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Understanding Controversies over Memorial Museums: The Case of the Leistikowstraße Memorial Museum, Potsdam

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Abstract

This article analyses the development of a recent and controversial memorial museum project in the German state of Brandenburg (The Leistikowstraße Memorial Museum in Potsdam), which commemorates victims of Soviet occupation after 1945. The article proposes a framework for understanding how conflicts can arise over such institutions, paying attention to the politicization of memory, the professional discourse of historians and museum practitioners, the demands of victims, and institutional factors. It draws on a detailed analysis of the context of the development of this memorial museum in order to understand the eventual outcomes in terms of the presentation of the past at this site.

Understanding Controversies over Memorial Museums: The Case of the Leistikowstraße Memorial Museum, Potsdam

Introduction

This article will analyse the development of a recent memorial museum project in the German state of Brandenburg, which commemorates the suffering of victims of Soviet occupation after 1945. The broader purpose of this analysis, however, will be to consider how conflicts can arise over such institutions and to better understand what is at stake in disputes between museum professionals and those directly affected by the historical events that memorial museums present to the public. The Leistikowstraße Memorial Museum in Potsdam (*Gedenk- und Begegnungsstätte Leistikowstraße Potsdam*), which will be discussed in detail in this article, offers an example of a conflict over the museological strategies employed in the depiction of victims' suffering, which pitted museum professionals against representatives of victim groups. This article will consider the causes of this dispute in the context both of dominant museological discourses among professionals, the demands of victims, and the regional and national political situation that contributed to the development of the controversy. It will also draw on a detailed analysis of the institutional context of the development of this memorial museum in order to understand the eventual outcomes in terms of the presentation of the past at this site. This approach will offer a framework for understanding the development of memorial museums and the controversies surrounding them that will be applicable in other contexts, while also paying close attention to the specificities of the case of Brandenburg, and of Germany more widely.

Post-Communist Memorial Museums in Germany

This discussion of the case of the Leistikowstraße Memorial Museum needs to be understood against the wider context of efforts to commemorate the victims of Soviet occupation and state socialism in East Germany since the fall of the state socialist regime in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1989. Following the collapse of the GDR, Germany underwent a reassessment both of its own national history and of the memorial sites through which that history was to be conveyed to future generations. On the territory of the former GDR in particular, important memorial sites relating to National Socialism, such as the concentration camps at Sachsenhausen and Buchenwald, required overhauling in order to replace exhibitions that had been installed with the intention of propagating the discourse of antifascism, which had been a key ideological legitimization of the state socialist regime.¹ In addition, the federal government increasingly took responsibility for part-funding memorial sites relating to the Soviet occupation and the GDR regime, thereby creating new federal competencies in an area of policy that had previously been devolved to the regions as a cultural matter. The criteria for receipt of federal funding, which is normally given in conjunction with funding from regional government, are set out in the Federal Memorial Concept (1999 and 2008), which stresses both the national importance of those memorials to be funded but also the “authenticity of the site”.²

As Paul Williams has argued, the “memorial museum”, which both commemorates the victims of oppression and provides historical information to the visitor, has emerged as an important global cultural phenomenon in the last 30 years or so. Although the German term *Gedenkstätte* is sometimes translated as “memorial museum”, as in the German-instigated Committee on Memorial Museums within the International Museums Association, the international examples that Williams gives include one site with no historical connection to the atrocities it addresses, namely the Simon Wiesenthal Centre Beit-Hashoah-Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles.³ In Germany, the term *Gedenkstätte* is reserved for memorial

museums that are site-specific, and this specificity of location and the use of original buildings in constructing the memorial museum is a key source of potential conflict between the various stakeholders.

