empire. The territory of the GDR was kept under communist rule against popular will, and the resulting division of Germany remained the chief grievance of the German nation since the end of World War II. Keeping these political facts in mind, the objective here is instead to analyse from the standpoint of one of Nazi Germany's successor states the way the political elite addressed – and evaded – the realities and consequences of Hitler's "war of annihilation" against the Soviet Union, and the way they connected this burdened history to the political concerns of the day.

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Vernichtungskrieg von Anfang an," *Die Zeit*, November 20, 1987, 49-51. The most powerful case was made by Giordano in his *Zweite Schuld*, esp. 169-214.

In a remarkable 1965 article for *Foreign Affairs*, Erhard's able Foreign Minister Gerhard Schröder (CDU) eloquently reasoned why an opening towards Eastern Europe and especially the Soviet Union was both necessary and possible twenty years after the end of World War II. Recalling that ever since the Hungarian uprising in 1956, the Eastern bloc could no longer be perceived as a monolith under total Soviet control, Schröder argued that Germany's *Ostpolitik* stood before a grandiose task: to bridge the "intellectual and political gap" which World War II had left "in [the] relations between divided Germany and the countries to the East."<sup>72</sup> He was the first foreign minister to stress explicitly that the present difficulties were linked to the past: "National Socialist megalomania [had] raged with particular brutality in Eastern Europe."<sup>73</sup> Schröder knew that the goal of a peaceful German unification could not be reached without acknowledging the legacy of the Eastern Front war because its emotional and ideological aftermath continued to dominate mutual perceptions and relations:

It is not surprising, therefore, that we frequently find an outdated image of Germany in Eastern Europe – one which may also have existed in the West 15 or 20 years ago. That image is characterized by mistrust and fear, based on recollections of the era when the National Socialist megalomania raged with particular brutality in Eastern Europe. Moreover, the countries of this area tend to make the same error that the Germans themselves frequently made and of which they have been cured by two catastrophes – namely, the mistake of overestimating Germany's resources. Ignorance of the changes that have taken place in Germany since 1945 has so far prevented this distorted image from being corrected. It is hard to know how deeply mistrust and fear of Germany are rooted in the minds of the leadership groups in Eastern Europe; but unjustified as they are today, they certainly represent a very considerable political factor.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Gerhard Schröder, „Germany looks at Eastern Europe,“ *Foreign Affairs*, Oct. 1965, 15-25, quote on 18. See the good analysis of this article's implications for German foreign policy since Adenauer in Peter Bender, *Die Ostpolitik Willy Brandts oder die Kunst des Selbstverständlichen* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1972), 19ff.

<sup>73</sup> Schröder, „Germany looks at Eastern Europe,“ 18.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

In this statement, a West German foreign minister for the first time acknowledged the role of Eastern Front memory by – if only implicitly – accepting the roots of the historical fear of a strong Germany in Eastern Europe. In the same breath, Schröder explicitly disconnected his country from this history by stressing that past mistakes would not be repeated since West Germany had been “cured.” He realistically evaluated the historically rooted fear as “considerable political factor,” the very existence of which the political leaders in Bonn hitherto had denied, ignored or dismissed. It should be recalled that Schröder’s statement came exactly ten years after Adenauer had boldly shrugged off the fear of Germany among Eastern Europeans as “psychosis of war” during his visit to Moscow in 1955.<sup>75</sup>

Schröder’s article appeared in context of the commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of VE Day in 1965.<sup>76</sup> Chancellor Erhard<sup>77</sup> personally had endowed that anniversary with a peculiar mix of seeking closure and raising hopes: ending the “postwar period” (*Nachkriegszeit*) and securing Germany’s role among the peace-loving nations for the future were the main themes of his brief chancellorship. Under the Erhard administration (1963-1966), Bonn slowly moved away from a mere policy of distrust against the Soviet Union towards a policy of forging trust in order to create a spirit of

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<sup>75</sup> One should indeed recall Adenauer’s awkward remarks on the “war thing”, the Soviets’ “psychosis of war” and the need for a “psychological cleansing” before starting a new era of diplomatic relations which outraged Khrushchev during their meeting in Moscow in September of 1955. Cf. Chapter 5.II.

<sup>76</sup> On the political context and implications of this year for German memorial culture see Wolfrum, „Die Suche nach dem ‚Ende der Nachkriegszeit,‘ 183-197. See also Kirsch, „*Wir haben aus der Geschichte gelernt*“, 50-52.

<sup>77</sup> Born the son of a tradesman, soldier in World War I, economist, a civilian clerk in an economic institute in occupied Lorraine during the Nazi years, 1945/46 Bavarian Minister of Economics, head economist in the *Wirtschaftsrat* of the Bizone, 1949 Economics Minister under Adenauer (without being CDU member), spiritus rector of the Federal Republic’s “Miracle Years.”



cooperation. This was now viewed as the most crucial precondition for achieving a solution of the German question. “While earlier, it was only spoken of what the Russians, the Poles and the Czechs had done to the Germans [invasion, rapes, robbery, expulsion], it was now also considered what the Germans had perpetrated under Hitler in Eastern Europe.”<sup>78</sup>

One of the first results of this development was the “Peace Note” offered by the Erhard administration to all nations (except the GDR) in the spring of 1966, followed by the first official announcement commemorating the beginning of “Operation Barbarossa” in June of the same year. Both documents rendered no immediate changes in the FRG’s diplomatic policies but it reflected the West German government’s “frustration with its policy towards the East and its concern to strengthen its own credibility as a responsible power.”<sup>79</sup> They also aptly illustrate Erhard’s problematic ambition to move beyond the “postwar period,” in fact to end it. Implicitly, the chancellor acknowledged the historical legacy of Nazi Germany’s war in Eastern Europe, but simultaneously he argued explicitly – very much reminiscent of Adenauer’s rhetoric – for a final line to be drawn.

In context of the worldwide ceremonies commemorating the end of the Second World War in 1965 and confronted with increasing domestic and international criticism of the meager legacy of Adenauer’s *Vergangenheitspolitik*, Erhard’s focus was on presenting his country in the best possible light. While the *Bundestag* heatedly debated

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<sup>78</sup> Bender, *Die Ostpolitik Willy Brandts*, 19f.

<sup>79</sup> Bark, Gress, eds., *Democracy and its Discontents*, 42.

the extension of the statute of limitations for Nazi crimes in 1965<sup>80</sup>, and while the Auschwitz trial 1963/65 for the first time had placed the Holocaust into the spotlight of public attention, the chancellor sought to shift focus on the republic's positive accomplishments. He stressed the stunning economic successes of the young Federal Republic which in his view had grown into a mature democracy (he spoke of the “*formierte Gesellschaft*” or “matured society”).<sup>81</sup> He believed that German reunification was the precondition for an easing of East-West tensions – unlike Brandt, who believed the opposite – and he felt that the Soviets' refusal to end Germany's division was the “wound which leaves Europe restless” – not Hitler and World War II which had caused it.<sup>82</sup> Erhard also wanted West Germany to become a respected, influential and “normal” member of the international community: “we are someone again,” was his motto.<sup>83</sup> One step in this direction was the full diplomatic recognition of Israel in 1965 overshadowed

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<sup>80</sup> See the eloquent analysis of the parliamentary debates in 1965 in Dubiel, *Niemand ist frei von der Geschichte*, 103-110. Dubiel stresses the international dimension of this debate. It was much influenced by the „*Ausland*”, i.e. by increasingly critical commentaries in French, British, Israeli and American newspapers of the West German war crimes trials which since 1958 continued to expose how scandalously little the FRG had done to prosecute Nazi crimes. The republic's reputation was at stake. The 1965 debate circled around the question whether or not “every guilt must be time-barred” (deputy Thomas Dehler, FDP) at some point, resulted in the decision to extend the statute by five years; only in 1979, after a further ten-year extension passed in 1970, the *Bundestag* decided that capital crimes committed during the Nazi period would not be barred by statute, thus creating a fundamental – and unique – exception to the rule.

<sup>81</sup> See his government statement of November 10, 1965. Printed in Klaus von Beyme, *Die großen Regierungserklärungen der deutschen Bundeskanzler von Adenauer bis Schmidt* (München: Hanser, 1979), 191-230.

<sup>82</sup> Quoted in Horst Osterfeld, *Außenpolitik unter Bundeskanzler Ludwig Erhard 1963-1966. Ein dokumentarischer Bericht aus dem Kanzleramt* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1992), 300. See also the discussion in Bark, Gress, eds., *Democracy and its Discontents*, 42-46.

<sup>83</sup> Von Beyme, *Die großen Regierungserklärungen*, 195.

by a heated controversy over secret arms transfers and followed by the immediate break-up of diplomatic relations with the FRG on the side of most Arab countries.<sup>84</sup>

With his “Peace Note” of March 25, 1966, Erhard practically if not formally annulled the Hallstein-Doctrine. It assured all governments in the world, including Eastern European countries but excluding the GDR, of the peaceful intentions of the Federal Republic, its commitment to arms-control and its determination to prevent the outbreak of another war: “The German nation wants to live in peace and freedom. It sees its greatest national mission in overcoming the division under which it has been suffering for many years.”<sup>85</sup> The emphasis was once again on the need to end the postwar period which in Erhard’s view was kept alive only by the Soviets’ refusal to permit Germany’s reunification. At that time, one should recall, it was still Bonn’s official position that a united Germany would exist within the borders of 1937 unless a “freely elected all-German government recognizes different borders.”<sup>86</sup> This was a rhetorical figure which continued to overshadow Bonn’s relations with Moscow, and especially Warsaw. The past, and the war on the Eastern Front in particular, remained of little relevance in these

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<sup>84</sup> During the same year, Ulbricht visited Gamal Abd el Nasser for the first time during his state visit in Egypt. On the FRG’s relations to Israel and the 1965 Near-East Crisis in general cf. Osterfeld, *Außenpolitik unter Bundeskanzler Ludwig Erhard*, 188ff. And Klaus Hildebrand, *Von Erhard zur Großen Koalition 1963-1969* (= *Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, vol. 4, ed. Karl-Dietrich Bracher, Theodor Eschenburg, Joachim Fest, Eberhard Jäckel (Stuttgart: dva, 1984)), 111-118.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Osterfeld, *Außenpolitik unter Bundeskanzler Ludwig Erhard*, 301.

<sup>86</sup> “The path [toward German reunification] may be long. It will cost us deprivations and sacrifices. We will take it anyway. A peace-treaty will stand at its end, negotiated and signed by a freely elected all-German government. Only with and in this treaty can and must the final borders of Germany be determined which according to effective legal opinion continues to exist within its borders of December 31, 1937 as long as not a freely elected government recognizes different borders.” Such was the standard legal codification of the claim on Germany’s lost territories in the East. It was Brandt who stopped using this phrase which for Germany’s Eastern neighbors, especially Poland, was a continuous source of discontent and distrust. Here quoted from Erhard’s 1965 government statement, printed in von Beyme, *Die großen Regierungserklärungen*, 220f.

statements. Erhard's stance towards the Soviet Union – in stark contrast to his foreign minister's position – was not informed by a genuine awareness of the war's legacy.

In his already-mentioned important government statement in 1965, Erhard had admonished the Soviet Union that it stood in the way of a peaceful solution of the Cold War. Stressing that almost half of all West Germans had no personal memories of the years between 1933 and 1945, Erhard talked about the need to move beyond remembering the “crimes committed in the name of Germany” during those years: the war and the postwar period “must no longer be reference points of this administration's policies.”<sup>87</sup> At no point did he connect the division of Germany to the pre-1945 period. Instead, he accused the Soviet Union of prolonging the war by other means: “The Soviet Union hitherto has not wanted German reunification in freedom and still does not want it.”<sup>88</sup> Yet, *implicitly* Erhard recognized the severity of the historical trauma caused by the German attack in 1941:

The Soviet government erroneously insists that a divided Germany served better the interests of the Soviet Union than a unified one. But they should know instead – and we have declared this as well: The German people and every all-German government will be ready to guarantee that the reunification of Germany will neither threaten Russia nor our Eastern neighbors.<sup>89</sup>

Five years later, Brandt would become the first chancellor to *explicitly* refer to the horrors of the Eastern Front war in context of a possible solution of the German question. Even the little-known fact that Erhard issued the first official declaration on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Nazi attack against the Soviet Union in 1966, confirms the conclusion that Erhard moved only half-heartedly towards a better

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 191f.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 219.

understanding with Eastern Europe, towards a new *Ostpolitik* based on the presumptuous idea of “détente through reunification.”<sup>90</sup> The short declaration with the remarkable title “Giving the Future its Right! Removing the Residues of War,” was released by the Erhard government to the press on June 20, 1966. It started with the following words:

Twenty-five years ago, the German invasion of the Soviet Union began. It has brought suffering and misery over both peoples, cost millions of human lives and shook the political constitution of Europe. The blood toll which the German and the Soviet nation have paid is an obligation to prevent forever a repetition of June 22, 1941. He who looks back on that fateful day and its consequences, misconceives today’s realities and gives away tomorrow’s chances.<sup>91</sup>

Read closely, these sentences reveal a principal refusal to face historical facts and betray a troubling insensitivity for the painful legacy of the war against the Soviet Union *in* the Soviet Union. While the first sentence admitted Germany was the attacker, the very next thought blurred the line between attacker and victim by stressing that both nations suffered greatly. Moreover, the “blood toll” was firstly paid by the Germans, but both, Germany and the Soviet Union, were called upon to prevent a repetition of June 22, 1941. Worse, the statement’s historical part ended with a critique of all those who refused or proved incapable of forgetting this “fateful day and its consequences.” Assuming that “those” referred primarily to the people in the Soviet Union – and the political elite who kept referring to the war whether out of sincerity or political opportunity, or both – this statement testifies to the still prevalent tendency to speak as little and as detached as possible of German guilt, and as much and as empathic as possible of German suffering on the Eastern Front. It is questionable whether Erhard was aware of the fact that two

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<sup>90</sup> Hildebrand, *Von Erhard zur Großen Koalition*, 83ff.

<sup>91</sup> „Der Zukunft ihr Recht geben! Überreste des Krieges wegräumen – Erklärung der Bundesregierung zum 22. Juni 1966,“ printed in *BPI*, no. 81, June 21, 1966, 637.

thirds of the more than 20 million Soviet victims during World War II were civilians. Nazi Germany's many non-German, mostly non-military victims were still being brushed over, or simply ridiculed as a result of the crude equation of both sides' sacrifices and losses.

The second part of the declaration stressed that "it was time to remove the residues of the war, in particular the German division." And with an implicit hint at the German-Soviet *Weltanschauungskrieg* (war of world views), it warned that "hatred has brought the nations on the brink of extermination." This alleged aggressive hatred on both sides negated once again who waged war, and who reacted. Finally, only the realization of the "vital necessities of the other will bring them peace and security." Germany, the text concluded, was "ready to cooperate and to sacrifice."

With this unprecedented but half-hearted gesture, Bonn had acknowledged the importance of June 22, 1941 in Soviet history and memory, and its relevance for the diplomatic relations between the two nations. Yet it also used this self-created opportunity to throw the ball onto the Soviet side. The declaration was to demonstrate West Germany's peaceful, cooperative intentions, and to expose Moscow's continuing renitence to properly address the German question. Far from expressing an empathetic understanding of historical truth the first official Bonn document dealing with the Eastern Front war and its legacy can be viewed as a perfect example of the politics of memory in its democratic variant. Its purpose was to relate the past to the present not for the sake of remembering the past but for the sake of rallying support for a solution to the burning question of Germany's dual statehood in the present and future.

Behind the Iron Curtain, the SED's interpretation of Bonn's June 22 declaration was accordingly frosty. In the editorial on June 22, 1961, *Neues Deutschland* argued that it showed "how little German imperialism had learned from June 22, 1941." Aiming in particular at Erhard's call to "remove the residues of war," the commentary reminded the reader that "it is known that for Bonn 'ending the German division' means as much as 'annexation of the GDR.'" The commentary intentionally and maliciously misread the declaration by complaining that "one has the guts over there to proclaim an attack on the socialist GDR on the anniversary of the attack against the socialist Soviet Union." For Walter Ulbricht this resembled the anti-communism of the interwar years. Alluding to Erhard's postulation of the "end of the postwar period," the editorial quoted Ulbricht with a warning that "one must not allow that Bonn's anti-communism leads into a new pre-war period."<sup>92</sup>

East Berlin's fierce propaganda against an allegedly aggressive West Germany routinely continued even though the signs for a lasting improvement of East-West relations congregated under the Kiesinger-Brandt administration (1966-1969). As Erhard, his successor Kurt-Georg Kiesinger (CDU) saw West German-Soviet relations not primarily "burdened" with the legacies of the Eastern Front war but with the "still unsolved problem of Germany's reunification," so he declared in his government statement upon taking office in December of 1966. Yet, at the same time Kiesinger and his Foreign Minister Willy Brandt (SPD) acknowledged that this was a distant goal that could only be achieved if the current political structure in Europe changed and the bloc

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<sup>92</sup> „Der 22. Juni 1941,“ in *Neues Deutschland*, June 22, 1966, 1.

confrontation ended.<sup>93</sup> Kiesinger dedicated a significant portion of his address to the relationship with the Soviet Union, recalling that already in 1955 he had strongly supported the establishment of diplomatic relations with Moscow. He also repeated what he had said eight years earlier in a *Bundestag* speech, namely that “the German nation harbors neither enmity nor hatred against the peoples of the Soviet Union; to the contrary, it seeks to live in good, peaceful neighborhood with them.”<sup>94</sup> To Kiesinger in 1966, a solution of the German question from now on was considered possible only within the larger context of a European peace settlement. This principle was the nucleus of the “New *Ostpolitik*” and it eliminated once and for all the long-standing contradiction between Bonn’s *Deutschlandpolitik* and *Ostpolitik*.<sup>95</sup> Remarkably, Kiesinger also avoided repeating the explicit claim to Germany’s borders of 1937. Instead he stressed that many Germans “desired a reconciliation with Poland, whose painful history we have not forgotten.” Addressing Prague, the chancellor “condemned Hitler’s policies which were aimed at destroying Czechoslovakian statehood” and expressed the hope for a better understanding in the future.<sup>96</sup> Finally, Kiesinger also paid tribute to the fact that the conclusion of the Auschwitz-trial in Frankfurt just a year earlier had brought the Holocaust at the forefront of the public mind. No chancellor could ignore it any longer. He thus briefly and vaguely referred to the “gruesome crimes which have been committed against the Jewish people abusing the name of our nation” and acknowledged

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<sup>93</sup> Bender, *Die Ostpolitik Willy Brandts*, 34.

