

Vergangenheitsbewältigung und Nationale Identität nach dem Holocaust Essay 2

Heute eröffnen wir ein Denkmal, das an das schlimmste, das entsetzlichste Verbrechen Nazideutschlands erinnert, an den Versuch, ein ganzes Volk zu vernichten. Dieses Denkmal ist den ermordeten Juden Europas gewidmet. [. . .] Es ist nicht, wie manche befürchten, das Ende, der steinerne Schlusspunkt unseres öffentlichen Umgangs mit unserer Nazi-Geschichte. Es überträgt vielmehr diese beunruhigende Erinnerung in das kulturelle Gedächtnis der Deutschen, ohne deren Beunruhigungskraft zu vermindern. (Wolfgang Thierse 2005). Can the *Holocaustmahnmal* serve as both memorial to the Jewish victims of the Holocaust and as a symbol of the new Germany? Examine the extent to which the memorial indicates the emergence of a new culture of memory in post-unification Germany.

The Holocaustmahnmal represents the emergence of a Habermasian approach to history, memory and politics that uses history as the pedagogical foundation of a supposedly self-critical *Lernprozess* communicated by state-mediated cultural memory. This negative understanding of history is used to form the basis of present post-national identity of Germany as a *Rechtsstaat* in an increasingly Europeanised and indeed globalised context. This came after years of intense debate about particular pedagogical interpretations of history and how these inform cultural memory; most notably displayed in the *Historikerstreit*. By taking a negative reading of national history, this emergent approach marks a methodological middle ground that lies somewhere in between the traditional conservative positive reading of national traditions, who's historicism¹ assigns cultural memory a compensatory function² in the uncertainty of modernisation and the positive left-liberal reading of enlightened institutions and universal values as the basis of collective understanding. Although some figures still considered the construction of a self-critical monument a barrier to Germany achieving 'normalcy' in the traditional nationalistic sense³, the

¹ Cf. Berger (1997, p. 3) who defines Historism as the understanding of society on the basis of its historical development.

² Cf. Hermann Lübke (1981, p. 15) assigns history (and memory thereof) a compensatory function in that it provides a historical reference point upon which contemporary identity is based.

³ Exemplified by Martin Walser's (1998) widely lamented Speech where he suggests negative reflection of the past and sovereignty in the present are contradictory.

memorial's construction alludes to a wider shift towards a new formation of German identity based on a self-critical historical understanding. Additionally, the extent to which the *Holocaustmahnmal* can serve as a physical reminder of the centrality of holocaust memory in contemporary German and European identity while also remaining a genuine and respectful memorial to the Jewish victims of the holocaust has been doubted, with questions arising as to whether these two functions may contradict each other.

Collective memory, conveyed through different communicative media and socialisation practices, shape identities, and thus convey a sense of belonging to a group⁴. These memories are vital in the creation of common commitments within democratic societies as 'one has to remember to belong'⁵. Assmann⁶ differentiates between two types of collective memory: Aby Warburg's *cultural memory*, formed by institutionalised cultural objectifications, and Assmann's *communicative memory*: non-institutional transmissions between individuals.

The period between the 1960's and 1990's was characterised by significant shifts in the 'infrastructure and modalities of publicness'⁷ brought about in part by the onslaught of electronic mass media, neo-liberalism, globalism, and later, the collapse of communism and reunification which further entrenched democratic and capitalistic values. Perhaps as a result of these changes, state supporting *Meistererzählungen*⁸ (master narratives) were exhausted, thus undermining a source of state legitimacy in the present. Habermas highlights the lack of not only master historical narratives, but also media to emulate them and shape collective memories:

⁴ Halbwachs in Assmann (2008, p. 109).

⁵ (Assmann, 2008, p. 114).

⁶ (Assmann, 2008, p. 110).

⁷ Eley (2011, p. 555) referring to the Habermasian idea of *Öffentlichkeit*, the 'quality or condition of being public'.