Much of the academic research on such conflicts in the German context has tended to adopt a normative approach, in which the eventual move to a historicizing presentation of sites of persecution is affirmed as appropriate to a democratic culture. This historicizing approach is understood as providing the visitor with multiple perspectives on the site and presenting them with a range of evidence in such a way as to downplay emotional responses and encourage independent judgement. In relation to the memorial at the former prison at Bautzen in Saxony that was once run by the Ministry for State Security (or *Stasi*), for instance, Marcel Thomas has argued that the resolution of the conflict between victim groups and museum professionals in favour of an approach that contextualizes the experiences of the former and presents those experiences in a mediated and objective fashion is a positive development, because it allows visitors to enter into a dialogue with the site that is personal and individual, rather than being overwhelmed by the presentation of the suffering of the former victims.⁴

Carola S. Rudnik makes a similar argument in relation to the Bautzen prison site, and in relation to memorial museums that commemorate the victims of the GDR regime more widely, when she argues that historians should work towards the creation of conditions for a public engagement with such sites that is characterized by visitors taking responsibility for their own interpretation of history based on the material presented. This involves the communication of multiple viewpoints, not just those of the victims, and excludes any emotionally overwhelming communication of their experience.⁵ Rudnik's study, which is the most substantial available in terms of its coverage of the various memorial museums on the subject of communist rule that have developed in Germany since 1989, also reads the conflict between victim groups and museum professionals at these sites in ideological terms. Where victims have too much of a say in the presentation of these sites, according to Rudnik's argument, we see the dominance of a conservative view of history in which the National Socialist and state socialist dictatorships are presented as equivalent, whereas left-liberal historians and museum professionals tend to argue for a more open, historicized presentation, which allows the visitor to reach their own conclusions.⁶ While it is undeniable that such political affiliations can correlate with preferences in terms of the presentation of memorial museums, Rudnik's approach tends to frame the conflict between victim groups, on the one hand, and historians and museum professionals, on the other, as motivated by "diametrically opposed value systems", and thus also in moral terms, even while emphasizing the need for a supposedly objective and apolitical presentation of the past.⁷

In this article, I intend to move away from a normative interpretation that sees the dominance of one particular model for presenting the past in memorial museums as the ideal outcome of conflicts between victims and historians. Instead, I will follow Monika Nalepa's proposal that the study of transitional justice has not focused adequately on the reasons for the implementation of particular policies for memory at particular points in time.⁸ As measures of transitional justice, which seek to redress the historical record and offer recognition to the victims, memorial museums of the kind to be investigated here provide one important example of such policy. My approach will not seek to identify what *should* happen at memorial museum sites, justified in political or moral terms, but will instead demonstrate how memorial museums themselves are the products of the interaction of a number of social forces, specific to a particular context. Specifically, the analysis will give an account of the differing agendas of victim groups, historians and museum professionals, and politicians who became involved in the dispute over the Leistikowstraße memorial museum.

Memory and the Politics in Brandenburg

In order to analyse the particular role of politicians in relation to our case study, it is necessary to understand the context of the state of Brandenburg and its attempts to come to terms with the legacies of Soviet occupation and state socialism in the GDR. Brandenburg is unusual among the new federal states on the former territory of the GDR, in that it has been governed continuously by the Social Democratic Party (SPD) since the first democratic regional elections were held in 1990. Until 2002 the post of Minister President was held by Manfred Stolpe, who had formerly held an important administrative office within the East German Evangelical Church. Stolpe was a controversial figure whose alleged contacts to the *Stasi* were investigated by a parliamentary committee in the early 1990s, and who never shook off the accusation that his conversations with the East German security services, which he did not deny, amounted to having worked for them as an agent. Stolpe governed Brandenburg in coalitions of various compositions, the first of which collapsed in 1994 as members of former GDR opposition groups in the regional parliament continued to press the issue of Stolpe's alleged *Stasi* contacts.⁹ From the very beginning, then, it was clear that the question of coming to terms with the GDR past in Brandenburg would be intimately connect to issues of coalition politics, that is to say of power.

Despite the accusations against him, Stolpe was nevertheless able to continue in power, in fact increasing his public support and securing an absolute parliamentary majority in the 1994 elections. He remained Minister President of the state of Brandenburg until 2002, when he became a Federal Minister. His replacement, Matthias Platzeck, formed a grand coalition with the Christian Democrats (CDU) after elections in 2004. As was frequently the case in the eastern federal states in the 1990s and 2000s, the only alternative to such a grand coalition was in fact a coalition between the SPD and the successor to the GDR's ruling communist party, the post-communist Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), known from 2007 as Die Linke (The Left). The CDU therefore had a strong electoral interest in maintaining the SPD's commitment to refuse coalitions with Die Linke, a commitment that became considerably weaker over time in other federal states, but was maintained in Brandenburg until 2009.