<sup>94</sup> Government statement to the *Bundestag*, December 13, 1966, printed in von Beyme, *Die großen Regierungserklärungen*, 231-246.

<sup>95</sup> Bender, *Die Ostpolitik Willy Brandts*, 35. Practically this fundamental shift became manifest with the establishment of diplomatic relations with Romania, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia in 1967/68 – political steps which formally ended the Hallstein doctrine.

<sup>96</sup> von Beyme, *Die großen Regierungserklärungen*, 244f.



that these crimes burdened relations to Israel. Nonetheless, he vowed to continue to work for improving relations.<sup>97</sup>

Though Kiesinger is not on record for ever referring specifically to the historic events on the Eastern Front during his short term in office, his 1966 speech both in terms of content and style signalled the dawn of a more sensitive inclusion of history's burdens into West German diplomacy and politics. With regards to the Eastern Front war, it was his successor Willy Brandt whose negotiated settlements with Moscow, Warsaw, Prague and East Berlin – the so-called Eastern treaties (*Ostverträge*) – entailed a reassessment of Germany's historical relations with Eastern Europe, and in particular with Poland and the Soviet Union. Moreover, Brandt's speeches, interviews, announcements and public commemorative acts such as his kneeling down in Warsaw in 1970 indeed reflected a more empathetic understanding of history. Yet, while Brandt's famous "knee-fall" and his subsequent explanations contained a sincere willingness to accept German guilt for Poland's sufferings and a sincere hope at reconciliation, his statements regarding the Nazi war against the Soviet Union remained rather sober and vague. After the pictures of him kneeling at the Warsaw Ghetto memorial had gone around the world, Brandt later reflected in his memoirs:

I went down on my knees before the memorial to those who died in the Warsaw Ghetto. Despite malicious comments in the Federal Republic, I was not ashamed to have done so. This gesture ... was not 'planned.' ... Oppressed by the memories of Germany's recent history, I simply did what people do when words fail them. My thoughts dwelt not only on the millions who had been murdered but also on the fact that Auschwitz notwithstanding, fanaticism and suppression of human rights persisted. My gesture was intelligible to those willing to understand it, and they included many in Germany and elsewhere.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>98</sup> Quoted in Bark, Gress, eds., *Democracy and its Discontents*, 187. Bahr recalls that Brandt and him didn't talk much about the event, Brandt only once reflected that "I had the feeling a nod with the head was not

Repeatedly before and after, Brandt spoke movingly of the sufferings that Poles had had to endure at the hands of Germans. Yet, while his sympathy for Poland's painful history is unquestionable, his postwar experience with the Soviet occupation of East Germany and parts of Berlin seem to have obviated an equally sincere commitment to reconciliation with the Soviet Union. At least in comparison with his statements on Poland, Brandt's references to the Soviet Union's war experience reveal a certain inner distance, even coldness. His closest advisor, Egon Bahr<sup>99</sup> (born 1922), confirmed this impression in his memoirs, stating at one point that "Brandt saw Poland with an understanding and an affection which [he] did not cherish for the Soviet Union."<sup>100</sup>

Politically and publicly, this inner distance mattered a great deal. Brandt never expressed a word of apology for what Germans had done in the Soviet Union during World War II, as he would do with regards to German crimes committed in Poland. Unlike the Moscow Treaty, the treaty with Poland starts with an explicit reference to the outbreak of World War II "whose first victim was Poland."<sup>101</sup> Unlike the Erhard administration before him in 1966, and the Schmidt/Genscher administration after him in

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enough." Quoted in Egon Bahr, *Zu meiner Zeit* (München: Karl Blessing, 1996), 341. On Brandt's knee-fall see his *Erinnerungen*, 211-224, and recently Christoph Schneider, *Der Warschauer Kniefall. Ritual, Ereignis und Erzählung* (Konstanz: Universitätsverlag, 2006), and Michael Wolffsohn, Thomas Brechenmacher, *Denkmalsturz? Brandts Kniefall* (München: OLZOG, 2005). In his memoirs, Brandt noted that this act was inspired by the realization that „nowhere else had a nation, had the people suffered as much as in Poland. The machine-like murder of the Polish Jews constituted a culmination which nobody had deemed possible." Willy Brandt, *Erinnerungen* (Frankfurt/Main: Propyläen, 1990), 214.

<sup>99</sup> Born the son of a teacher, who was dismissed in 1938 after refusing to divorce his Jewish wife, Egon's mother. 1942-1944 Wehrmacht soldier, dismissed after his "non-Aryan ancestry" becomes known. 1945 Journalist in Berlin, 1950-1960 RIAS reporter, 1956 SPD, 1960-1966 press chief of Mayor Brandt in West Berlin, thereafter becomes Brandt's chief foreign policy advisor.

<sup>100</sup> Bahr, *Zu meiner Zeit*, 292. Bahr claims the same was true for foreign minister Walter Scheel's inner attitude towards Poland and the Soviet Union.

<sup>101</sup> German-Polish Treaty, December 7, 1970. Printed in *Außenpolitik der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, 340.

1981, Brandt issued no special statement in June 1971, thirty years after the German attack against the Soviet Union. The anniversary was not even formally acknowledged. To illustrate this point one may refer to one of Brandt's speeches during the debate over the ratification of the Eastern treaties in the *Bundestag* in 1972. The Eastern treaties with Moscow and Warsaw, Brandt argued, constituted the "responses to the bitter questions left to us by World War II."<sup>102</sup> As to the recent German-Polish history and the lost German territories, the chancellor stressed that

we cannot and we do not want to turn injustice into justice, but we don't want to add yet another link to the chain of injustice between the two nation. ... Given the history of Germans and Poles alike there can be no indifferent existence next to each other. ... This administration – and I may certainly add: this high house – wishes that both nations, and especially the young people amongst them, find each other across the rifts and graves of history.<sup>103</sup>

He added to these remarks that "all this applies also to the peoples of the Soviet Union."<sup>104</sup>

Brandt then explain in his own words the reason for his wavering position: Poland was the tragic "loser among the victors of World War II,"<sup>105</sup> but the Soviet Union in its wake had become a "world power:"

We know that we are dealing here with a world power, and with the interests of a world power. We know that we cannot face this world power without backup from our friends and allies. But we also know that there are millions of people in the Soviet Union to whom this contract is more than a legal act in the political power game. *Applause from the coalition parties* [SPD, FDP] There are too many wounds on both sides. This treaty means that we want to let old wounds heal, and to avoid inflicting new ones.<sup>106</sup>

To Brandt, then, the historical burdens seemed diminished by the powerful position the Soviets had attained after World War II. Nonetheless he stressed the human dimension of

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<sup>102</sup> "Die Ostverträge müssen verabschiedet werden," May 10, 1972, printed in Willy Brandt, *Bundestagsreden*, 233.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> Bahr, *Zu meiner Zeit*, 338.

<sup>106</sup> "Die Ostverträge müssen verabschiedet werden," May 10, 1972, printed in Willy Brandt, *Bundestagsreden* (Bonn: Verlag AZ-Studio, 1972), 249.

the Eastern Front war. Quoting himself with a statement he had made in Moscow after signing the treaty in 1970, Brandt paid tribute to the fact that the “catastrophe” – his synonym for the crimes of the Nazi regime – had cost the “peoples of the East, even more than in the West, indescribable sacrifices.”<sup>107</sup>

Thus, publicly chancellor Brandt chose a nuanced rhetoric which signalled both, a willingness to acknowledge and reconcile the past, and a determination to keep a critical distance. He also carefully balanced the need to “keep the book of history” open with the desire to write “new pages in this book.”

Reconciliation between the Federal Republic of Germany and the peoples of Eastern Europe can only be honestly achieved if the book of history will not be closed. But it must be added right away: on the new pages of this book, good news about the German fate can only be recorded if we reach out the hand to balance and to reconciliation, if we say yes to a good development in Europe which will not be possible without our own contribution.<sup>108</sup>

On its downside, this balanced approach allowed it for Brandt to remain rather unspecific in his public comments on Nazi Germany’s crimes and especially on the question of criminal guilt and collective responsibility. Although he had himself written a short history of World War II shortly after the end of the war in which he had detailed the crimes committed by Germans in the Third Reich, his public statements as chancellor more than twenty years later lacked historical detail and depth.<sup>109</sup> As member of the

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 248.

<sup>108</sup> Willy Brandt, “The Eastern Treaties Must Be Passed.” Speech opening the second and third *Bundestag* reading of the Eastern treaties, May 10, 1972. Printed in idem, *Bundestagsreden*, 236.

<sup>109</sup> Willy Brandt, *Der Zweite Weltkrieg* (Stockholm: Gustaf Lindströms Boktryckeri, 1945). In the book, in great parts a purely military history of the war, Brandt stated that after the beginning of the Nazi „crusade against Bolshevism“ the Soviet Union „bore the main burden of the fight against Hitler’s armies” (35). He also pointed to Stalingrad as “turning point” (38) but included no specifics on the realities of the “war of extermination,” death camps and mass shootings. As a result of then still unknown facts, he also noted that the war had claimed 30 million victims (in Europe, 50 million if one included the Pacific war theater), half of which were Soviet citizens (54).

Norwegian resistance he had had knowledge of the Nazi mass killings in Poland, the Soviet Union and elsewhere, and he incorporated these first-hand information in his early post-war writings as journalist.<sup>110</sup> However, despite this remarkable experience as World War II veteran and chronologist – two experiences he shared with Ulbricht – Brandt's *ex officio* comments on the legacy of the Eastern Front war, the what he referred to as "Hitler's crimes," committed in the name of Germans by "a criminal clique" whose "national betrayal" had blemished Germany's name,<sup>111</sup> remained mostly vague. Following his credo that "the past must not hinder the future,"<sup>112</sup> he used his historic trip to Moscow in August of 1970 to strike a balance between facing the past horrors and shifting focus on a new beginning. In an address on Moscow television shortly after the signing of the

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In 1946, Brandt also published a collection of essays on the Nuremberg Trials. The volume was written and published in Norwegian only. The title "Criminals and the other Germans" (*Forbrytere og andre tyskere*) nicely captured his main – and later unchanged – view on the criminal legacy of Nazi Germany. In his memoirs, Brandt summarized and commented its controversial essence: "What was guilt? What responsibility? When does a bystander become a perpetrator? The Nuremberg trials helped to clarify the terms. Guilty I called the Nazis, i.e.: their hard core – roughly a million; I wanted guilt to be individually determined. The Nazi-enemies I called not guilty, neither the great majority of the more or less indifferent. Yet there was no doubt that they all bore responsibility [which] they all had to carry into the future. [...] I judged those raised in the Hitler youth with special mildness: The worst Nazis are not among those who 'grew into Nazism so to speak, but among those who had already been Nazis before they came to power.' I generalized and stated: 'It would be terrible if the Germans as such were criminals.' Special circumstances had made them to tools – and victims – of Nazism. I made these observations during the months of the Nuremberg Trial and published them in 1946 in Oslo. [...] The title 'Criminals and the other Germans' caused awful confusion. It was the title of a book that defended the majority of Germans against the minority of criminals." Even in 1989, when Brandt published his memoirs, he didn't rethink his more than questionable assessment. Cf. Brandt, *Erinnerungen*, 144f.

<sup>110</sup> Brandt, *Erinnerungen*, 133. As in his public speech, Brandt also spoke in his memoirs of crimes committed in the "abused German name:" "Indescribable shame descended on the German name. I foresaw that this shame would not leave us for a long time." Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> The quotes are from Brandt's declaration aired over radio and television after the signing of the German-Polish Treaty November 20, 1970. A (not very good) English translation is printed in Willy Brandt, *Peace. Writings and Speeches of the Nobel Peace Prize Winner 1971* (Bonn-Bad Godesberg: Verlag Neue Gesellschaft, 1971), 110f, and from his first statement of government speech in the *Bundestag* in October 1969, printed in von Beyme, *Die großen Regierungserklärungen*, 253, 279.

<sup>112</sup> Quoted from Egon Bahr, „Visionär, Pragmatiker, Realist: die Vergangenheit darf die Zukunft nicht behindern; das war eine Maxime Willy Brandts und ein Geheimnis seines Erfolges," in *Vorwärts (Regionalausgabe Hamburg)*, no. 10 (2002), 16ff.

German-Soviet Treaty, Brandt explained to his “fellow-citizens” the historic and political meaning of the settlement:

The signing of the treaty between the Soviet Union and the Federal Republic of Germany is an important moment in our postwar history. Twenty-five years after the capitulation of the German Reich that was destroyed by Hitler, and fifteen years after Konrad Adenauer, here in Moscow, had agreed the establishment of diplomatic relations, it is now time to reconstitute our relationship with the East, and what is more on the basis of the unconditional, reciprocal renunciation of force and taking as a starting-point the existing political situation in Europe. ...

I know I am free from wishful thinking, as most of you are. This century marked by blood and tears and hard work, has taught us to exercise common sense. ... This treaty with the Soviet Union is a success of German postwar policy. It is a decisive step towards improving our relations with the Soviet Union and our Eastern neighbors – a quarter of a century after the catastrophe that claimed untold victims from the nations, in the East more than in the West.

It accords with the interests of the entire German people to improve relations with the Soviet Union in particular. Not only is she one of the major World Powers; she also shares in the special responsibility for Germany as a whole and Berlin.<sup>113</sup>

The statement contains a few remarkable lapses. The “Third Reich” was not destroyed by Hitler, but by the anti-Hitler-coalition. And while referring to the end of the war, Brandt avoided mentioning the attack against the Soviet Union in 1941, undoubtedly the most decisive event in recent German-Soviet history looming over the heads of the negotiating partners.<sup>114</sup> Instead he once again stressed Germany’s dependence on the Soviet Union as global player. And unlike his statements in and with regards to Poland, the chancellor did not take – symbolically – personal responsibility for the crimes committed in the name of Germans, and he did not ask for forgiveness. Earlier that day, August 12, 1970, the chancellor had visited the “Memorial for the Unknown Soldier” to lay down a wrath – his only, nonverbal, statement there.<sup>115</sup> What Brandt did say though in his televised address

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<sup>113</sup> “Peace with all the Peoples of Eastern Europe,” Remarks made on Moscow television on August 12, 1970, English translation printed in Brandt, *Peace*, 106f.

<sup>114</sup> See further down on the section on the conversations behind closed doors and the reflections in Brandt’s and Bahr’s memoirs.

<sup>115</sup> For a chronology of the official program during Brandt’s visit see the documents in Boris Meissner, ed., *Moskau-Bonn. Die Beziehungen zwischen der Sowjetunion und der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1955-1973. Dokumentation* (Köln: Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1975), 1264-1285.

was that Eastern Europeans had suffered incomparably harder under the Nazi war and occupation than Germany's other conquered countries in the West – a long ignored and then still unpopular fact.

Upon his return to Bonn, Brandt declared that in a “metaphorical sense,” a “final line has been drawn under the war,” and that he hoped that “now also the war of words will come to an end.”<sup>116</sup> Two years later, in a *Bundestag* debate, he also recalled his remarks made before having dinner with Soviet prime minister Alexei N. Kosygin (1904-1980) on the evening of August 12, 1970, the day of the signing of the treaty. Speaking semi-publicly, Brandt was much more open and engaging on that occasion, elaborating his idea of drawing a “final line” (*Schlußstrich*) with some very personal thoughts:

Yesterday, for the first time in my life, I stepped on Soviet soil and in doing so I was aware of the memories and wounds which our states and not the least their peoples carry up until this very day. I know I am in a country in which there exists a special sense of history. A history that no one can undo and that no one must deny. He who forgets or seeks to forget will become sick in his soul.<sup>117</sup>

Remarkably, Brandt chose not to quote this part in his *Bundestag* speech. He only repeated the more formal lines which then had followed in his Kremlin dinner speech:

But it is equally true, that no nation can live permanently without pride and without the prospect of realizing its will peacefully. History must not become a grind stone [*Mühlstein*] which won't ever release us from the past. In a certain sense, I understand this treaty as a final line and as a new beginning that allows our two states to look ahead into a better future. As a treaty which shall liberate us from the shadows and the burdens of the past – you as us; which shall give you and us the chance of a new beginning.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> „Pressekonferenz mit Bundeskanzler Brandt und Außenminister Scheel am 14. August 1970 in Bonn,“ *ibid.*, 1287.