⁸ E.g., Modernist narratives of growth and development in the post war period, later, more virulent anticommunism.

In der späten Moderne gibt es keinen allgemein geteilten Kontext mehr, worin überlieferte symbolische Ausdrucksformen und rituelle Praktiken begründungsfrei kollektive Verbindlichkeiten erzeugen können.⁹

These societal changes are challenging in that they weaken the power of communicative memory and so undermine one source of collective memory. Achieving stability (or *fixity*¹⁰) may only be achieved outside informal everyday memory. The ‘concretion of identity’ is achieved through the derivation of formative and normative impulses from objectivised, organised cultural practices.

Kann sich das kulturelle Gedächtnis einer Nation, das ja nicht mit privater Erinnerung verwechselt werden darf, im diskursiven Medium von Geschichtsschreibung, Literatur und Unterricht nicht allein fortpflanzen ... verlangt es symbolische Darstellung und Ritualisierung.¹¹

In this sense, the holocaust memorial may be seen to represent a form of symbolic, ceremonial communication, a metonym which evokes a memory when it comes into contact with individuals¹². Memorials have long been instrumentalised by the state in this way and used as tools of commemorative communication in service of some collective memory¹³. The memorial landscape provides a ‘naturalising locus’ for contemporary cultural memory in that it attempts to emulate histories prior to those experienced by current generations, the state’s ‘triumphs and martyrs, its ideals and founding myths’ and uses these to disseminate normative values for the present¹⁴.

⁹ (Habermas, 2001a, p. 53).

¹⁰ Cf. Assmann & Czaplicka (1995, p. 127).

¹¹ (Habermas, 2001a, p. 54).

¹² Most individuals will not have their own individual, biographical memories, but instead infer meaning from cultural memory.

¹³ (Young, 2000, p. 95).

¹⁴ (Young, 2000, p. 95).

Although the *Holocaustmahnmal* appears to fit within the memorial landscape in terms of this function within society, it differs in the approach to memory culture it embodies – namely a self-critical, negative reading of history that informs a contemporary *Lernprozess*. The 19th century memorial landscape emulated a ‘cult of sacrifice’ that disseminated a positive reading of national histories most commonly through memorials to war dead. The basis of such monuments can be found in Historism¹⁵, which partially re-emerged during *Historikerstreit* of the 1980s. Changes in wider attitudes towards history¹⁶ and developments in historical approaches necessitated a change in the state’s approach to memorialisation – which led to often reluctant adoption of early memorials which muddled the inclusion of passive and active victims of war¹⁷. With the re-dedication of the *Neue Wache* in Berlin, Helmut Kohl created a national memorial to the ‘*Opfern von Krieg und Gewaltherrschaft*’ which attempted to function as a memorial to Jewish victims of the holocaust, other victim groups and even German perpetrators. By framing this memorial as one to victims of war and tyranny¹⁸ and placing it at the location of the former GDR’s national memorial, the *Neue Wache* took on a politicised role in the context of anticommunism as a self-affirming symbol. The muddling of passive victims of German extermination campaigns with active German perpetrators of these crimes was seen to relativise the holocaust¹⁹ and undermine the memorials function as a memorial.

In contrast, the emergence of a memorial specifically dedicated to the passive victims of the holocaust²⁰ in the *Holocaustmahnmal* is telling of a wider shift in perceptions of

¹⁵ Namely a positive reading of history with the use of traditions to maintain cohesion of identity across time.

¹⁶ An increase in historical interest stemming from both the public sphere (Cf. Lübke’s *Musealisierung unserer kulturellen Umwelt* (Lübke, 1981, p. 7)) and from academic circles in the *Historikerstreit* led to an increased interest in victims of national socialism than in the immediate post war period.

¹⁷ Cf. Koselleck’s use of terms *passive* and *active* in reference to victims of war (Koselleck, 1999, p. 222)

¹⁸ A rebuttal to Stalin’s memorial to the victims of militarism and fascism. (Koselleck, 1999, p. 222).