As part of a grand coalition of SPD and CDU from 2004 until 2009, the Christian Democrats sought to push for a politics of remembering the GDR that tended to stress the totalitarian nature of the regime and the necessity of commemorating its victims. At times, the tendency of Jörg Schönbohm, Minister of the Interior and the CDU's leader in the Brandenburg cabinet, to draw parallels between the GDR regime and the National Socialist dictatorship placed the coalition under strain. For example, in April 2006, Schönbohm caused a scandal when he spoke at a commemoration for the liberation of Sachsenhausen concentration camp and reminded his audience of those who had been detained there by Soviet occupying forces from 1945.¹⁰ Prominent CDU parliamentarians from Brandenburg were also signatories in October 2007 of the "Cottbus Declaration", which called upon the state-funded Foundation for Memorial Museums in Brandenburg to do more to commemorate the suffering of the victims of the GDR regime. Such ideas clearly fed into the coalition's new policy on remembrance, which came into force in 2009, and which encompassed the years 1933-1990, while placing particular emphasis on remembering the GDR as a dictatorship.¹¹

The Christian Democrat focus on improving the process of coming to terms with the GDR regime in Brandenburg was part of a wider attempt by the CDU in the eastern federal states and at the federal level to delegitimize Die Linke as potential coalition partners of the SPD, as can be seen, for example, in policy documents such as the CDU's statement on the future of eastern Germany from 2008, which repeatedly emphasizes the need to remember the crimes of state socialism, while at the same time highlighting the Christian Democrats' "fight against all kinds of socialist experiment" and specifically against Die Linke, which has "learned

nothing from history”. Here Die Linke are portrayed as “the direct inheritors of the East German communist party’s repression and spying”, promoting a view of history whose acceptance among the wider population would make it possible for them to launch an attempt to overthrow the Federal Republic’s democratic order.¹²

The Brandenburg CDU’s strategy of attempting to make Die Linke too toxic for any future coalition with the SPD failed, however, to prevent just such a coalition emerging in the autumn of 2009. There are arguably two reasons why the CDU’s strategy of mobilizing the state socialist past in order to emphasize its status as preferred coalition partner did not succeed. Firstly, it proved difficult to present the CDU in Brandenburg as untainted by involvement in the GDR regime. For instance, the CDU deputy Minister President Ulrich Junghanns was shown to have had a senior role in one of the regime-loyal “block parties” in the GDR.¹³ Put on the defensive, Schönbohm admitted that his party would have to do more in order to be open about some members’ activities in the GDR, while at the same time attacking Die Linke for using cases such as that of Junghanns to deflect attention from their own implication in the GDR regime.¹⁴ Secondly, as Platzeck noted on establishing his coalition with Die Linke in 2009, the match between the SPD and Die Linke in terms of policy was simply easier to bridge than with the CDU, which had been a more fractious coalition partner. Furthermore, a continued partnership with the CDU, which had decreased its share of the vote in the election, would have resulted in a coalition with a majority arguably too slim to be workable.¹⁵

In the run-up to the vote, Platzeck had already indicated very strongly that he took a relaxed view of coalition with Die Linke, even if some of its representatives had admitted to being *Stasi* informants before unification. Where individuals had been honest about their involvement and made good on their commitment to democracy, then there was no bar to their involvement in government.¹⁶ Platzeck maintained this position once the coalition with Die Linke was formed, writing an opinion piece for the weekly national magazine *Der Spiegel* that presented the inclusion of the former supporters of the GDR regime as evidence of Brandenburg’s successful democratization in the post-unification period, drawing parallels with the integration of former supporters of National Socialism in post-war West Germany.¹⁷ His new coalition, however, was soon beset by allegations that further members of the parliament representing Die Linke had been informers for the *Stasi*.¹⁸

Stephan Hilsberg, a former GDR opposition activist and later a member of the Federal Parliament for the SPD, has argued that Brandenburg’s reluctance to address the involvement of elites in the previous regime was relatively uncontroversial until the SPD-Linke coalition, because members of all parties were potentially implicated.¹⁹ In light of the new coalition, however, the involvement of members of Die Linke with the *Stasi* became newly politicizable, especially for the Christian Democrats, who not only saw themselves shut out of power, but who also numbered among their members of parliament individuals who identified strongly with the cause of those persecuted in the GDR. Chief among these was deputy leader of the CDU in the Brandenburg parliament, and regional party chairman, Dieter Dombrowski, a former GDR political prisoner who arrived at the inaugural session of the new parliament in November 2009 wearing prison uniform to protest against the SPD-Linke coalition.