<sup>117</sup> The entire dinner speech is printed in Meissner, ed., *Moskau-Bonn*, 1275f. It was Brandt's response to prime minister Kosygin's address during which he only vaguely, almost timidly hinted at the “past experiences” which taught to “cherish every day of peace.” *Ibid.*, 1274. On this occasion, it was Brandt who invited the past to the table, and his remarks were rather concrete compared to similar statements.

<sup>118</sup> For his repeating this part of the dinner speech in the *Bundestag*, see Brandt, *Bundestagsreden*, 235. In his memoirs, however, Brandt recalled the statement in its entirety, see Brandt, *Erinnerungen*, 199.

This *public* rhetoric of coming to terms with the past by “liberating” both sides from the “shadows and burdens” signalled a measured dose of empathy for the Soviet fate in the wake of Nazi Germany’s attack, but also an assertive determination to rehabilitate Germany, to restore its national “pride,” to move beyond a history of bloodshed whose causes, course and consequences nonetheless remained unspoken.

The chancellor Willy Brandt thus spoke much about reconciliation and about remembering history without ever really stating what precisely needed to be reconciled and what needed to be remembered. He reiterated time and again that the “catastrophe,” the “bloody history” has endowed Germans with an everlasting responsibility but he avoided to make concrete references to German war crimes on the Eastern Front, their perpetrators and victims. Given how strongly Brandt had embedded his diplomatic turn towards *Ostpolitik* into a rhetoric of revisiting the past – and of reassessing its ramifications for the present – it is noteworthy that his bringing about a fundamental shift in the political culture of West Germany was possible even though his public speeches contained so few references to concrete historical facts.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> This holds true also for Brandt’s Holocaust memory. He made one of his more concrete statements on Auschwitz in an opening speech for the “Brotherhood Week” in Cologne, an meeting of young Christians, in March of 1971. Stressing that the agreement with Moscow would not interfere with Bonn’s good relations with third states, including and especially Israel, the chancellor warned that neither the fuming Arab-Israeli conflict would obfuscate the “special feature” German-Israeli relations: “The fact that millions of Jews were murdered in Europe cannot be extinguished – and this is all the more horrible for us and for those born afterwards, because under the spirit of enlightenment the symbiosis of Jewish and German culture has shown such an astonishing productivity. We have nevertheless tolerated the proof – and must tolerate – that hell on earth was possible. It was reality. The name, Auschwitz, will remain a nightmare for generations. Illusions are not [allowed]: the injuries which in those dark, twelve years were done to the soul of the people, to the victims and to the soul of the people of the perpetrators will not heal so quickly. For it was the image of man which was injured, of man whom we understand as the image of God. This experience – it is the real catastrophe of mankind, more than all wars and their terrors lie upon Jewry, not only in Israel; and it lies on us Germans.” Quoted from the at times odd English translation in Brandt, *Peace*, 82. Here in Cologne speaking semi-publicly before



The contrast evident in Brandt's selective public recollection of his historic Kremlin dinner speech of August 12, 1970, can be highlighted further with the secret minutes and protocols of the chancellor's closed meetings with the Soviet leaders, as well as from his personal autobiographic reflections.<sup>120</sup> Recalling the August 1970 visit, Brandt later revealed in his memoirs, he had ambiguous encounters with the "traumatic" Soviet history – and had realized that "false and sincere" expressions of "war memories" could be very close to each other. Shortly after his arrival in Moscow, he recalled passing by a memorial that signalled the point at which German tanks were forced to turn around in 1941. Yet, "the trauma of deadly threat had roots which reached even farther back," he added. Kosygin, who accompanied Brandt on the car ride from the airport, had the driver stop at the Lenin Hills, where he led his guest to the spot from which Napoleon reportedly looked back on the burning city of Moscow for a last time. "This was a piece of history brought back to life."<sup>121</sup> In contrast, Brandt despised Brezhnev's "reminiscences to June of 1941 which he dished up" later that day. Apparently, the CPSU's general secretary Leonid I. Brezhnev (1906-1982) lamented how well economic relations had been between the two countries prior to 1941. He recalled the "positive attitude" of the Soviet peoples towards Germany. He explained the complete "ignorance" of the Soviet leadership on June 22 with the fact that the "honorable partner" was not expected to

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an audience of young Christians, Brandt might have found the words he did not find just a few weeks earlier in Warsaw while standing at the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial. Maybe this was even a consequence of that remarkable visit and the worldwide, very emotional and mostly positive reactions to it. For a more general contextualization see in addition Herf, *Divided Memory*, 344f.

<sup>120</sup> The relevant protocols of the talks between Brandt and Kosygin, and Brandt and Brezhnev are printed in Schwarz, ed., *Akten zur Auswärtigen Politik*, vol. 2: 1. Mai bis 31. August 1970 (München: Oldenbourg, 2001), 1438-1472.

<sup>121</sup> Brandt, *Erinnerungen*, 201.

commit such an act of “disloyalty.” Brezhnev then recounted “front memories [enriching them] with melodramatic appeals to the ‘comrades from the other side.’” Brandt was more “shocked than impressed by this way of mobilizing emotionalism (*Rührseligkeit*).”<sup>122</sup>

When three years later Brezhnev visited Bonn in May of 1973, Brandt recalled another instance of them discussing the war – this time he felt that Brezhnev’s remarks were more sincere and authentic. His own comments might have contributed to that. During a dinner hosted by the Soviet delegation, the chancellor expressed appreciation for Soviet war memories “listening very carefully when [Brezhnev’s] thoughts wandered back to the war and to the victims he had claimed.” In his short speech, Brandt then quoted from a front letter of a young German soldier fighting on the Eastern Front:

In a letter a German soldier wrote to his parents after the invasion of the Soviet Union, there are the sentences: ‘I know that our armies will leave this country in a streak of misery. Nothing but suffering, destruction and maybe hatred will remain. And still, there is nothing I desire more than’ – the letter said – ‘to face the people one day in peace and as friend.’ That soldier never returned.<sup>123</sup>

Brandt’s successor Helmut Schmidt was also present at that dinner, then still in his function as finance and economics minister. In a rare case of personal reflection about his wartime experience as young Wehrmacht officer in a semi-public situation, Schmidt remembered his thoughts at the end of the war: “he did not think it was possible that after this terrible war there could come a chance for a conversation between Germans and the first man of the Soviet Union.” Brandt recalls that Brezhnev “responded with strongly

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> „Tischrede von Bundeskanzler anlässlich des Abendessens am 21. Mai 1973,“ printed in Meissner, ed., *Moskau-Bonn*, 1635.

emotional toasts,” and that “there stood tears in the eyes of my Russian hosts.”<sup>124</sup> It seems that over the years the Eastern Front memory eroded the long-lasting atmosphere of mistrust and hatred.

The above-described cautious but eventually very sincere and pointed exchanges about the Eastern Front war testify to the fact that “memory was essential in allaying that mistrust and for any hope of securing Soviet agreement to end or moderate the division of Germany.”<sup>125</sup> The intersection of politics and memory and the long shadow of history in politics may be pointedly summarized by a statement Brezhnev made at the end of Brandt’s second visit in September of 1971. Sitting next to each other in the car back to the airport, Brezhnev laid his hand on Brandt’s knees at one point and said: “I understand you, Willy Brandt, when it comes to Germany [the German division]. Yet, not us, but Hitler is responsible for that.”<sup>126</sup>

Brandt surely was convinced that “public reflection” on the Nazi war of extermination in Eastern Europe was “necessary to rebuild trust and normalize West German relations with Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.”<sup>127</sup> In retrospective, his politics of memory fulfilled this self-imposed requirement. Naturally, this could not be achieved by Brandt alone; his foreign policy advisor Egon Bahr, his foreign minister Walter Scheel (FDP) as well as president Gustav Heinemann strengthened his public position and rallied support for Ostpolitik. Scheel, an air force veteran of the Eastern Front, contributed to a more empathetic understanding of history as foreign minister and

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<sup>124</sup> Brandt, *Erinnerungen*, 202.

<sup>125</sup> Herf, *Divided Memory*, 344.

<sup>126</sup> Brandt, *Erinnerungen*, 209.

<sup>127</sup> Herf, *Divided Memory*, 344.

even more so during his term as federal president (1974-1979). He publicly argued that Germans must remember “*all* victims of the war with respect and reverence,” stressing particularly the million-fold murder of Jews and Eastern European civilians.<sup>128</sup> As Brandt, he also met with Brezhnev on several occasions during which he expressed how important these encounters were “after all the mischief [*Unheil*] the Second World War has brought over our nations.”<sup>129</sup> Federal president Heinemann, a long-time advocate of a demilitarized, peaceful, neutrally united Germany, pleaded for the historization of the Nazi past by stressing the negative political traditions that led Germany down a disastrous path. In the already mentioned controversial speech commemorating the centenary of the Bismarck Reich, Heinemann connected the fateful *lieux de mémoire* of Germany’s recent history: “One hundred years German Reich – this indeed does not mean once Versailles, but twice Versailles, 1871 and 1919, and it also means Auschwitz, Stalingrad, and unconditional surrender in 1945.”<sup>130</sup> This speech illustrated why Heinemann had used the much-quoted phrase of Germany as the “difficult fatherland” in his inaugural speech in 1969. Now picking up the arguments of the Fischer controversy, he engaged the West German public in a “discourse of catastrophe.”<sup>131</sup> The head of state

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<sup>128</sup> Speech commemorating the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the Second World War, printed in *Walter Scheel. Reden und Interviews*, vol. 4: “1. Juli 1977-30. Juni 1978” (Bonn, 1978), 226-235, quote on 226 [Emphasis in original].

<sup>129</sup> Dinner speech during a meeting with Brezhnev in Brühl, May 4, 1978. Printed in *ibid.*, 257-262, quote on 258.

<sup>130</sup> Quoted in Edgar Wolfrum, *Geschichtspolitik*, 260. On the controversy this televised speech stirred in 1971 see *ibid.*, 258-271.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 258. The „Fischer controversy“ evolved in the 1960s around Fritz Fischer’s book *Griff nach der Weltmacht. Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschlands* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1961) which argued that the Kaiserreich bore the main responsibility for the outbreak of First World War. See most recently Klaus Große Kracht, “Die Fischer-Kontroverse. Von der Fachdebatte zum Publikumsstreit,” in *idem*, *Die zankende Zunft. Historische Kontroversen in Deutschland nach 1945* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 47-68.

had given his countrymen not only an unprecedented “public lecture on history” that “hit the public like a bomb.”<sup>132</sup> He was also the first prominent West German politician to connect the Eastern Front war with the Holocaust, even though he “merely” listed the two places symbolizing the mass murder of the Jews and the mass death on the Eastern Front – Auschwitz and Stalingrad – right next to each other, in one breath.

It was thus the Brandt era as a whole, and the political climate change it brought about, which generated a fundamental change in West German political culture. Domestically, Brandt, Bahr, Scheel, and Heinemann started a process of gradually opening public memory to the horrors of the Eastern Front and of reassessing the war’s end and outcome (namely to accept the status-quo, i.e. the permanent loss of German territories in the East). Brandt saw himself as the chancellor of the “other Germany,” a Germany that was “liberated” in 1945, not (just) defeated.<sup>133</sup> His important 1970 speech commemorating VE Day introduced the idea the later president Richard von Weizsäcker popularized fifteen years later: that May 8, 1945 was not only a day of total defeat but that it was also a day of liberation:

This, too, must be seen: what in those days – 25 years ago – was felt by countless Germans as national as well as personal affliction was, for other peoples, liberation from foreign rule, from terrorism and fear. And for the majority of the German people as well, there emerged the chance of beginning again, of creating a constitutional and democratic way of life.<sup>134</sup>

Insofar Brandt, not von Weizsäcker, should receive credit for initiating the transformation of the public perception of the war’s end. On the diplomatic level, Brandt initiated a new era of relations with the East hoping to achieve “change through rapprochement” in the

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<sup>132</sup> Wolfrum, *Geschichtspolitik*, 260.

<sup>133</sup> Brandt, *Erinnerungen*, 186. An English version of his May 8, 1970 speech is printed in Brandt, *Peace*, 99-104.

<sup>134</sup> Brandt, *Peace*, 100.

long run. Just as Adenauer had opened up West Germany's path towards a real integration into the Western world by formally acknowledging responsibility for the Holocaust in 1951, Brandt's shift in tone and content with regards to the political memory of the Eastern Front war "was essential for diplomatic success in Eastern Europe and in Moscow."<sup>135</sup> The Nobel Prize committee awarded him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1971 for this success and it aptly summarized the quintessence of his contribution to Germany's postwar history: "In the name of the German people, Brandt has stretched out his hand to reconcile peoples who were enemies for a long time."<sup>136</sup>

Helmut Schmidt, chancellor from 1974 to 1982, initially continued Brandt's *Ostpolitik*. He had been actively involved in its formulation during the late 1960s, had visited Moscow twice in 1966 and 1969 and had served as Brandt's defense minister from 1969 to 1972. He was well-known for his expertise on defense and international security questions, and his sober judgment and unfailing sense for the politically necessary and possible won him popularity at home and esteem abroad.<sup>137</sup> Schmidt understood himself most explicitly as member of the „war generation,” the generation who shared the existential experience of violence, fear and societal collapse.<sup>138</sup> He claimed to have known that National Socialism was doomed on the day “they attacked the Soviet

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<sup>135</sup> Herf, *Divided Memory*, 345.

<sup>136</sup> „Reasons given by the Nobel Committee.“ Printed in Brandt, *Peace*, 7.

<sup>137</sup> Bark/Gress, *Democracy and its Discontents*, 161ff.

<sup>138</sup> See his autobiographical essay „Die Kriegsgeneration: Mein Weg zur Sozialdemokratie,“ in *Die neue Gesellschaft*, 15, no. 6 (1968), 479-483. Later reprinted in Helmut Schmidt, *Pflicht zur Menschlichkeit. Beiträge zu Politik, Wirtschaft und Kultur* (Düsseldorf: Econ, 1981), 251-263.

Union.”<sup>139</sup> According to his personal experience and memory, he perceived of the Wehrmacht as the “only decent club” in the Third Reich because he mostly remembered it as a place free from Nazi ideological infiltration.<sup>140</sup> He also described in his memoirs how he had “suppressed” war memories for more than thirty years until he met Brezhnev in 1973 with whom he shared the front experience. It were indeed his encounters with the Soviet leader that seemed to have prompted him to start a deeper personal reckoning with the memories and legacies of the Eastern Front war:

I always had a good personal relationship to Brezhnev ...; it probably rested on the fact that we both had experienced the war directly as soldiers. One knew each other's war experiences because we had talked about them; we knew from each other that we both hated the war, and not just I feared a new war, but Brezhnev too. Brezhnev was no enemy but a respected opponent whom I understood on a human level.<sup>141</sup>

A decisive moment in this remarkable relationship – after all, the Brezhnev doctrine continued to overshadow Détente until the mid-1980s – was their conversation during the already mentioned dinner hosted by Willy Brandt for Brezhnev back in 1973. During that meeting, Schmidt suddenly recalled memories of the smell in a burning city, images of dead bodies scattered on the streets, images of Soviet POWs, and the horrifying screams

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<sup>139</sup> See the interview „The Germans remain a threatened people,“ *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, no. 82, April 4, 2005, 36. With the quote in the title, Schmidt meant that Germans remained susceptible to illusions and ideology, their democracy remaining threatened by shifting “emotions.”

<sup>140</sup> Helmut Schmidt, *Menschen und Mächte* (Berlin: Siedler, 1987), 19f. See the analysis of this war experience and its impact on Schmidt's political personality and outlook in Martin Rupps, *Helmut Schmidt. Politiverständnis und geistige Grundlagen* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1997), 73ff.