¹⁹ See (Koselleck, 1999, p. 222) and (Leggewie & Meyer, 2005, p. 302).

²⁰ Though there were many debates regarding which victim groups a new *Holocaustmahnmal* should commemorate, the separation of passive victims from German perpetrators is itself significant in this context.

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victimhood and perpetration and a shift towards a more Habermasian approach to historical memory. Whereas in the 50s and 60s the erection of a memorial dedicated solely to the murdered Jews of Europe would have caused ‘*erbitterten Kontroversen*’ amongst the political elite²¹, by the mid 1980’s there were calls from even the upper echelons of society for more honest memory regarding the inhumanity committed during the third Reich, and more of a focus on the memory of passive victims²². It was not until the 1990’s, however, that calls for a unique memorial for passive, namely Jewish, victim groups began widely circulating in public discourse, with the foundation of the *Förderkreis zur Errichtung eines Denkmals für die ermordeten Juden Europas*. Habermas supports a negative reading of history from which moral lessons may be drawn, which is captured this in his referral to national identity as *gebrochen* [fractured]:

*„Gebrochen“ nur insofern, also diese Verantwortlichkeit den Willen zur Diskontinuierung irreführender Denkweisen in der Kontinuität eigener Überlieferungen bedeutet. Als mithaftende Nachfahren sagen wir das „Nie wieder“ zu uns selbst. Der Bruch in der Fortsetzung unserer tragenden Traditionen ist die Bedingung wiedererlangter Selbstachtung.*²³

Talk of a ‘fracture’ in one’s history and an ability to ‘discontinue’ certain continuities implies an ability to make judgements about the past and then ‘learn from history’. A separation of passive from active victims therefore shows a deeper engagement with victim memory and willingness to ‘learn’. The maxim ‘*Nie wieder*’ takes on an important role in the emerging memory culture of Germany and is relayed periodically in speeches at commemorative events, with the *Holocaustmahnmal* itself interpreted

²¹ (Fichter, 1999, p. 181).

²² Bundespräsident Richard von Weizsäcker called for *Erlösung durch Erinnerung* at the 40th anniversary of the end of the war. Although he did not explicitly call for a unique monument to remember Jewish victims, he presented them as a primary focus of memory and this memory as the primary means to ‘come to terms with’ the past (von Weizsäcker, 1985).

²³ (Habermas, 2001a, p. 49).

as the physical representation of this maxim²⁴ - showing wider alignment to the Habermasian approach.

Critics of the *Holocaustmahnmal* question the efficacy of a self-critical approach to historical *memory* and its 'compulsive' instrumentalization by the state. Volkhard Knigge and Ulrike Jureit question the pedagogical function of collective memory asserted by Halbwachs and later Assmann which form the basis of Habermas' calls to 'learn from history', and also the extent to which memory culture may be influenced by the state. Quoting Peter Novick, Jureit differentiates between *etwas historisch zu verstehen* and *Erinnerung*. While the former requires the distanced study of complex and different historical perspectives resulting in moral ambiguity and is comparable to Knigge's *Geschichtsbewusstsein*²⁵, historical memory necessitates the simplification of any moral ambiguities into a singular perspective²⁶. Knigge perceives an obstacle to the didactic use of historical memory in that politico-moral judgements of history presuppose the ability to judge history, which is supposedly obtained by 'learning from history'²⁷. The result is a rigid form of historical memory based on teleologic, *a priori* moral judgements, much like historicism. This draws a comparison to the dogmatic pedagogy of previous memorial projects that fail to emulate the 'fractured' nature of history. This leads, according to Jureit, to a culture that forgets exactly what it is trying to remember through trite, compulsive remembrance²⁸ in what is nothing more than 'politisch funktionalisierte Pietät'²⁹.