<sup>141</sup> Helmut Schmidt, *Weggefährten. Erinnerungen und Reflexionen* (Berlin: Siedler, 1996), 501. Brezhnev, one of Stalin's faithful followers and long-time party member, served as political commissar in the Red Army during the war (as Khrushchev) and advanced to the position of major general in 1943, heading all political commissars on the 4<sup>th</sup> Ukrainian front. After 1945 he continued his military career in the newly acquired Soviet territories (Ruthenia and Bukovina), co-organizing the forced Sovietization of these areas. He thus knew the fear of death as both victim and victimizer and he also knew the realities of Wehrmacht warfare on the Eastern Front from personal experience, even though his “heroism” and “sacrifices” during the fight were certainly exaggerated as part of an image campaign to match his rise to power during the 1960s. Cf. the critical account in John Dornberg, *Brezhnev. The Masks of Power* (Dehli: Vikas Pub. House, 1974), 75ff.

of a comrade dying next to him.<sup>142</sup> He later recorded this first memorable encounter with Brezhnev and the ensuing conversation about their shared but by no means identical Eastern Front experience:

That was the beginning of a very special and personal relationship between an emotional “Great Russian” who was nonetheless capable of political calculation, and a cool North-German who was nonetheless not free from emotions. ... In the course of the evening, Brezhnev – whether calculated or inspired by his mood of the moment remained unclear to me – started a monologue about the sufferings of the peoples of the Soviet Union during World War II. Especially the people in the Ukraine, where he himself was a general major and political commissar of the Eighteenth Army, had suffered indescribably. Brezhnev’s speech escalated into a moved and moving depiction of ever more details of losses, the horrors of war, and also the criminal misdeeds of the Germans in violation of international law, whom he kept calling ‘fascist soldiers’ or the ‘fascist invaders.’ I had experienced the same war. I knew how right he was; I also knew how much it was his right to talk like that – even though he seemed to exaggerate in some instances. Willy Brandt and the other Germans present must have felt similarly because we all listened to Brezhnev for a very long time. It was important to him ... to make his hosts feel the great turn, the great self-conquest it had cost him and the Russians to decide to cooperate with the Federal Republic of Germany, to agree on the Moscow treaty and the Four-Power agreement on Berlin – and to visit Bonn, the former enemies.<sup>143</sup>

Schmidt’s analysis underlines the relevance of an appropriate Eastern Front memory for the success of *Ostpolitik*. The described conversation between the leaders of two former enemy nations was a key moment in Schmidt’s personal memory of the Eastern Front. His response to Brezhnev’s monologue revealed his henceforth unchanged view of a collective guilt of Germans on the one hand, and – from his limited air-force perspective – of a Wehrmacht as the “decent club” of mostly innocent, patriotically fighting good Germans, on the other:

Brezhnev was right: the war was terrible, and we Germans had carried it into his country. Yet, he was also wrong in his one-sidedness; not only Germans but also Russian soldiers had committed heinous crimes against their former enemies. And he was wrong to see the former German soldiers as fascists. The great majority of Germans, their corporals, officers and generals were as much Nazis as the great majority of our former enemies were communists; on both sides one had believed to be obliged to serve and defend one’s fatherland. ... During the entire eight years in the Wehrmacht, in fact, I had not one single convinced Nazis as superior or commander. But I was indeed raised to be a patriot. I reminded Brezhnev of those officers who on the one hand fought as patriots against the enemy, and on the other against Hitler, ready to commit high treason, but not to betray their country. I spoke of the

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<sup>142</sup> Schmidt, *Menschen und Mächte*, 19.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 18.



dying in the bombed cities, of the miseries during flight and expulsion; ... while we condemned Hitler at night, we fulfilled our duty as soldiers during the day.<sup>144</sup>

Here Schmidt not only perpetuated the “myth of a clean Wehrmacht” – endowing it with the weight of his personal integrity and authority as eyewitness – but also resonated the main themes of West Germany’s victims myth – Germans as victims of air raids, flight, expulsions.<sup>145</sup> And he formulated the position he would restate twenty years later in reaction to the controversial Wehrmacht exhibit: that the Wehrmacht was mostly free of ideology, and thus mostly uninvolved in Hitler’s war of extermination.<sup>146</sup> Even Brandt vividly remembered the impact Schmidt’s remarks made on everyone in the room. After Schmidt had described the “ambivalent feelings of a young officer on the Eastern Front” who thought it impossible that after this “terrible war” Germans and Russians would be able to talk to each other ever again, Brezhnev responded by offering “strongly emotional toasts.”<sup>147</sup>

Helmut Schmidt was the only West German chancellor with such an intense Eastern Front experience and thus he was particularly sensitive to the fact that “Hitler’s shadow loomed threateningly over ever rapprochement” between Germans and the Soviet

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 18-20.

<sup>145</sup> Cf. Robert Moeller, „Deutsche Opfer, Opfer der Deutschen: Kriegsgefangene, Vertriebene, NS-Verfolgte; Opferausgleich als Identitätspolitik,“ in Naumann, ed., *Nachkrieg*, 29-58.

<sup>146</sup> The best expression of his position can be found in Theo Sommer, ed., *Gehorsam bis zum Mord? Der verschwiegene Krieg der deutsche Wehrmacht – Fakten, Analysen, Debatten* (= *ZEIT-Punkte*, 3, 1995) (Hamburg: Zeitverlag, 1995.), 70-90. Schmidt had served in the Air Force and he continuously claimed that “there was no Nazi except Göring.” He generalized his experience and concluded that the Wehrmacht as a whole should not be blamed for criminal warfare. In a very recent interview with the *FAZ* in context of the VE Day commemoration, he put it in the following words: “That we were in the wrong war, that’s a feeling I had. But that did not relieve me from fulfilling my military duties. And that’s how the great mass of the people behaved. Well, I was with the air force, which, except for Göring, was actually not [infiltrated with] Nazi [ideology]. Among the officers I knew personally – mostly younger people [...] – was no Nazi. But no one doubted that he had to do his duty as soldier.” See the interview „The Germans remain a threatened people,“ *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, no. 82, April 4, 2005, 36.

<sup>147</sup> Brandt, *Erinnerungen*, 201f.

Union.<sup>148</sup> Though he continued the basic line of Brandt's *Ostpolitik*, his strong belief in military parity between the great powers, and his early insight into what would become the Euromissile Crisis (spanning the years from 1977 to 1983) forced him to take a more confronting stand *vis á vis* Moscow. In fact, being a "centrist to the core," he lost his office over that dispute because his own party deserted him in 1982.<sup>149</sup> Even during those years of a dawning second Cold War arms-race, Schmidt noted in one of his many autobiographic reflections that Brezhnev had a certain "understanding for my deep concern about the deployment of Soviet SS-20 missiles with which the Soviet Union threatened to exterminate all important cities and military targets on German soil."<sup>150</sup> Schmidt, again, attributed this understanding to a shared war experience.

His personal sense of history and sensitivity for the persistence of memories thus blended with the changes in West German political culture now fully under way as the ideals and ideas of the 1968 movement disseminated amongst many parts of society.<sup>151</sup> He was the first chancellor to visit and speak at Auschwitz in 1977, finding exceptionally well-chosen words to express "West German atonement and remorse."<sup>152</sup> Equally unique

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<sup>148</sup> Schmidt, *Menschen und Mächte*. Vol. II: Die Deutschen und ihre Nachbarn (Berlin: Siedler, 1990), 447.

<sup>149</sup> See Jeffrey Herf, *War by other Means: Soviet Power, West German Resistance, and the Battle of the Euromissiles* (New York: Free Press, 1991), 46.

<sup>150</sup> Schmidt, *Weggefährten*, 501.

<sup>151</sup> See one of the most prominent (and controversial) contemporary commentaries on this change in memory culture: Lübke, "Der Nationalsozialismus im deutschen Nachkriegsbewußtsein." Lübke underlined in particular the emotional impact of the TV-series „Holocaust“ (1979) on West German views of the Nazi past: "through this series a relationship between moral and political common sense and National Socialism and its terrible consequences was restored." Rejecting the thesis of the Germans' inability to mourn (he called the Mitscherlich's work a "pseudo-theory which comes with the imposition to treat the majority of the nation as patient in the intellectual custody of emancipatorily active analysts of suppression." Ibid., 597), Lübke claims that now Germans could "mourn without having to unmask [themselves] as subjects allegedly hitherto unable of this mourning." Ibid., 597.

<sup>152</sup> Herf, *Divided Memory*, 346. The speech is printed in Helmut Schmidt, *Der Kurs heißt Frieden* (Düsseldorf: Econ, 1979), 53-55.

was his speech commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the anti-Jewish pogroms of November 9, 1938, because he began by actually detailing the brutal events he was about to commemorate.<sup>153</sup> He also found strong words to expose most Germans' passivity to and complicity in Nazi crimes.<sup>154</sup>

These changes in the political memory of the Second World War were in part a distancing from and in part a reception of new trends in historiography. During the 1970s, many World War II historians turned increasingly to neo-Marxist concepts in order to explain National Socialism. Discussions of theories of fascism departed from and arrived at a critique of capitalism. They paid comparatively little attention to archival studies of actual events and its causes.<sup>155</sup> At the same time, some professional historians picked up the theory of a preventive war obviously inspired by David Irving's widely-read works on Hitler's war and his generals.<sup>156</sup> Moreover, some of these arguments, such as that the Eastern Front war was a missed opportunity for a war of liberation for Eastern Europe, and that heinous crimes were committed on both sides and thus could and should be weighed against each other, entered mainstream historiography. They reflected the widespread, diffuse and persisting desire to retrospectively legitimate the crusade against the

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<sup>153</sup> His speech started with the rare observation that „first one must speak of event and facts, of the misery and crimes for which it is today just as difficult to find the appropriate vocabulary as it was then.” The speech is printed in Schmidt, *Der Kurs heißt Frieden*, 85.

<sup>154</sup> See also for further analysis, Herf, *Divided Memory*, 246f.

<sup>155</sup> See the brief overview in Müller, Ueberschär, „Die deutsch-sowjetischen Beziehungen,” 275f.

<sup>156</sup> Irving's *Hitler und seine Feldherren* (Frankfurt/Main: Ullstein, 1975), and *Hitlers Weg zum Krieg* (Berlin: Herbig, 1978) appeared in several editions and were widely read in West Germany. Bernd Stegemann, in particular, argued that the decision to go to war against the Soviet Union was the result of a perceived threat from the East, thus a strategic decision. See his article “Der Entschluß zum Unternehmen Barbarossa: Strategie oder Ideologie?” in *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, 33 (1982), 205-213, which prompted a replica from Andreas Hillgruber, „Noch einmal: Hitlers Wendung gegen die Sowjetunion 1940. Nicht (Militär-), Strategie oder Ideologie, sondern ‚Programm‘ und ‚Weltkriegsstrategie,“ in *ibid.*, 214-226. See also Martin Broszat, “Hitler und die Genesis der Endlösung. Aus Anlaß der Thesen von David Irving,” *VfZ*, 25 (1977), 739-775.

Soviet Union and to confirm the validity of anti-Bolshevism.<sup>157</sup> The still-prevalent idea that already prior to 1945, Germans had stood on the right side – alongside the Western allies against the Soviet threat – had been a popular “illusion” in the conservative political circles since the 1950s.<sup>158</sup>

Unlike their East German colleagues, Western historians largely left the economic and military elites’ involvement in Nazi crimes on the Eastern Front untouched. Important exceptions were Hillgruber’s 1978 essay on the image of Russia among the Wehrmacht leadership, and Rolf-Dieter Müller’s work on the “role of the industry in Hitler’s Eastern Empire.”<sup>159</sup> Schmidt most certainly noticed these exceptions – during the controversy over the already mentioned Wehrmacht exhibit in 1995, he passionately fought against a collective condemnation of the Wehrmacht but knew the crimes in question very well – not, as he claimed, from personal experience but from postwar historical accounts.<sup>160</sup> It was only during the later 1970s, that West German historians

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<sup>157</sup> Müller, Ueberschär, „Die deutsch-sowjetischen Beziehungen,“ 276. In particular, the work of a former member of the Wehrmacht’s Army Chiefs of Staff, Erich Helmdach, *Überfall? Der sowjetisch-deutsche Aufmarsch 1941* (Neckargemünd: Voswinckel, 1975) – in which the title aptly describes the intention of the author (namely to stylize June 22, 1941 as a mutually-wanted showdown between two equally aggressive ideologies) – was included in a standard on the Second World War: Boog, Förster, Hoffmann, eds., *Das deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, vol. 4: “Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion.”

<sup>158</sup> Dubiel, *Niemand ist frei von der Geschichte*, 75.

<sup>159</sup> Andreas Hillgruber, „Das Rußland-Bild der führenden deutschen Militär vor Beginn des Angriffs auf die Sowjetunion,“ in Alexander Fischer, ed., *Rußland-Deutschland-Amerika* (Wiesbaden, 1978), 296-310. Rolf-Dieter Müller, „Die Rolle der Industrie in Hitlers Ostimperium,“ in Messerschmidt, ed. *Militärsgeschichte*, and idem, „Von der Wirtschaftsallianz zum kolonialen Ausbeutungskrieg,“ in Boog, Förster, Hoffmann, eds., *Das deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, vol. 4: “Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion,“ 98-189.

<sup>160</sup> Schmidt was invited to deliver the key-note address at the 32<sup>nd</sup> National Historians Meeting (*Historikertag*) in Hamburg in October of 1978 (two years earlier, president Walter Scheel filled the same role; this seems to be a peculiar German tradition to invite the head of state and chancellor to the largest professional meeting of historians). During his speech in 1978, Schmidt referred explicitly to recent trends in the historiography on the Nazi era betraying a more than passing historical interest. Helmut Schmidt, “Auftrag und Verpflichtung der Geschichte,” in Schmidt, *Der Kurs heißt Frieden*, 70f. On Schmidt’s

began to address the genocidal character of the crusade against “Jewish Bolshevism” and identified the ideological amalgamate of anti-Semitism and anti-Bolshevism as the “centerpiece of the racial-ideological program of National Socialism.”<sup>161</sup> The attack against the Soviet Union was now viewed as the prelude to the “final solution.”<sup>162</sup> Helmut Krausnick and Jürgen Förster shed “new light” on the Wehrmacht’s warfare on the Eastern Front by illustrating the effective execution of the criminal orders and by turning attention to the millions of Jewish and non-Jewish Soviet citizens who perished under these orders.<sup>163</sup> During the early 1980s, a number of historians published meticulously researched accounts of the murderous treatment of Soviet POWs in German captivity.<sup>164</sup> Gradually, also West German historians began to address the economic, exploitative aspects of the Eastern Front war.<sup>165</sup> And lastly, in 1982, Raul Hilberg’s seminal work on

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position on Wehrmacht crimes in particular see the above-quoted section in his memoirs, *Menschen und Mächte*, 18ff. And Sommer, ed., *Gehorsam bis zum Mord?*, 76ff.

<sup>161</sup> Hillgruber, „Die ‚Endlösung‘ und das deutsche Ostimperium.“

<sup>162</sup> This debate was initiated by Dawidowicz’s seminal *The War against the Jews*, the German edition appeared under the title *Der Krieg gegen die Juden* (München, 1979). Important was Broszat, “Hitler und die Genesis der Endlösung.” and Christopher Browning’s response „Eine Antwort auf Martin Broszats Thesen zur Genesis der Endlösung,” *VfZ* 29 (1981), 97-109.

<sup>163</sup> Helmut Krausnick, „Kommissarbefehl.“ And idem, Wilhelm, *Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges* – the latter of which also details cooperation and complicity of Wehrmacht units in war crimes. On the Wehrmacht in particular, Förster, „Zur Rolle der Wehrmacht im Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion.“ And idem, „Das Unternehmen ‚Barbarossa‘ als Eroberungs- und Vernichtungsfeldzug,” in Boog, Förster, Hoffmann, eds., *Das deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, vol. 4: “Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion,” 413-447.

<sup>164</sup> Streit, *Keine Kameraden*. Streim, *Die Behandlung sowjetischer Kriegsgefangener im „Fall Barbarossa*,” and idem, *Sowjetische Kriegsgefangene in Hitlers Vernichtungskrieg*.

<sup>165</sup> Rolf-Dieter Müller, „Die Rolle der Industrie in Hitlers Ostimperium,” in Messerschmidt, ed., *Militärsgeschichte*, 383-406. Idem, „Von der Wirtschaftsallianz zum kolonialen Ausbeutungskrieg,” in Horst Boog, ed., *Das Deutsche Reich und der Zweite Weltkrieg*, vol. 4: “Der Angriff auf die Sowjetunion,” 98-189. Idem, *Das Tor zur Weltmacht. Die Bedeutung der Sowjetunion für die deutsche Wirtschafts- und Rüstungspolitik zwischen den Weltkriegen* (Boppard am Rhein: Boldt, 1984).

the “destruction of the European Jews” finally came out in a German translation – twenty-one years after its original publication.<sup>166</sup>

The most important official statements of the Schmidt administration concerning the war against the Soviet Union originate in those years. The year 1981, the fortieth anniversary of the attack against the Soviet Union, was a pivotal milestone in the official commemoration of the Eastern Front: the anniversary fell in the midst of the Euro-Missiles conflict. Schmidt’s foreign minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher (born 1927, FDP)<sup>167</sup> published a statement commemorating the attack on June 21, 1981. Compared to Erhard’s brief 1966 declaration, this statement was more precise and clearer with regards to causes and consequences, perpetrators and victims. Yet, amidst the heated controversy about the NATO double-track decision, its title exclusively alluded to the present, thus constituting another example for the politics of memory regarding the Eastern Front war: “A Policy of Securing Peace and Rapprochement.” Once again, the attacker was named upfront but the text’s very brief historical part indiscriminately referred to “millions” of unnamed victims in Europe.

Forty years ago, Hitler-Germany attacked the Soviet Union. This war brought immeasurable sufferings over the peoples of Europe. Millions of people found death. Still today we carry the consequences of this war.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Raul Hilberg, *Die Vernichtung der europäischen Juden. Die Gesamtgeschichte des Holocaust* (Berlin: Olle & Wolter, 1982).

<sup>167</sup> As young boy, Genscher had joined the Hitler youth and was drafted in the last month of the war, then taken prisoner by American soldiers; he left his birthplace Halle in East Germany in 1952 and resided as lawyer in West Germany where he became involved with the Liberals in Bremen, 1965-1998 member of the *Bundestag*.

<sup>168</sup> Hans-Dietrich Genscher, „Politik der Friedenssicherung und Entspannung,“ printed in *BPI*, no. 61, June 21, 1981, 521.

Genscher's statement further presented the Federal Republic as the only responsible heir to the Third Reich, having "visibly broken with spirit, aims, and policies of the National Socialist Regime which led to the Second World War." In working towards a peaceful Europe, it demonstrated its "determination to never again let war break out on German soil." The statement assured the "peoples of the Soviet Union for whom the Second World War had brought so much misery" that "we Germans stand by the renunciation of violence (*bekennen uns zum Gewaltverzicht*)."

Without directly criticizing the Soviet Union for its rearmament policies in central Europe and expansionism in Afghanistan, Genscher's declaration stressed the need for all states to "cooperate" with each other instead of "confronting" each other, to prefer the "sober dialogue" to "polemics," and to exercise "restraint and responsibility when dealing with each other instead of striving for domination." The fortieth anniversary of the beginning of the invasion once again marked a welcome occasion to demonstrate Bonn's dedication to a "calculable policy towards all nations in the world," a policy "contributing to stabilization and the securing of peace."<sup>169</sup>

One day later, chancellor Schmidt published an editorial addressing the anniversary in one of the leading national papers, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* – thus far an unprecedented gesture in the commemoration of the Eastern Front. Schmidt's commentary in essence repeated Genscher's political conclusions, yet his historical remarks were more ambiguous: on the one hand, Schmidt acknowledged that the "German attack has covered the peoples of the Soviet Union with unspeakable misery. At the end of the war, no other

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

country had to bemoan more dead than the Soviet Union – over twenty million people.” Yet, on the other hand, Schmidt spoke of “Hitler’s war,” “Hitler’s attack,” and “Hitler’s crimes,” uniting the “terrible losses” of the German nation with the other victims in the call “never to forget.” Drastically downplaying Nazi Germany’s plans in Eastern Europe, Schmidt equalized Soviet wartime and German postwar sufferings: “What the National Socialist regime in the German Reich wanted to impose on the Russians – the partition of the state, and expulsion of people – is what happened afterwards to our own nation.”<sup>170</sup>

Thus, Germany’s division was to Schmidt a crime comparable to Hitler’s “Plan Barbarossa,” except that the latter had failed. It was this connection to the present which prompted Schmidt to stress how the “evil consequences of World War II” still burdened the two nations’ relations to that day. Distrust and fear prevailed on both sides. Yet, while the Soviet Union betrayed mutual agreements regarding arms control, Germany continued its cooperative policies because it “has learned from the war.” In conclusion, Schmidt, the Eastern Front veteran, put this legacy into a comforting formula most Germans at that time were all too willing to accept: “We Germans today bear no guilt for Hitler’s war. But we carry the main moral burden to assure that the right lessons will be learned from Hitler’s war.” This not only stripped a whole generation of veterans of the responsibility for Nazi Germany’s military adventures, but it also put Germans once again in a position of deciding what was “right,” and what was wrong. Moreover, with a nod to NATO’s controversial double-track decision, Schmidt stressed that “no one can ask us to jeopardize our own security and our own freedom. We certainly won’t do that –

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<sup>170</sup> Helmut Schmidt, „Vor vierzig Jahren überfiel Hitler die Sowjetunion: Den Weltkrieg niemals vergessen,“ *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, June 21/22, 1981, 1.



for this we have the alliance and the *Bundeswehr*.” But, what “Jews, Poles, Frenchmen and Russians, indeed everyone in the world can ask of Germany is that we will never forget Hitler’s crimes and Hitler’s war.”<sup>171</sup> This ostentatious willingness “not to forget” contained in fact no real acceptance of responsibility for it disassociated the German people from Hitler’s war.

The fortieth anniversary of “Operation Barbarossa” was addressed once again in 1981 in context of the memorial service on the National Day of Mourning. Just two months earlier, many West Germans had closely watched “The Unforgotten War,” the first documentary series on the Eastern Front war aired on West German television.<sup>172</sup> The president of the *Bundestag*, Annemarie Renger (SPD), delivered a thoughtful speech dedicated to honouring the dead, but also to recalling that there was no good fighting in a wrong war – a notion Schmidt strongly disagreed with. World War II, Renger argued, was launched in the “name of the German people as naked war of aggression and conquest.” It should not be forgotten that the “willingness to give one’s life was demanded by a regime that was in its nature criminal.”<sup>173</sup> This was a bitter truth for veterans to swallow in postwar Germany. Most politicians had long avoided this candor in context of the National Day of Mourning.<sup>174</sup> Schmidt too refused to fully acknowledge it. Even though he professed to having had “this feeling that we were in the wrong war,”

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Cf. Chapter 10.II.

<sup>173</sup> Annemarie Renger, „Verpflichtung und Wille zum Frieden,“ *BPI*, no. 106, November 17, 1981, 913f.

<sup>174</sup> See further Chapter 9. II.

he still saw himself obliged to fulfil “my military duties.”<sup>175</sup> This sense of obligation he would never come to question in retrospective.

Thus, even with the Eastern Front veteran Schmidt heading the Bonn government, the political memory of the Eastern Front war remained largely vague and inconspicuous. While it had attained a more prominent position in the official memorial calendar, the political leadership still avoided direct and detailed references to German war crimes in the Soviet Union. Schmidt’s semi-public ponderings over the Eastern Front face to face with Brezhnev are in so far relevant as they demonstrate how little of his personal lessons from history Schmidt was willing to relate to the public. With the transition to Helmut Kohl’s self-declared “turn” amidst a “spiritual-political crisis”<sup>176</sup> – a turn which included the goal to popularize a more affirmative, patriotic understanding of German history – such in-depth references at first seemed even less likely.<sup>177</sup> Yet, it was under Kohl and federal president Richard von Weizsäcker, that the controversial commemoration of the war’s end in 1985, the *Historikerstreit* and the further erosion of West Germany’s “victims myth” (Robert Moeller) would compel the political establishment to publicly acknowledge – and actually name – what had happened on the Eastern Front between 1941 and 1945 to Nazi Germany’s other victims.<sup>178</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> See the interview „The Germans remain a threatened people,“ *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, no. 82, April 4, 2005, 36.

<sup>176</sup> Cf. Benedikt Dettling, Michael Geske, „Helmut Kohl: Krise und Erneuerung,“ in Karl-Rudolf Korte, ed., *„Das Wort hat der Herr Bundeskanzler. Eine Analyse der großen Regierungserklärungen von Adenauer bis Schröder“* (Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 2002), 224.

<sup>177</sup> On the politics of the past and national identity in the era Kohl during the 1980s in Bark, Gress, eds., *Democracy and Discontents*, 415-447.

<sup>178</sup> On the Historians’ Controversy see the good summary by Konrad Jarausch, „Removing the Nazi Stain? The Quarrel of the German Historians,“ *German Studies Review*, vol. 11, no. 2 (1988), 285-301. And Maier, *Unmasterable Past*.

Kohl's "public use of history" had two main themes: he presented himself as a person blessed with the "grace of late birth,"<sup>179</sup> and as the representative of a democratic Germany dedicated to proving that "we have learned from history."<sup>180</sup> He had grown up in a Catholic, anti-Nazi home, with his father prophesying at the kitchen table that "Hitler means war."<sup>181</sup> As young teenager, Kohl helped clean away bodies and rubble after allied air raids on his home town Ludwigshafen. After his evacuation in 1944, the boy was hired to help remove precarious documents and records from the Nazi leadership's private homes and offices in Berchtesgarden.<sup>182</sup> As a student of law and history during the 1950s, Kohl focussed on the contemporary challenges facing his country. His dissertation dealt with the re-emergence of the political parties in the Palatinate after 1945. As chancellor, he would develop a strong propensity for detecting and exploiting the historical moment – sometimes with much tact, as during a memorial service in Verdun with French president François Mitterand in 1984, and sometimes with surprisingly little sense for the appropriate as during his visit to a cemetery of American and German soldiers, including SS-men, in Bitburg with U.S. president Ronald Reagan on May 5,

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<sup>179</sup> He used this phrase several times even before his famous speech to the Israel Knesset in January of 1984. He saw himself as part of the younger generation of Germans which was particularly dedicated to the "humanist tradition of our nation," as one "who in the Nazi years could not become guilty [*nicht in Schuld geraten konnte*] because he had the grace of late birth and the blessing of a special family [*Elternhaus*]." Quoted in Werner Maser, *Helmut Kohl. Der deutsche Kanzler* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1990), 18.

<sup>180</sup> Kohl repeated this assurance on several important occasions, one of which was his first visit to the Soviet Union in July of 1983 where he not only acknowledged that "the events of this century, the sufferings and severe sacrifices in two world wars have shattered the relations between our two nations" but also recognized the "historically rooted security interests of the Soviet Union." Dinner speech July 4, 1983, printed in Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung, ed., *Bundeskanzler Helmut Kohl. Reden, 1982-1984* (Bonn, 1984), 253-264, quotes on 254, 258.

<sup>181</sup> Maser, *Helmut Kohl*, 26.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 28f.

1985.<sup>183</sup> Herf has pointed out that the Bitburg visit was so controversial because it “displaced the realities of the Nazi era in a fog of manipulative sentimentalism.”<sup>184</sup> If to Kohl and Reagan it was an act of expressing friendship between the US and West Germany to blur the lines between the former enemies by honoring dead allied soldiers alongside Wehrmacht soldiers, members of the SS and Waffen SS, then doing the opposite, namely speaking of the war of extermination planned and executed by Wehrmacht, SS and Waffen SS, potentially implied anti-German sentiment. And because West Germany was since 1945 opposed to the Soviet Union *alongside* its former Western enemies, Kohl’s politics of memory in Bitburg “seemed to offer symbolic confirmation of an unbroken continuity between the Wehrmacht’s war against the Soviet Union and the Cold War that followed.”<sup>185</sup> Germany had been on the “right side” all along.

This was not Kohl’s view of German history, however, and another public commemoration ceremony just a few days before Bitburg gave him the opportunity to ameliorate the heated emotional debate which his plans to visit the soldiers ceremony had stirred. In Bergen-Belsen, Kohl gave a historic speech on the fortieth anniversary of the concentration camp’s liberation on April 21, 1945. It was historic because it was the first time, a West German chancellor spoke publicly and explicitly about the crimes committed against Soviet POWs on the Eastern Front and in concentration camps within the Reich such as Bergen-Belsen. Four years after the first major historical work on the German treatment of Soviet POWs had appeared (Christian Streit’s *Keine Kameraden*),

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<sup>183</sup> Cf. Herf, *Divided Memory*, 350-354.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 353f.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 354.

Kohl was the first political leader to appropriately resonate these findings in one of his historical speeches. Stressing the need to educate Germans about “the time of murder, indeed of genocide, the darkest, most painful chapter in German history” and to keep the “conscience alive for the scope, for the dimension of this historical experience and burden,” Kohl commemorated “most of all the persecution and murder of the Jews.”<sup>186</sup> He asked “why so many people remained indifferent, didn’t listen, didn’t want to realize” what was about to unfold after 1933. After all, what the Nazis had in mind for the Jews became not just visible on November 8, 1938, “when 35,000 Jewish fellow-citizens were carried off to concentration camps.”<sup>187</sup> But Kohl also referred to the many other victims of Nazism: Sinti and Roma, the mentally handicapped, Soviet POWs, the civilian population in Eastern Europe. It is particularly noteworthy that he decided not just to mention these victims, but that he attempted to tell their stories, an approach to Germany’s other victims hitherto unknown in the political speech of the Bonn republic:

When the camp was erected at Bergen-Belsen, they at first brought Russian POWs here. The way they were housed and treated became a torture to the prisoners. Over 50,000 alone died here in the area around Bergen-Belsen. This too we must always remember: of the overall almost six million Soviet soldiers who were captured, less than half survived. And thus, at this hour, we also bethink the sufferings that were inflicted on the peoples of Central and Eastern Europe in the German name. We remember the war dead of the Soviet Union. And we remember the crimes against the Polish nation.<sup>188</sup>

Even if Kohl, too, left the perpetrators in the dark, the details he did communicate were at that time only beginning to become public knowledge in West Germany. Moreover, he respected the singularity of the crimes committed “in the German name” against Soviet

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<sup>186</sup> Helmut Kohl, „Das Geheimnis der Erlösung heißt Erinnerung,“ speech at Bergen-Belsen, April 21, 1985. Printed in Peter Hintze, Gerd Langguth, eds., *Der Kurs der CDU. Reden und Beiträge des Bundesvorsitzenden 1973-1993* (Stuttgart: DVA, 1993), 266-273, quote on 267.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 269.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 270.

POWs by avoiding the routine reference to the many German soldiers and POWs who had perished in the Soviet Union (yet, he did mention the German expellees, the victims of “new injustice”). It is remarkable that on this occasion Kohl also anticipated the essence of Weizsäcker’s famous speech to be delivered on May 8, 1985: May 8, 1945, he contended, was “for the Germans a day of liberation,” not just for those directly victimized and occupied by the Nazis, but for all Germans. And he assured his audience, that Germans knew of their “responsibility before history,” a responsibility “that also finds expression in a shame never to become time-barred.”<sup>189</sup>

President Weizsäcker’s much-cited 1985 speech<sup>190</sup> commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the end of the war did include a reference to the “peoples who have suffered in the war, most of all the inexpressibly many citizens of the Soviet Union and of Poland who have lost their lives.”<sup>191</sup> He also discussed the Hitler-Stalin-pact criticizing the Soviet Union for exploiting other nations’ wars to profit with territorial gains. “Yet, the initiative of war came from Germany, not from the Soviet Union. It was Hitler who took up force. The beginning of the Second World War remains tied to the German name.”<sup>192</sup> Weizsäcker named a few places which symbolized Nazi crimes – the Warsaw Ghetto, Lidice, Rotterdam. But it took another six years for a German head of state to refer specifically to crime scenes in the Soviet Union: Kohl, addressing the fiftieth anniversary of the attack in 1991 in a statement on Soviet television, for the first time

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 270f.

<sup>190</sup> See for analysis and context Herf, *Divided Memory*, 355-359.

<sup>191</sup> „Der 8. Mai 1945 – vierzig Jahre danach.“ Speech in the *Bundestag*, May 8, 1985. Printed in Richard von Weizsäcker, *Brücken zur Verständigung* (Berlin: Verlag der Nation, 1990), 31-46, quote on 33.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 37f.

referred to the siege of Leningrad, one of the most horrendous chapters in the Wehrmacht's war on the Eastern Front.<sup>193</sup>

Yet, an important milestone in the public commemoration of the Eastern Front war was a speech given by president of the *Bundestag* Phillip Jenninger (born 1932, CDU) in November 1988 commemorating the 1938 anti-Jewish pogroms.<sup>194</sup> The scandal his speech ensued was due to his attempt to explain the Germans' "fascination" with Hitler, to reconstruct how the amalgamate of a century-old popular anti-Semitism and a racially inspired extremist nationalism could lead to organized industrial mass murder of the European Jews. The opposition charged Jenninger with succumbing to this "fascination" by slipping into the minds of ordinary Germans; about fifty deputies of the SPD and the Greens walked out during his speech and the spiral of negative reactions to his speech forced him to eventually resign from his post.<sup>195</sup> The ostentatious lack of support amongst his own conservative ranks can be explained with the other controversial argument Jenninger's speech put forward: that "the planning of the war in the East and the destruction of the Jews were inseparable from each other, that one without the other would not have been possible."<sup>196</sup> This was indeed the first time a leading West German

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<sup>193</sup> Printed in BPI, no. 74, June 25, 1991, 587.

<sup>194</sup> See Herf, *Divided Memory*, 360-362. And more critically Dubiel, *Niemand ist frei von der Geschichte*, 215-218, who claims (with the mainstream of the contemporary political establishment) that Jenninger failed to distance himself rhetorically from the „fascinating“ story of Hitler's „successes“ between 1933 and 1938.

<sup>195</sup> A rather sophisticated version of the criticism is summarized in Klaus Naumann's commentary „Keine Entgleisung,“ in *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik*, 12 (1988), 1115-1118.

<sup>196</sup> Quoted from Herf, *Divided Memory*, 361. Oddly, the speech was not published in the stenographic protocols of the *Bundestag*. A transcript of the televised version is printed in Astrid Linn, „...noch heute ein Faszinosum...“ *Philipp Jenninger zum 9. November 1938 und die Folgen* (Münster: Lit, 1991), 27-44.

politician connected the war on the Eastern Front with the Holocaust, and thus also linked the Wehrmacht's warfare with its execution.

If the view is extended beyond the fall of the wall in 1989 and beyond the unification of Germany, Kohl can be said to have been the first German chancellor to begin to name the crimes committed in the war against the Soviet Union. In 1991, in the aftermath of German reunification and amidst the last days of the Soviet state, Kohl sent a formal letter to the Kremlin, addressing the CPSU ZK's general secretary Michael Gorbachev (born 1931) directly. He also gave a televised speech to the Soviet public more than twenty years after Brandt's appearance on Soviet television after the signing of the Moscow treaty. In his television address Kohl said that "German troops" had attacked the Soviet Union" to carry out a "war launched by the Hitler dictatorship." This war inflicted "inexpressible suffering on the peoples of the Soviet Union." Yet "no numbers can measure this misery. Our grief extends on all innocent victims, the children, the women, the elderly. It extends on the millions of soldiers who suffered fear, misery, and death on the battlefields of this war."<sup>197</sup> And for the first time he referred to the "two cities in the Soviet Union whose names symbolize all the cruelty of the war the National Socialist leaders had planned as war of extermination: Leningrad and Stalingrad." The siege of Leningrad, Kohl contended, symbolized the "inexpressible sufferings inflicted on the civilian population," Stalingrad "stands for the inferno of total warfare." Yet, Kohl made this statement on Soviet television; it was not a speech addressing a domestic audience

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<sup>197</sup> Helmut Kohl, „Speech on Soviet Television,“ June 21, 1991, printed in *BPI*, no. 73, June 25, 1991, 587.



and maybe that is why he mentioned the siege of Leningrad and the “German hands” which had committed those and other crimes.