Although it is often claimed that the *Holocaustmahnmal* is primarily the result of a *Bürgerinitiative*³⁰ it is undeniable that the state played a major role in the conception

²⁴ Cf. common themes of 'never again', 'learning from history' and 'reminder for future generations' in (Thierse, 2005) and (Grütters, 2015).

²⁵ Cf. Knigge draws comparison between *Geschichtsbewusstsein* and *Erinnerung* in (Knigge, 2014, pp. 3-4).

²⁶ (Jureit, 2008, p. 95).

²⁷ (Knigge, 2016, p. 5).

²⁸ (Jureit, 2008, p. 95).

²⁹ (Knigge, 2014, p. 3)

³⁰ Thierse (2005) speaks of a '*Initiative von Bürgern aus der Mitte der Gesellschaft*' and (Grütters, 2015) speaks of '*bürgerlichen Engagement*'.

and execution of it, and the shaping of wider memory culture. With its overreaching relationship with remembrance culture, Knigge posits that the state's engagement in *Erinnerungskulturpolitik* partially dissolves the separation between the creation of the *Rahmenbedingungen* of memory culture and its *Inhalt* – a condition for the normal functioning of democratic cultural policy³¹. Young highlights the uniquely problematic 'didactic logic of monuments – with their demagogical rigidity and certainty of history' within the German context, where dogmatic, state sanctioned interpretations of history had been very successfully implemented by two authoritarian regimes in the last century alone³².

In the same way that the commemorative displays at Bitburg, and war anniversaries of the 1980's were criticised as mere self-affirming 'symbolic performances'³³ in service of *the powers that be*³⁴, the attitude of the state towards a *Holocaustmahnmal* has also been criticised as one more concerned with optics than authenticity. Walter Grasskamp is dubious of calls for a central memorial to function as a *Kranzabwurfstelle*³⁵, and function optically in the same way as previous national monuments³⁶. Parallels could perhaps be drawn between the use of ritualised symbolism in relation to German foreign policy aims. Leggewie & Meyer posit that the '*Übernahme historischer Verantwortung*', symbolised by the *Holocaustmahnmal*, allows Chancellor Schröder to take '*in seinen Augen eine neue Rolle in der Weltpolitik*'³⁷. This is reminiscent of Germany's involvement in the 1999 NATO

³¹ (Knigge, 2014, p. 5)

³² (Young, 2000, p. 96)

³³ Leggewie and Meyer speak of Kohls insinuation of German 'normality' (which he uses in reference to the traditional conservative conception of a normal nation state) through symbolic commemorative performances (Leggewie & Meyer, 2005, p. 343)

³⁴ (Eley, 2011, p. 558)

³⁵ A pejorative term Grasskamp employs in relation to criticisms of Daniel Liebeskind's jüdische Museum, which is, cynically, said not to be favoured by the state because of its lack of an optic centre (Grasskamp, 1999, p. 219).

³⁶ Cf. Horst Hoheisel's proposed *Gegendenkmal* which involved destroying the *Brandenburger Tor* to carve out an empty space to symbolise the void left by the murdered Jews. Young (2000, p. 92) identifies the political point in the proposal is that it will of course be rejected owing to the fact that it compromises traditional symbols of identity too much.

³⁷ (Leggewie & Meyer, 2005, p. 347)

operations in Kosovo which, charged with assertions that German involvement was imperative to safeguard human rights, which is partly motivated by holocaust memory³⁸, could be compared cynically with German commitments to the *Westbindung* in the 1980's which are charged with optics from ceremonies such as those named above. The self-affirmation inherent in earlier state-sanctioned approaches to memory culture seems to be ever present.

In the years after reunification there was an increase in Germany's alignment with western allied powers. In what would have been considered out of the question before the fall of the berlin wall³⁹, German chancellors appeared naturally alongside allied powers at commemorative events⁴⁰. This occurred in the context of limited 'cosmopolitanisation'⁴¹ within Europe which brought normative expectations regarding the adoption of holocaust-centric victim memory culture as a mediator of collective identity across the (west of⁴²) the continent. Due to its poignancy in existing memories⁴³ and its ability to convey the negative history from which a liberal democratic Europe would derive its 'mobilisation'⁴⁴, the holocaust memory imperative emerged as an 'important source of state legitimacy and a signature of

³⁸ (Sznajder, 2016, p. 13)

³⁹ Cf. Richard von Weizsäcker „*Wir haben wahrlich keinen Grund, uns am heutigen Tag an Siegesfesten zu beteiligen*“ (1985)

⁴⁰ Leggewie & Meyer (2005, p. 344) speak of a *Zeitenwende* in terms of western alliance post-unification.

⁴¹ Cosmopolitanization is defined by Wolfgang Beck as a 'non-linear, dialectical process in which the universal and particular, the similar and the dissimilar, the global and the local are to be conceived not as cultural polarities, but as interconnected and reciprocally interpenetrating principles' (Beck in Levy, et al., 2011, p. 140) in the European context this involves a weakening but not complete dissolution of ideas of nationhood, with the adoption of 'affirmative but ambivalent perceptions of Europeanness, sceptical narratives about the nation emphasizing injustice and 'perpetratorship', and an increased recognition of the Other' (Levy, et al., 2011, p. 141).

⁴² Cf. issues with asserting holocaust memory as the 'founding myth' of European identity in former soviet states whose histories also include suffering under soviet dictatorship (Leggewie, 2008, p. 23).

⁴³ Ruth Klüger observes that „Alle, die nach Auschwitz in westlichen Ländern leben, haben Auschwitz in ihrer Geschichte“ (Klüger in Assmann, 1999, p. 330)

⁴⁴ Cf. Thierse (1999, p. 9) "Die Erinnerung an die Barbarei nationalsozialistischer Herrschaft... ist eine der wichtigen Ursprungsquellen...für die Mobilisierung jener Kräfte, die die Humanität des gesellschaftlichen Miteinanders verbürgen"

Europeanness⁴⁵. The *Holocaustmahnmal* thus additionally serves as a symbol of German commitment to European integration and aligns Germany with victor powers in the sense that Germany derives contemporary meaning from a negative perception of this past. The adoption of collective identities beyond national borders is a condition of legitimacy for any post national democracy⁴⁶, and so the *Holocaustmahnmal* also helps lay the foundations for future succession to a supranational European power, a goal of Habermas.

Habermas highlights the benefits of victim memory in identity creation in that it forms collective understanding and has the ability to legitimise universalist, democratic values without resorting to the use of national consciousness or Historism. It could also be contrasted with other left-liberal approaches popularised in the 80's such as constitutional patriotism, which call for self-understanding based on universal values alone. Habermas recognises the power of these slightly more particular national attachments as bases of self-understanding, which may indeed be considered 'potential mediators between the individual and the global horizons along which identifications unfold'⁴⁷.

„Mit diesem Wandel im kollektiven Selbstverständnis holt der Universalismus des demokratischen Verfassungsstaates den Partikularismus des mit ihm verschwisterten Nationalbewusstseins ein, indem er dieses gleichsam von innen umstrukturiert. Die Nationen bekommen die postnationale Konstellation auch auf diese Weise zu spüren.“⁴⁸

Despite its obvious implications stretching beyond the physical borders of Germany, Habermas insists that with the erection of the *Holocaustmahnmal* Germans seek only to 'mit uns ins Reine zu kommen' and that they 'erfüllen damit keine Erwartung von

⁴⁵ (Levy, et al., 2011, p. 142)

⁴⁶ (Habermas, 2001b, p. 90)

⁴⁷ (Levy, et al., 2011, p. 140)

⁴⁸ (Habermas, 2001a, p. 57)