Even though an unprecedented media attention at home placed the fiftieth anniversary of the attack at the center of public attention, the political leadership still only reluctantly spoke of the historical truth.<sup>198</sup> Kohl’s remarks on Soviet television, however, were the most explicit reference to Nazi war crimes – and a hint at the Wehrmacht’s incriminating role – a German chancellor had ever made thus far. Speaking now as chancellor of a united Germany half a century after the beginning of “Operation Barbarossa,” Kohl vowed to honor the legacies left by the Eastern Front war: “In view of the crimes which were committed in the German name and by German hands, we solemnly swear: Never again dictatorship! Never again war!”<sup>199</sup>

The changing political memory of the Eastern Front war was crucial for the easing of tensions between West Germany and the Soviet Union since the 1960s. Brandt, Bahr and Scheel would not have succeeded with *Ostpolitik* without convincing the Soviets of their genuine determination to revisit the Eastern Front war, its history and legacy. Even though Brandt and his successor Schmidt were far from fully acknowledging the criminal dimension of the Nazi war against the Soviet Union, their shift in content and tone of the Eastern Front memory signalled that West Germany was taking Soviet historical and

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<sup>198</sup> This media attention had started in 1981 with the fortieth anniversary, symbolized by Schmidt’s page-one commentary in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. See Schreiber, “Das ‘Unternehmen Barbarossa’ in der deutschen Presse,” 38ff. In 1991, a nationally acclaimed exhibit on the „War Against the Soviet Union“ opened in Berlin, and one of Guido Knopp’s first major film productions appeared on public television (ZDF): the two-part documentary film “The Damned War: Operation Barbarossa.” The print media covered the events accordingly.

<sup>199</sup> Kohl, “Speech on Soviet Television,” June 21, 1991, 587.

security concerns more seriously, sought to dispel them and supplant these concerns with trust. This shift was a crucial precondition for the rapprochement between the two former enemy nations. As the many historical, often private conversations initiated by Brezhnev demonstrate, to Moscow, history was the third party at the table and the shadows of the past needed to be addressed before diplomatic relations with the Federal Republic could normalize. Remarkably, the Eastern Front memory continued to influence the diplomatic theater even after the conflict over Soviet missiles in central Europe, and the invasion of Afghanistan had worsened relations once again. Schmidt, in particular, clung on to the notion that the shared experience of the horrors of war obliged the leaders of the two nations to preserve peace at all costs.

To the degree to which the West German memory of the Eastern Front became more balanced and nuanced, the East German reminiscences to the war against the Soviet Union faded from the political sphere. With *Ostpolitik*, the long-standing “two-camp theory” had become (almost) obsolete, and Honecker’s personal dedication to the alliance with the Soviet Union no longer required as much to exploit the Eastern Front memory as evidence for East Berlin’s unwavering, “eternal” loyalty. Nonetheless, Honecker appropriated the Eastern Front to his agenda of connecting the antifascist narrative with the achievements of “real existing socialism,” substituting the lack of war experience with an extra sense for historical locations and their celebration – his visits to Stalingrad and Krasnogorsk served this agenda well. Yet, under Honecker’s rule, the political memory of the Eastern Front became less detailed, less nuanced, even less historical. It seems that to the degree to which the legitimizing power of the antifascist “founding myth” faded away during the 1980s, it became also less relevant for the SED to keep the

Soviet Union and its role as Hitler's prime victim and victor during World War II at the center of public attention.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Cf., Münkler, „Antifaschismus und antifaschistischer Widerstand,“ 28f. Grunenberg, *Antifaschismus*.

## **Conclusion**

“The war is not over as long as there is one wound still bleeding from it.”

Heinrich Böll

Postwar German political culture cannot be properly understood without considering the impact the experience of war and its aftermath had on German society. Whereas historians thus far have focused on studying the memory of German suffering and the Holocaust, this study has demonstrated how central the Eastern Front memory was in German postwar political culture on both sides of the Iron Curtain. The memory of the war against the Soviet Union was a *politicum* from the very beginnings. With the division of Germany in the wake of the Cold War, remembering the Eastern Front, especially German crimes commissioned in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe between 1941 and 1945, posed an immense challenge to the emerging political elites. In the GDR, the SED's monopoly over the interpretation of history secured the Eastern Front war the most prominent position in the political memory of the Second World War. In the FRG, in contrast, it took the political leadership decades to formulate a critical Eastern Front memory. My study suggests that with the emergence of the Holocaust memory since the 1960s, it was possible to evade the other historic crime of Nazism – the “war of extermination” in the Soviet Union – until the 1980s. Thus, in as much as the “divided memory” (Jeffrey Herf) of the Holocaust marginalized the mass murder of the European Jews in East Germany – with the SED instead focusing on the Soviet Union as Hitler's prime victim and conqueror – it in turn marginalized the Eastern Front as monstrous crime scene in West German memory with the political leaders since Kiesinger/Brandt placing the Holocaust at the center of official narratives about Germany's role in World War II.

In both Germanys, the political elites perpetuated an artificial division of the criminal legacy of the Third Reich: they failed to connect the two most outrageous crimes planned

and executed by Nazi Germany, namely the crusade against “Jewish Bolshevism” in the Soviet Union and the extermination of the European Jews. However, this study has not neglected that politicians are not historians, and that they cannot and should not be expected to speak about historical events from a professional historian’s point of view. This is indeed not the measure a study of public memory should employ. Yet, my analysis has demonstrated how the propensity of politicians (and ideologues) to keep references to historical events largely ambiguous and vague instead of fleshing them out with specific details, contributed to the public misuse of history – of history’s bold instrumentalization in the East, and elusive avoidance in the West, and thus its all too frequent misrepresentation in both Germanys. In contrast, politicians like Brandt, Schmidt, Jenninger, or Kohl, who in rare cases paid attention to specific events, historic details, and overall context, came closest to portraying history in its full complexity and ever-prevalent ambiguity.

With a long-term view and from a comparative perspective, my study has highlighted the fact that over the course of half a century, the experience of war and total defeat has had a decisive impact on German society and politics. The brutalization of warfare taking place on the Eastern Front between 1941 and 1945 in the course of which Germans not only experienced mass death but were first and foremost “those who did the killing,” was one source for the “stigma of violence”<sup>1</sup> which left its mark on postwar

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<sup>1</sup> Geyer, “The Place of the Second World War in German Memory and History,” 10f. Geyer stresses that in genocidal war the experience of killing outweighs that of dying on the part of those who carry it out: “The German experience is filtered and concentrated through this mark of the murderer as through a prism.” Ibid.

German political culture ever since the end of the Third Reich. This stigma explains the “difficulty of ending the war” on the Eastern Front in either Germany.<sup>2</sup> Coming to terms with this legacy oscillating between the sufferings Germans have inflicted on others, and the losses incurred by Germans themselves, was a major political, intellectual and emotional challenge for Germany’s political elite. The master narrative forged by the Nazis since the beginning of “Operation Barbarossa” in 1941 declared the war a crusade against Jewish Bolshevism, a test of fate forced upon the German people to save their own existence and to save Europe from the Bolshevist menace. In reality, this was a war waged to put into practice the Nazis’ vision of a racially homogenous Aryan empire and of gaining “living space” at the expense of millions of Eastern Europeans. Under the pretext of fighting a Jewish-Bolshevist world conspiracy, Hitler launched his “essential war” (Jürgen Förster) against the Soviet Union and thus created the most important precondition for genocide: it was the Eastern Front war which enabled the Nazis to proceed with the extermination of the European Jewry on and behind the front lines, as well as in the vast territories occupied by the Wehrmacht.

Most Germans perceived the Eastern Front as the worst war theater, and the losses incurred during battle of Stalingrad endowed the name Stalingrad with a metaphorical meaning: as a collective trauma, it came to embody German suffering during World War II. Yet, at the same time, the Nazi propaganda leading up to the war, as well as the collective hunch most Germans evidently had about the criminal dimension of “Operation Barbarossa,” burdened the narrative of ultimate suffering with the question of

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<sup>2</sup> To borrow a phrase by Hannes Heer, cf. Heer, “The Difficulty of Ending a War.”

guilt. Both these aspects, the traumatic experience of mass death among German soldiers and the concurrent commission of unprecedented crimes against non-Germans, constitute the “legacies of Stalingrad.” During the Nuremberg interregnum, this ambiguous legacy was part of the public discourse in all four zones of occupation. Several Allied war crimes trials addressed the criminal nature of the Wehrmacht’s war against the Soviet Union in detail, the media reported heavily and for a brief moment in postwar German history, the historical reality of the Eastern Front was subject of public discussion. The facts unearthed by Allied prosecutors, however, did not become part of the political memories of the Eastern Front war as they were forged by the political leaders in East and West Germany.

For differing reasons and to varying degrees, crucial parts of the story were marginalized, acquiesced, or distorted. Seeking to forge “usable pasts” (Robert Moeller), the political elites put their interpretations of the war into the service of the present. The conceptual premise of this long-term study was to examine the relationship and intersections between memory and politics, historical narratives and political legitimacy, meaning and power. By focussing in this sense on the “public use of history” (Jürgen Habermas) in the political and diplomatic spheres, this kind of political-cultural history can indeed deepen our understanding of these intersections and the impact they can have on the political culture of postwar societies. In the GDR, the SED propagated the war against the Soviet Union as the centerpiece of its master narrative about World War II. The Red Army’s fight alongside German communists, transformed “Stalingraders,” and NKFD activists served as the historical starting point for the building of socialism in one half of postwar Germany. The postulate of a historically generated, quasi-organic



friendship between the former arch-enemies, Soviet Union and Germany, was one fundament on which the SED hoped to plant and cultivate its political legitimacy. It was not only the “antifascist myth” on which the East German communists founded their state, it was also the project of German-Soviet friendship with which they claimed to realize the right lessons learned from the past. The GDR’s *raison d’être* was in fact not based on one or the other, but on the combination of these two interdependent historical narratives. Yet, the calculated presence of the Eastern Front war in the GDR did not entail a nuanced and detailed confrontation of the historic crimes committed in its course. Rather, by blaming the attack on German imperialism, the SED exculpated the ordinary soldier by putting him in one line with Hitler’s other victims. Blinded and abused, the German working class had become the tool of German fascism, not its supporter, and nor its executor. As my analysis of the judicial reckoning with Eastern Front crimes has shown, the SED’s calculated focus on the war against the Soviet Union did not lead to a more thorough prosecution of war crimes committed by potential perpetrators residing in the GDR. It merely entailed a bias towards Soviet victims. Thus, the SED’s political memory of the Eastern Front war included remembering the crimes against Soviet civilians, Soviet POWs, and partisans – in contrast to what West German politicians communicated – yet, the concrete circumstances of their commission and execution, or even the identity of the main victim group, the Jews, remained obscure until the 1980s.

The process of “internalizing” the Nazi past in West Germany lasted for decades. Memory shifted from the victims perspective dominant during the 1950s to a perpetrator perspective in the late 1960s. The most important result of this shift was the acknowledgment of the Holocaust as Germany’s historic crime and lasting liability. Yet,

even though the mass murder of the Jews almost exclusively took place on and behind the Eastern Front lines, the closely related, in fact conditional war against the Soviet Union remained marginal much longer. Political leaders such as Adenauer and Heuss, in general, accepted German guilt but they were unwilling and/or unable to escape the political and ideological needs of the day. In light of the Cold War and confronted with Soviet expansionism, they largely neglected the conflict's dramatic prehistory. With the ascendancy of the Cold War, the old enemy Soviet Union became the new enemy. Thus, democratic anticommunism and the political realities of the bloc confrontation long hindered a sincere reckoning with the Eastern Front war legacies. Even after the era Brandt had shifted political memory towards a more conciliatory tone in the 1960s/70s, it took another twenty years to permanently shatter the "myth of the clean Wehrmacht" in (West) German society.

The memory of the Eastern Front war in postwar Germany was political because its core touched on the nature of German-Soviet relations, it is a key chapter in the post-1945 history of the "Russia Complex."<sup>3</sup> In the GDR, Ulbricht, Norden and other communists excelled in putting this event happening in the past into the service of the present. In several crucial moments in East German history – the "building of socialism" campaign in 1952, the June uprisings in 1953, the creation of the armed forces, and the building of the wall in 1961 – they invoked the Eastern Front memory in order to rally support, crush resistance, forge loyalties and legitimize the use of force. After the hot

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<sup>3</sup> Koenen, *Der Russland-Komplex*.

Cold War had cooled down in the wake of Détente, Honecker's politics of memory interpreted the war against the Soviet Union less instrumentally and rather canonized its content. The rapprochement between Bonn and Moscow called for a more sophisticated "history propaganda," one still capable of unmasking reactionary anti-Soviet tendencies in the West, but also of solving the ideological dilemma posed by *Ostpolitik*. Yet, towards the end of the 1970s, during the crisis of the Euro Missiles the old stereotypes seemed to make sense again. Once again, albeit with lesser propagandistic zeal and creativity as Ulbricht, Honecker invoked the "lessons of Barbarossa" in order to denounce the West's stand against the Soviet Union.

In West German political culture, the criminal legacy of the Eastern Front war remained long neglected. This has been observed before but this study has fully illustrated the degree and severity of this denial. Under Adenauer, in context of severe Cold War tensions and firmly rooted in the antitotalitarian consensus, West German politics mostly refused even to address the fact that Nazi Germany's war had claimed 20 million lives in the Soviet Union, two thirds of which civilian. Although Adenauer was aware of the "war thing" and its role in Soviet memory, and although president Heuss included "Russian mothers" among the mourners of the war's dead in his speeches, the crimes committed in Eastern Europe, and in the Soviet Union in particular, were absent from the political memory of the Eastern Front until the mid-1960s. Instead, the unresolved issue of the remaining German POWs, the fate of the German population fleeing the Red Army in the last year of the war, and the continuous presence of Soviet forces in East Germany dominated the discourse about the war's legacy. This selective Eastern Front memory was a central feature shaping the West German victimization

discourse during the 1950s. Likewise, in the realm of military and defense policy, political leaders were not inclined to discuss the current situation – a divided Germany – and current Soviet security concerns in context of the recent burdensome past. During the remilitarization debates in the *Bundestag* none of the key speakers discussed the problematic nexus between “Operation Barbarossa” and a new German “Wehrmacht.” The desire to move on, to become a permanent and respected member of the Western “free world,” both required and facilitated the marginalization of the Eastern Front war.

Only in the wake of Brandt’s *Ostpolitik*, the political leadership brought the reality and legacy of this war (back) on the political agenda. *Ostpolitik*’s success depended on the ability of the Bonn administration to convince the Soviet leaders of a sincere change in the political memory of the German-Soviet war. Without the acknowledgment of the Soviet Union’s role and sacrifices in World War II, a rapprochement between Moscow and Bonn was unthinkable. Yet, the continuous Cold War divide limited this reconsideration. Schmidt, the only postwar German chancellor to have fought on the Eastern Front – his veteran experience is comparable only to Ulbricht’s NKFD activities – semi-publicly reflected on his war memories in his conversations with Brezhnev. In his political speeches, however, he was far from addressing the Eastern Front war as the main site of German war crimes. His conviction that the Wehrmacht as he knew it had been the “last decent organization” in the Nazi Reich contributed no less to the persistence of a selective, basically still uncritical Eastern Front memory. This memory also ignored the connection between “Operation Barbarossa” and the “Final Solution.” Only in 1988, a leading West German politician, president of the *Bundestag* Philipp Jenninger, publicly discussed this link in his controversial speech commemorating the

pogroms of November 9, 1938. And it took until after the fall of the wall for a German chancellor to refer specifically, not without pointing to Stalingrad first, to one of the most horrible episodes in the war against the Soviet Union: the siege of Leningrad. And not even at this point has the political memory of the Eastern Front reached a level of historical specificity and clarity that has come to characterize West German reflection on the Holocaust. In pointing to the overbearing Cold War context and to the intricate connection between history, memory and politics, the preceding pages indicate why the relatively clear and precise memory of the Holocaust emerged far sooner and more powerfully than did the memory of the crimes of the Nazi regime on the largest front of the Second World War.

It has been demonstrated that the respective founding narratives – German-Soviet friendship in the East, antitotalitarianism in the West – as well as the dominant mutually hostile Cold War context allowed the political elites to evade the question of individual guilt and to neglect the nexus between genocidal war and the Holocaust. The “myth of a clean Wehrmacht” facilitated in *both* Germanys the lasting separation of those two central *lieux de mémoire* which to this day embody the tremendous German sufferings and the unprecedented German crimes committed during World War II: Stalingrad and Auschwitz.

Aside from reconstructing in which ways the Eastern Front memories were motivated by contrasting ideological and political interests, this study has also attempted to consider the biographical factor as many postwar politicians were also the children of war. Ulbricht’s front experience, his personal memories of the battle of Stalingrad, and his commitment to *writing* history after the war, reveals the intricate link between

wartime experience and postwar politics. It was not only his world view, his ideology, his political calculations which motivated his Eastern Front memory but also his veteran biography. He firmly believed in the righteousness of his interpretation of history and the position he deduced from it for himself as the leader of a socialist Germany. After all, he had been on the “right” side of history, the victor’s side, all along. Ulbricht, Pieck, Norden, Abusch, Becher and others believed they were entitled to lead the mission for Germany’s antifascist reeducation; their historical experiences had a tremendous impact on their self-understanding as political avantgarde of the “better Germany.” The “Hegelian moment” (Jeffrey Herf) they were referring to constituted *the* formative experience of their lives, empowering them to lead future generations, a phenomenon comparable to the role the October Revolution played in the lives and minds of the Soviet Bolsheviks during the 1920s. Just as to these “revolutionaries, whose entire adult lives had been devoted to enlightening the dark masses with the revolutionary message,” to Ulbricht and his comrades, writing and disseminating the lessons of “Barbarossa” meant “not a mere description of events but an argument about their transcendent significance.”<sup>4</sup>

To a lesser extent this is also true for a number of other Stalingrad veterans such as Adam, Homann, Korfes or Steidle attained important political, administrative and military positions in the SED state. Claiming to have experienced a cathartic transformation in Soviet captivity, these “Stalingraders” also aligned with the “better Germany” and were even able to preserve their soldierly identities to a large extent: they continued the fight – only now as “good soldiers,” as militant pacifists in the fight for

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<sup>4</sup> Corney, *Telling October*, 45.

peace. Hundreds of former rank-and-file soldiers returning from Soviet captivity, claimed having passed through a similar transformative process of “reflection and return.” They, just as their West German counterparts, seemed to have been able to forge ultimately liberating, redemptive narratives which explains why many of them willingly joined in the socialist project in the GDR. Not only that their practical employment, for example in the police apparatus, contributed to the stabilization of the Stalinist one-party-state; their ideological commitment to the German-Soviet friendship project was a crucial contribution to the SED’s quest for legitimacy – and in turn liberated every one of them from the burden of historical guilt.

Much like in the East, veterans in West Germany also sought to make sense of their wartime experience; they too forged “redemptive memories” (Frank Biess) or “legitimate narratives” (Joanna Bourke) of war. By freely communicating their soldierly experience in veteran journals they contributed to the discourse of a democratic anti-totalitarianism in the early Federal Republic – naturally without being convinced democrats in any case. Yet, the degree of denial with regards to the criminal nature of the Eastern Front war points to the questionable side-effects of the anti-totalitarian consensus. It allowed former Wehrmacht officers to publicly ponder over the lessons to be drawn from the war against the Soviet Union only in order to improve the odds of a new “Wehrmacht” to win its relaunch.

It was thus less surprising to discover that a more sincere and reflective confrontation of the Eastern Front war, the ambivalent role of the soldier as victim and perpetrator, and the human suffering it entailed for millions of civilians, took place in the early postwar literature. In spite of the ideological bias of the East German literature, and the outcast

position of many West German writers in the Adenauer era , both literary scenes produced a number of works which offered a medium for meditating the personal and historical legacies of this war.

A similarly nuanced conclusion derives from the analysis of the East and West German historiography on the Eastern Front war. Even though history was a “weapon” for Ulbricht, and the SED utilized this weapon constantly for its “history propaganda,” a number of East German historians have early on addressed crucial aspects of the Eastern Front history, for example the profitable complicity of many German businesses in the Holocaust, or the OKW’s deep involvement with the planning and execution of the “war of extermination” in the Soviet Union. Western historiography started to grapple with these issues much later. In turn, GDR accounts of World War II singularized the war to its effects on the Soviet Union, to the Red Army’s “war of liberation” in the East, and to the sufferings of a limited group of people (German communists, Soviet civilians, and POWs). The mass murder of the Jews, and the Western Allies’ contribution to the victory over Nazism were long downplayed, at least until the early 1980s. In fact, historiography and the SED’s “history propaganda” emphasized June 22, 1941 to such an extent that it often seemed World War II had broken out only then, and not on September 1, 1939. The preceding events, including the invasion of Poland and France, were relegated to the status of the war’s pre-history. It is no less disconcerting to realize how long it took West German historians to address the nature of the Wehrmacht’s warfare, its complicity in war crimes and genocide, and to write the history of the millions of Soviet POWs who perished in German captivity. Similarly to the initially reluctant confrontation of the



Holocaust among West German historians, German crimes on the Eastern Front war long remained a subject of ignorance.<sup>5</sup>

My study has explored the intricate relationship between war, memory and politics, and even though its focus was on the political memory of the Eastern Front war, it has occasionally ventured into the realm of individual memories. It has unearthed the connections between the politics of memory and veteran attempts to make sense of war. Yet, political memory pervades the political culture of a society, shaping collective memory, imbuing it with a sense of a common past and identity. At the very end of my analysis, I therefore would like to address – at least partially – the question of how the political memory of the war against the Soviet Union shaped German public opinion until the fall of the wall.

The concept of “public” or “popular” opinion is debatable; occasionally, scholars prefer to refer to a “second public” (*zweite Öffentlichkeit*) in dictatorial societies, thus stressing the absence of basic conditions for the emergence of something like a “popular opinion,” namely freedom of speech and a free press.<sup>6</sup> One must also be aware of the methodological pitfalls of comparing statistical polls taken in the Federal Republic with centralized “public opinion research” in the GDR. Nonetheless, I propose to draw on both sources albeit with equal critical care. Especially the latter, the polls taken by the “Institute for Public Opinion Research” (Berlin) and the “Central Institute for Youth

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Nicolas Berg’s controversial, *Der Holocaust und die westdeutschen Historiker*.

<sup>6</sup> See for example Katja Naumann, *Eine zweite Öffentlichkeit?: Zur Verbreitung von Untergrundliteratur während der 80er Jahre in Leipzig* (Leipzig: Edition Leipziger Kreis, 2004). A less critical approach to the concept is Mark Allinson’s *Politics and Popular Opinion in East Germany, 1945-1968* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

Research” (Leipzig) between 1964 and 1990 in the GDR, are a valuable, hitherto largely neglected source for the extent of support (and dissent) for the SED regime.<sup>7</sup> For the study of West German public opinion about the Soviet Union I rely on the Allensbach Institute’s quantitative analyses as well as on scholarly research.<sup>8</sup> In order to extract what is most relevant for my topic from these sources the focus rests on polls addressing German views of the Soviet Union, and for the East German case, on data dealing with the “historical conscience” (“*Geschichtsbewußtsein*”) of the population.

Already in 1965, Walter Laqueur aptly summarized the West German position towards the Soviet Union. For most of the FRG’s history, the attitude of the government *and* of the public was one of “fear and resentment.”<sup>9</sup> While over time, West German political culture acknowledged the Holocaust as one of Nazi Germany’s worst crimes,

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<sup>7</sup> On the IfM see Heinz Niemann, *Meinungsforschung in der DDR. Die geheimen Berichte des Instituts für Meinungsforschung an das Politbüro der SED* (Köln: Bund-Verlag, 1993). Idem, *Hinterm Zaun. Politische Kultur und Meinungsforschung in der DDR – die geheimen Berichte an das Politbüro der SED* (Berlin: edition ost, 1995). For a critical review of the social sciences in general, and public opinion research in particular, in the GDR, see Heinrich Best, ed., *Sozialwissenschaften in der DDR und in den neuen Bundesländern. Ein Vademecum* (Bonn: Informationszentrum Sozialwissenschaften, 1993). Gesellschaft Sozialwissenschaftlicher Infrastruktureinrichtungen e.V. (GESIS) et.al., eds., *Materialien zur Erforschung der DDR-Gesellschaft. Quellen. Daten. Instrumente* (Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 1998). Evelyn Brislinger, Brigitte Hausstein, Eberhard Riedel, *Jugend im Osten. Sozialwissenschaftliche Daten und Kontextwissen aus der DDR sowie den neuen Bundesländern (1969-1995)* (Berlin: trafo verlag, 1997). And Walter Friedrich, Peter Förster, Kurt Starke, eds., *Das Zentralinstitut für Jugendforschung Leipzig 1966-1990. Geschichte, Methoden, Erkenntnisse* (Berlin: edition ost, 1999). Peter Förster has demonstrated the value of this research for assessing public opinion in East Germany – and for the comparative perspective as well, cf. Peter Förster, „Die deutsche Frage im Bewußtsein der Bevölkerung in beiden Teilen Deutschlands: Das Zusammengehörigkeitsgefühl der Deutschen; Einstellungen junger Menschen in der DDR,“ in *Materialien der Enquete-Kommission „Aufarbeitung von Geschichte und Folgen der SED-Diktatur in Deutschland*, vol. 5: “Deutschlandpolitik, innerdeutsche Beziehungen und internationale Rahmenbedingungen” (ed. Deutscher Bundestag, Berlin, 1995), 1212-1380.

<sup>8</sup> Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, Erich Peter Neumann, eds., *The Germans. Public Opinion Polls 1947-1966* (Allensbach, Bonn: Verlag für Demoskopie, 1967), Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, Edgar Piel, eds., *Allensbacher Jahrbuch der Demoskopie* (München: Saur, 1976ff.). Arnold Sywottek, “Die Sowjetunion in westdeutscher Sicht seit 1945,” in Niedhart, ed., *Der Westen und die Sowjetunion*, 289-362. And Walter Laqueur, *Russia and Germany. A Century of Conflict* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1965), esp. 271-287.

<sup>9</sup> Laqueur, *Russia and Germany*, 283.

even reflected “some remorse about the murder of millions of the Jews,” there were “no guilt feelings with regard to Russians, Poles and Czechs.” Memory of the victims of Nazism differentiated between the cold blooded murder of the Jews and the Eastern European nations who were commonly remembered as enemies in the war. And since these countries had retaliated against the Germans by expelling, robbing and murdering many of them towards and after the end of the war, “the account seemed settled in German eyes.”<sup>10</sup>

A number of oral history studies have confirmed this assessment. Based on hundreds of biographical interviews with elder Germans in the Ruhr area and in the some parts of the late GDR, Lutz Niethammer concluded that especially West Germans had only a “short-term memory” of the “Russians.” Their losses, as well as “the Russians as enemy and as prisoner in general have no faces in German memory.”<sup>11</sup> In contrast to many East German interviewees whose memories included for example the murderous treatment of Soviet POWs and forced laborers – displaying a degree of reflection and empathy which should in Niethammer’s view not simply be attributed to the SED’s “brain washing” attempts – Niethammer stresses the West German preoccupation with Russia as “threat,” not the least a legacy of Nazi ideology and propaganda.<sup>12</sup> On the whole, the “brutality of the Russians seems to have been a grandiose a priori anticipation at the end of the war,” overshadowing instantaneously the dreadful Soviet experiences during World War II.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Lutz Niethammer, “Juden und Russen im Gedächtnis der Deutschen,” in Walter H. Pehle, *Der historische Ort des Nationalsozialismus. Annäherungen* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1990), 115-134, quote on 125.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 126ff.

The “vastly evident scandal” of the crimes committed in the wake of “Operation Barbarossa” against Soviet citizens was not perceived as such in postwar West Germany.<sup>13</sup>

Ever since the Allensbach Institute started conducting polls among West Germans, views of the “Russians” have been largely reported as negative. Throughout the Cold War, the percentage of West Germans who perceived them as threat ranged between 44 percent (1980) and 66 percent (1952).<sup>14</sup> In 1982, 57 percent said that they found the “Russians” “unsympathetic.”<sup>15</sup> In 1988, certainly due to Gorbachev’s positive image in the West, only 29 percent said they “didn’t like the Russians very much.”<sup>16</sup> Only 25 percent viewed the Soviet Union as threat in the same year.<sup>17</sup> The most astounding result, however, derives not from the responses to the Allensbach studies on the Soviet Union but from the design of these polls: in all the years, Allensbach asked *one* question pertaining to the Eastern Front war. As late as 1992, a poll included a question on whether Germans “had heard about the many German POWs who had been sentenced to long prison terms in order to keep them longer in the Soviet Union” (54 percent said “yes”), and whether they had personally had heard of such persons (15 percent “yes”).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 119. Niethammer’s interviews instead confirm the „divided memory“ of the Holocaust: while in East Germany „Jews were no social factor any more,“ and thus also their suffering vanished, West Germans underwent a „thorough process of recalling“ the Nazi crimes against the Jews resulting in an empathetic acknowledgment of the Jewish fate and German guilt. Ibid., 121ff.

<sup>14</sup> *Allensbacher Jahrbuch*, vol. VIII, 626.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 582. Followed by East Germans whom 46 percent of West Germans disliked, and Czechs (32 percent).

<sup>16</sup> *Allensbacher Jahrbuch*, vol. IX, 979.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 982.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 989. In 1955, in context of Adenauer’s visit to Moscow, Allensbach asked one question which somewhat implicitly addressed the past. The way the question was phrased suggested they the Soviets were blamed for the current hostile situation: “Do you believe that Russia *now* has the good will to co-operate with us?” [Emphasis added] – 23 percent “yes” in Sept. 1955, 34 percent “to some extent,” 27 percent “no”

Thus, it remains impossible to discern how West Germans evaluated the legacies of the war against the Soviet Union as they were never asked for their opinion on this issue.

If we shift focus to East Germany, the political memory of the war against the Soviet Union generated very different views about the past among the East German population. One direct result of the SED's monopoly over "history propaganda" in general, and the Eastern Front memory in particular, was that East German polls actually addressed the war against the Soviet Union as historical event, the Soviet Union's role in the defeat of fascism, as well as the roots of the GDR-USSR alliance. The already mentioned Institute for Opinion Research (IfM) was established by the SED Politburo in 1964 in order to systematically evaluate the "effectiveness and persuasiveness of [the party's] propagandistic and agitation work as well as the effect of enemy propaganda." It was to provide the "party leadership with a fast and operatively reliable, scientifically-exact material about the development of the mass mood (*Massenstimmung*) and the state of conscience (*Bewußtseinsstand*) in the population which is untainted by subjective opinions and interests."<sup>19</sup> The results were kept secret from the public. Subsequently, a number of polls conducted by the IfM dealt with a range of issues which the Politburo deemed relevant to its policy and propaganda, among them questions of foreign policy

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(compare the much worse numbers for October 1955, after Adenauer's return: 11, 17 and 57 percent). In 1960 and 1965, a similar question was asked: "Do you feel that, deep down, the Russians have the good will to seek a reconciliation with the West, or do you think not so?" 57 percent (1960) and 56 percent (1965) said they "do not think so," 17 percent/23 percent responded "think so." Cf. Noelle-Neumann, Neumann, eds., *The Germans*, 554.

<sup>19</sup> Draft of a Politburo decree on the „Ausarbeitung und Schaffung eines ihm unmittelbar unterstellten zentralen Systems wissenschaftlicher exakter sozialistischer Meinungsforschung,“ April 27, 1963. BA/SAPMO, NY 4182, 897, fiche 1, 38f. See also the relevant Politburo decision in „Protokoll Nr. 49/63 Sitzung des Politbüros des Zentralkomitees am 17. Dezember 1963,“ BA/SAPMO, DY 30 J IV 2/2, 915, fiche 1.

(e.g., the West, Israel and the Arab countries), national security and defense (NATO, NVA, Warsaw Pact), military training, historical-political conscience, leisure and cultural activities, women's rights, social services, or the economy.<sup>20</sup> Since the archive of the Institute was destroyed after Honecker decreed its closure in 1979, estimates based on surviving poll materials deposited in other divisions of the party apparatus count 183 polls between 1965 and 1978.<sup>21</sup> The polls were conducted anonymously; IfM staff workers handed out questionnaires to participants who were asked to fill them out (usually in a group setting in factories, schools or universities), and to return them to a staff member on the spot, or to mail it back to the Institute.

According to these polls, a majority of East Germans – not surprisingly in view of the official propaganda – were in favor of the Soviet Union, believed overwhelmingly in the military and ideological superiority of the “socialist camp” and supported the unconditional “brotherhood in arms” with the Soviet Union. Yet even if one takes into account that a significant number of participants might have feared ramifications for critical answers or might have questioned the formally guaranteed anonymity, the numbers are staggeringly high.<sup>22</sup> With regards to the memory of the Second World War,

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<sup>20</sup> A good overview is Niemann, *Meinungsforschung in der DDR*.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 15. So far it is mere speculation that Honecker was annoyed by increasingly critical results the polls rendered and therefore ordered the termination of the project.