Zeitgenossen, sei es innerhalb oder außerhalb Deutschlands⁴⁹. This assertion is key to the functioning of the *Holocaustmahnmal* as a memorial to the Jewish victims of the holocaust, and thereby ironically, it's function as a symbol of an emergent national identity, as it ensures that the motivation of the memorial is genuinely geared towards victim memory⁵⁰. The extent to which Jewish victims are 'over identified' with in service of identity creation is a common theme in critiques of the *Holocaustmahnmal* and victim memory in general⁵¹ and one that is often alluded to but rarely explicitly deal with by supporters of the memorial. Natan Sznaider levels his criticism of victim memory appropriation from the relevant perspective of an increasingly cosmopolitan German national identity which requires one to legitimise oneself both internally and externally.

„All diese Entwicklungen entfernen sich von den jüdischen Opfern des Holocaust, die in dieser kosmopolitischen Perspektive im Namen der „Menschheit“ nochmals geopfert werden. Dieses kosmopolitische Modell ist daher eine radikale christliche Vereinnahmung der jüdischen Katastrophe, die sich aber gleichzeitig als fortschrittlich und frei von ethnischen Bindungen präsentiert.“⁵².


Sznaider directly criticises the use of memory of Jewish suffering as a source of motivation for contemporary identity as yet another usurping of Jewishness. Understanding the *Holocaustmahnmal* as a project of victim memory appropriation, appeals to 'learn from history' that are made in service of identity creation undermine the authenticity of the memorial. Habermas anticipates this criticism by stating that “Das Gedenken an die Opfer [darf] für diese Selbstreferenz nicht einfach

⁴⁹ (Habermas, 2001a, p. 51)

⁵⁰ Cf. other monuments to war victims erected in the Bonn republic. The *Ehrenmal an Den Opfern der Kriege und der Gewaltherrschaft* in Bonn, was criticised for its focus on victims of 'tyranny' and its supposed anti-communist, rather than commemorative motives (Meier, 1999, p. 145)

⁵¹ Cf. Christian Schneiders criticism of the 68er generations *Gegen-identifikation* with Jewish victims in a supposed fantasy of victimhood in (Jureit, 2008, p. 91).

⁵² (Sznaider, 2016, p. 15)


funktionalisiert werden ⁵³ which would seemingly require the focus of the *Holocaustmahnmal* to be victim memory, with the appropriation of this as a basis of collective identity conveniently passed off as a welcome by-product.

In his speech at the dedication of the holocaust memorial in Berlin to the murdered Jews of Europe, President Wolfgang Thierse describes the memorial as a *Denkmal an der Grenze*⁵⁴ in that it represents the very limits of what might be thought possible in a democratic society⁵⁵. According to Thierse, the *Holocaustmahnmal* bridges the gap between *persönliche Erinnerung* and *kollektive Gedächtnis*⁵⁶, which engages the memorial with the formation of cultural memory in a time where communicative memory is weakened, while also bridging the gap between *historisches Wissen* and *Empathie mit den Opfern*⁵⁷, which engages the memorial with the emergent self-critical and victim focussed culture of memory⁵⁸. Thierse's presentation of the memorial almost as an entity in flux, rather than a static monument like those of the past, is common defensive argument; The fact that it serves only to 'articulate the dilemma of Germany's impossible memorial conundrum'⁵⁹ and its ongoing debates, rather than marking a 'Schlusspunkt'⁶⁰, writes off criticisms of the project as part of the process.

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⁵³ (Habermas, 2001a, p. 50)

⁵⁴ (Thierse, 2005)

⁵⁵ Indeed, debates in other perpetrator nations have not been as in depth or productive as these, e.g., Japan (Young, 1999, p. 56)

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Empathy with victims by way of historical memory – by placing the *Holocaustmahnmal* between this and historical understanding, Thierse engages with methodological critiques of the use of historical memory by e.g., Knigge (2014, pp. 3-4)

⁵⁹ (Young, 1999, p. 57).

⁶⁰ (Thierse, 2005).



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