<sup>22</sup> The questionnaires contained no hint at the IfM's institutional position as directly subordinated to the SED's ZK. The letter head contained a mail box address in Berlin. See for example a surviving copy of the Poll on the Letter Exchange between the SED's ZK and the SPD (1966), in BA/SAPMO, DY 30/5200, 64f. Similarly, the number of critical answers is surprising in some cases: for example, in a 1966 poll on „Questions of the Securing of Peace,“ item 7 asked: It is internationally common that each state secures and protects its borders. Is, in your view, the violation of the state border between the GDR and the FRG, resp. West-Berlin, a criminal act?“ 71 percent responded „yes,“ 20 percent said „no.“ Yet, the next item asked „Do you in this context consider it right to use fire arms against border violators (*Grenzverletzer*)?“ 45 percent approved, but no less than 40 percent answered „no“! BA/SAPMO, DY 30/5199, 143. Or even more astounding results came in with polls addressing the economy: asked whether they would buy the

the polls revealed that the SED's "history propaganda" was rather successful: in 1965, 90 percent of East Germans saw May 8, 1945 as a "day of liberation," ten years later the number rose to 92 percent.<sup>23</sup> In the Federal Republic, the day was until 1985 largely viewed in terms of defeat. Interestingly, a post-unification poll asking the same question found that this view had reversed: in 1995, more East Germans saw May 8, 1945 as day of defeat, than as day of liberation; only about 17 percent of West Germans but 34 percent of East Germans saw it as day of defeat.<sup>24</sup>

Especially among the youth in the GDR, the positive picture of the Soviet Union was connected with the memory of the Eastern Front war. In a 1969 poll, 90 percent said that "cooperation with the Soviet Union is very important for the GDR;" 60 percent said that they "liked the Soviet people."<sup>25</sup> In 1975, 97 percent agreed that "the Soviet Union is important for us because it has liberated us and others from fascism."<sup>26</sup> Another poll asked in 1978, whether the "Soviet Union is our best friend." 50 percent fully agreed, 40 percent agreed "with limitations." The same poll asked those same 90 percent why the Soviet Union was "our best friend," to which 96 percent responded "because it has

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clothes produced in their own factory, more than 70 percent responded „no“ or „rather no.“ DY 30 IV A2/9.02/31.

<sup>23</sup> 1965: Poll based on 1083 submitted questionnaires from all *Kreisen* of eight *Bezirke* in the GDR. The participants were selected randomly from the central *Einwohnermeldekartei*. BA/SAPMO, 30/5188, 32-62, esp. item 9 on page 62. 1975: nationwide poll among several groups: young men shortly before being drafted to the NVA, reserve soldiers, a sample of the general population and a sample of male workers aged 30 to 45 from 10 factories. BA/SAPMO, DY 30/5208, 36-48, esp. 43.

<sup>24</sup> Classen „Vom Anfang im Ende: ‚Befreiung‘ im Rundfunk,” 117, fn. 105.

<sup>25</sup> 6006: Bewußtseinsentwicklung und soziale Herkunft Jugendlicher (1969), items 82, 90. This and the following polls were conducted by the Central Institute for Youth Research in Leipzig which continued its work until 1990. The questionnaires are available online at [www.gesis.org](http://www.gesis.org). I thank Eberhard Riedel at the Zentralarchiv für Empirische Sozialforschung an der Universität zu Köln for his expertise.

<sup>26</sup> 6078: *Parlamentsstudie in Vorbereitung des X. Parlaments der FDJ* (1975), item 306.

liberated us and other peoples from fascism.”<sup>27</sup> These numbers decreased in the course of the 1980s; in 1985, only 25 percent felt “fully bonded with the Soviet Union,” 52 percent with “limitations.” Yet, again, 95 percent of both groups claimed that they felt so because the Soviet Union had liberated the world from fascism.<sup>28</sup>

The way these opinions were asked speaks to the heavy bias of the studies. Yet, they also reflect the wide dissemination of the SED’s master narrative of the Eastern Front war. A poll conducted in 1983 among the workers in Berlin and *Bezirk* Neubrandenburg asked participants to date important historical events in German and European history. Aside from events such the Thirty-Years War, the Reformation, the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars and the 1918 “bourgeois-democratic” revolution, the poll asked only one date pertaining to World War II: “the attack of Hitlergermany against the Soviet Union.” 71 percent of the respondents knew the right answer, the highest score of right answers compared to the other historical events on the list.<sup>29</sup>

These findings seem to confer with findings stemming from the post-unification era, and they thus also speak to the longevity of the SED’s historical world view. When Allensbach asked Germans in East and West in 1995 “who played the decisive role in the Second World War, in the victory over Fascism?,” the astoundingly disparate response showed that the divided memory of the Eastern Front war still dominated Germans’ view of World War II: while 69 percent of West Germans responded “the United States,” 87

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<sup>27</sup> 6080: *Einstellungen und Aktivitäten Jugendlicher. Komplexstudie Lehrlinge* (1978), items 30, 34.

<sup>28</sup> 6082: *Politische Einstellungen und Verhalten Jugendlicher* (1985), items 16, 18

<sup>29</sup> 6339: *Geschichtsbewußtsein* (1983), item 12. 45 percent were members of the SED, about 50 percent were skilled workers, 13 percent had an academic education. Results provided to me by Eberhard Riedel.



percent of East Germans said that “Russia” had played the decisive role in defeating Nazi Germany.<sup>30</sup>

How severely divided German memory remains even after the end of its division should finally be highlighted with a brief look at the controversy surrounding the Wehrmacht exhibits “War of Extermination. Crimes of the Wehrmacht 1941-1944.”<sup>31</sup> It was one of the milestones in the post-unification process of all-German *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. This exhibit addressed three aspects of the Wehrmacht’s “war of extermination.” It detailed crimes committed in the partisan war in Serbia in 1941, crimes of the Sixth Army on the road to Stalingrad in 1941-1942, and crimes of the occupation regime in occupied Belorussia 1941-1944. Aside from documenting the criminal orders, front letters describing the “daily life of the crimes,” and military records demonstrating the Wehrmacht’s complicity on every level, the exhibit relied heavily on visual evidence as it displayed hundreds of photographs taken mostly by German soldiers. Eighty percent of them were amateur shots found in the pockets of dead or

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<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Michael Mertes, “Die Gegenwart der Vergangenheit. Zur außenpolitischen Relevanz von Geschichtsbildern,” *Internationale Politik*, no. 9 (Sept., 2000), 1-8, quote on 7. In recent years, a number of fascinating oral history studies have appeared which explore the cross-generational, communicative memory of the Nazi past in East and West German families. All come to similar conclusion with regards to the persistence of the Nazi past’s divided memory. See for example Bernd Faulenbach, Annette Leo, Klaus Weberskirch, *Zweierlei Geschichte. Lebensgeschichte und Geschichtsbewußtsein von Arbeitnehmern in West- und Ostdeutschland* (Essen: Klartext, 2000). Nina Leonhard, *Politik- und Geschichtsbewußtsein im Wandel. Die politische Bedeutung der nationalsozialistischen Vergangenheit im Verlauf von drei Generationen in Ost- und Westdeutschland* (Münster: Lit, 2002). Sabine Moller, *Vielfache Vergangenheit. Öffentliche Erinnerungskulturen und Familienerinnerungen an die NS-Zeit in Ostdeutschland* (Tübingen: edition diskord, 2003). And Harald Welzer, Sabine Moeller, Karoline Tschuggnall, “Opa war kein Nazi”: *Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 2002), especially chapter 7: “Die eine und die andere Welt. Das Geschichtsbewußtsein vom Nationalsozialismus im Ost-West-Vergleich,” 162-194. In so far Herf’s conclusion in 1997 that “in the fall of 1990, German political unification arrived and the era of divided memory ended,” was premature. Herf, *Divided Memory*, 366.

<sup>31</sup> See the catalogue of the exhibit *Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht, 1941-1944. Ausstellungskatalog*.

captured German and Austrian soldiers, 20 percent were professional pictures taken by the propaganda division of the Wehrmacht. These photographs of crime scenes, of victims before and after their murder, and of often cheering executors had a shocking effect on the German public.

Entries in the guestbook of the exhibit in Dresden (January 18 until March 1, 1998) reinforce the above conclusion that East Germans indeed had a better knowledge and more empathetic understanding of the crimes on the Eastern Front. Many of the 53,000 visitors who came to see the exhibit within in only six weeks left commentaries to that effect in the guestbook or wrote letters to the organizers. A 60-year old men wrote that “as a former GDR citizen interested in history the exhibit was no surprise to me because I knew about many crimes of the Wehrmacht, for example in Minsk, Serbia and in the Ukraine. But with these pictures showing innocent people before and after their murder, one asks oneself what these people went through. German guilt can never be redeemed.” Another visitor of the same age noted that he knew much already from his history classes in school, yet he disagreed with the “thesis” that this was a “Western exhibit for West Germany:” “My father said very little about the war in the East ... he never spoke about the times in between military operations! ... In so far the silence of the soldiers after this war in both Germanys is comparable.”<sup>32</sup>

Looking back on the public reactions to his exhibit, Hannes Heer, one of the initiators and co-authors, said that he had thought he was producing a West German

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<sup>32</sup> All quoted in Petra Bopp, „Wo sind die Augenzeugen, wo ihre Fotos?,” in Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, ed., *Eine Ausstellung und ihre Folgen. Zur Rezeption der Ausstellung „Vernichtungskrieg. Verbrechen der Wehrmacht 1941 bis 1944* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1999), 198-229, quotes on 199.

exhibit because in his perception the “myth of the clean Wehrmacht” was an exclusively West German phenomenon.<sup>33</sup> Yet, reactions in East German cities proved him wrong. While in West Germany, especially after the exhibit was on display in Munich (February-April 1997), a fierce controversy ensued over the character of the Wehrmacht, the individual “guilt” and “honor” of the German soldiers, and the responsibility of the German army as a whole, East Germans reacted quite differently. The exhibit was indeed perceived as a scandal in the West because it once and for all shattered the “myth of a clean Wehrmacht.”<sup>34</sup> In the East, as the Dresden example shows, the scandal was that many visitors felt the exhibit subtly dismantled the GDR’s antifascist legacy.<sup>35</sup> The exhibit emphasized the individual soldiers’ brutalization and it revealed how little actual justice had been done in the “better Germany” with regards to the crimes of the Wehrmacht. Most visitors who addressed the issue of the GDR’s handling of war crimes ended up defending the SED’s practiced antifascism. One visitor wrote in a letter to the organizers:<sup>36</sup> “I am no *ex post* defender of the former GDR – to the contrary. But the war was always presented as what it was – something terrible. (Whether they acted according

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with the organizer of the exhibit in Dresden, Jens Hommel, November 15, 2006.

<sup>34</sup> The West German debate has been studied extensively by historians, see for example Hamburger Institut für Sozialforschung, ed., *Eine Ausstellung und ihre Folgen*, Heer, “The Difficulty of Ending a War,” and Heribert Prantl, *Wehrmachtsverbrechen. Eine deutsche Kontroverse* (Hamburg: Hoffmann & Campe, 1997). The special East German side of the controversy has not been addressed yet.

<sup>35</sup> Interview with the organizer of the exhibit in Dresden, Jens Hommel, November 15, 2006. Hommel reported that especially during the many concurrent events such as round-table discussions the most controversial issue was the GDR’s (failed) mastering of this past, and the comparison of the two Germany’s handling of the war’s legacies.

<sup>36</sup> The organizers distributed leaflets among the visitors of the exhibit asking them to send in comments, suggestions, and/or personal documents from the war. Hommel reported that old women came to see him and handed him loads of pictures and documents of their deceased husbands, saying „keep it all, I don’t want to see that anymore.“

to this insight is a whole different question).”<sup>37</sup> Thus this legacy was rather praiseworthy, especially compared to the alleged complete failure to confront the Eastern Front crimes in the “post-fascist society in the [old] FRG.”<sup>38</sup>

Yet, some differentiated between the facts the SED “history propaganda” had presented about the criminal warfare in the East, and the unsatisfying answers it gave to the question how this all could have happened. A younger man, twenty years old in 1989, recalled his history lessons in a GDR high school: he had learned much about the criminal orders, and the war of extermination, but “it remained unclear how the population saw fascism, and how the soldiers saw war. The question whether it could happen again did not exist in light of the state-ordered antifascism.”<sup>39</sup> Others felt that after almost ten years after the end of the GDR, the time had come to overcome the SED’s bias for the Soviet Union’s sufferings during World War II – and to finally address Soviet crimes, too.<sup>40</sup>

This brief look into East Germans’ minds after the end of the SED regime underlines the profundity of the impact the political memory of the Eastern Front war had on this part of German society. That the search for a common, in the best sense “legitimate narrative of war” in post-1989 Germany has just begun is vividly manifested in the reactions to the Wehrmacht exhibit. It remains to be seen whether the Eastern Front war

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<sup>37</sup> Letter from a man residing in Dresden, born 1923, served one year at the Eastern Front („from Charkov to Stalingrad“), dated March 6, 1998. In my personal archive.

<sup>38</sup> Entry in the Dresden guestbook dated January 22, 1998. Copy of the guestbook in my personal archive.

<sup>39</sup> Letter dated February 1998, in my personal archive.

<sup>40</sup> See for example a letter with an attached article depicting the Katyn Massacre, dated January 28, 1998. The sender stressed the need to condemn war in all its variations and regardless of who has started it – a recurring theme in many letters and comments reflecting the long-term effects of the SED’s militant pacifism.

will receive an adequate place in the political culture of the “Berlin Republic.” Only a narrative that is able to bear out the ambiguity of Germany’s experience with war and mass death in the twentieth century, to integrate the divided memory of the war among East and West Germans and to accept the “stigma of violence” which will remain ingrained on German memory as a consequence of particularly those heinous crimes committed in the war on the Eastern Front, will make it possible for the victims and survivors of Nazi Germany’s wars to receive the empathetic respect they have thus far largely been denied.

## Glossary

ACC	Allied Control Council
AeO	Working Group of former Officers ( <i>Arbeitsgemeinschaft ehemaliger Offiziere</i> )
BDO	Association of German Officers ( <i>Bund ehemaliger Offiziere</i> )
BND	Federal Secret Service ( <i>Bundesnachrichtendienst</i> )
CDU	Christian-Democratic Union (Christlich-DEmokratische Union)
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CSCE	Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe
DSF	Association for German-Soviet Friendship ( <i>Gesellschaft für Deutsch-Sowjetische Freundschaft</i> )
FDP	Free Democratic Party ( <i>Freie Demokratische Partei</i> )
FHQ	Fuhrer Headquarters ( <i>Führerhauptquartier</i> )
FRG	Federal Republic of Germany ( <i>Bundesrepublik Deutschland</i> )
GDR	German Democratic Republic ( <i>Deutsche Demokratische Republik</i> )
Gestapo	Secret State Police ( <i>Geheime Staatsppolizei</i> )
GST	Society for Sports and Technology ( <i>Gesellschaft für Sport und Technik</i> )
ICD	Information Control Division, U.S. War Department
IfM	Institute for Public Opinion Research ( <i>Institut für Meinungsforschung</i> )
IMT	International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg
KB	Cultural Union for the Democratic Renewal of Germany ( <i>Kulturbund für die demokratische Erneuerung Deutschlands</i> )
KPD	Communist Party of Germany ( <i>Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands</i> )
KVP	Quartered People's Police ( <i>Kasernierte Volkspolizei</i> )
KZ	Concentration Camp ( <i>Konzentrationslager</i> )
MfS	Ministry for State Security ( <i>Ministerium für Staatssicherheit</i> )
NATO	North-Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NDPD	National Democratic Party of Germany ( <i>Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands</i> )
NKFD	National Committee Free Germany ( <i>Nationalkommittee Freies Deutschland</i> )
NS	National Socialism
NVA	National People's Army ( <i>Nationale Volksarmee</i> )
OKW	Supreme Command of the Wehrmacht ( <i>Oberkommando der Wehrmacht</i> )
OMGUS	Office of the Military Government of the United States in Germany
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
Pgs	nominal members of the Nazi Party not accused of any crimes ( <i>Parteigenossen</i> )
SD	Security Service ( <i>Sicherheitsdienst</i> )
SSC	Society for the Study of Soviet Culture ( <i>Gesellschaft zum Studium der Kultur der Sowjetunion</i> )
SED	Socialist Unity Party
SPD	Social Democratic Party of Germany ( <i>Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands</i> )
SS	Protective Squadron ( <i>Schutzstaffel</i> )
SVAG	Soviet Military Administration in Germany
VOKS	All-Union Society for Cultural Ties with Foreign Countries
VP	People's Police ( <i>Volkspolizei</i> )
ZK	Central Committee ( <i>Zentralkommittee</i> )

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- DY 16 - NDPD
- DY 32 - DSF
- DY 27 - KB
- NY 4128 - Nachlaß Ulbricht
- NY 4127 - Nachlaß Norden
- NY 4167 - Nachlaß Honecker
- Bild Y 1- SED Bildarchiv

#### ***BA/MA Freiburg***

- DVW 20 - Arbeitsgemeinschaft ehemaliger Offiziere

#### ***BSTU Berlin***

- HA I - Abwehrarbeit in NVA und Grenztruppen
- HA II - Spionageabwehr
- HA VII - Abwehrarbeit Mdl/DVP
- HA IX - Untersuchungsorgane
- HA X - Internationale Verbindungen
- HA XX - Staatsapparat, Kultur, Kirche, Untergrund
- HA XXII - Terrorabwehr
- ZIAG - Zentrale Auswertungs- und Informationsgruppe
- HA PS/AKG - Hauptabteilung Personenschutz
- ZKG - Zentrale Koordinierungsgruppe Flucht/Übersiedlung
- MfS SED - Kreisleitungen

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