The level of threat to the 2009 coalition perceived by Platzeck is reflected in a number of measures subsequently undertaken in order to demonstrate the coalition’s commitment to addressing the GDR past and make good the failure to do so under Stolpe in the 1990s. Whereas other federal states in the east had their own officials responsible for directing research into the archives left behind by the *Stasi*, Brandenburg had always refused to create such a post. Legislation to bring this office into being had been already been passed in June of 2009, after much pressure from the CDU, but no appointment had been made. This was made good in mid-December 2009, soon after the new coalition took power, with the appointment of former GDR dissident Ulrike Poppe.

In addition, all members of the new SPD-Linke coalition were subjected to a renewed check for any involvement with the *Stasi*, with the embarrassing outcome that four individuals in the parliamentary group of Die Linke who had not previously volunteered this information were discovered to have been informants, including the Vice-President of the new parliament, who was forced to resign.²⁰ These revelations allowed the opposition parties to call on Platzeck to dissolve his coalition with Die Linke, to which a new grand coalition with the CDU would have been the only alternative.²¹

By January 2010, a new parliamentary commission of inquiry (*Enquetekommission*) had been set up, a move forced by the opposition parties, who had a sufficiently large number of seats in the parliament to push this measure through.²² The commission's remit was to analyse Brandenburg's coming to terms with the GDR regime in a number of spheres, including politics and the media. The conduct of the inquiry was controversial, however, in that the SPD in particular saw it as an attempt by the opposition, and especially the CDU, to criticize Stolpe's administration and the SPD's unwillingness to address the GDR past while in power. There were repeated clashes between SPD members of the commission and historians whose reports were presented to it, while Platzeck himself warned that the commission was becoming more about "getting even than coming to terms with the past".²³ A number of these experts resigned, citing the attitude of SPD members and the apparent unwillingness of officials to cooperate with their requests for information.²⁴

Although the opposition parties did not succeed in ending the SPD-Linke coalition by mobilizing the politics of memory, it is nevertheless clear that they did manage to exploit this issue successfully enough for the early months of the new coalition to be consumed with *Stasi*-related allegations. It was certainly difficult for the new government to begin bringing forward policy when it was unclear whether further revelations would emerge about individuals in Die Linke or about the Brandenburg SPD's approach to dealing with the past since 1990. One journalist described the coalition as being "immobilized by shock".²⁵ The long-winded process of the commission of inquiry also proved to be an unwelcome distraction, making it difficult for the SPD to move on from the question of the GDR past and its relationship to it.

In summary, in the case of Brandenburg, we can see clear links between the dynamics of coalition politics and the politicization of coming to terms with the past. While in power, the Christian Democrats had pressed the SPD to focus more clearly on the politics of memory in relation to the GDR, which had a potentially de-legitimizing effect on their rivals for coalition partnership, Die Linke. Once they had lost power, the Christian Democrats could continue to put the SPD under pressure over this issue and undermine their coalition choice. This politicization of memory in the Brandenburg case would also have direct consequences for the ways in which the political system responded to conflicts around the development of the Leistikowstraße memorial museum.

The Role of Museum Professionals and Historians

As Patrizia Violi has pointed out, the notion of authenticity in relation to memorial museums is a paradoxical one. Despite the inherent "indexicality" of the site itself, in which the materiality of the place acts as a kind of witness to the atrocities committed there, it is nevertheless necessary to present the site in such a way that this indexicality can be experienced and understood by visitors. In other words, the link between the place and particular events in its past is not in fact naturally given, but has to be constructed by the exhibition that is created there.²⁶ The task of creating such exhibitions often falls to museum professionals who, in the German context, are often also trained historians.

The Federal Memorial Concept requires of funded memorial museums that they develop a plan for the site that is adequate to the aims set out by the funder, which include the

need to make the public aware of the importance of human dignity, freedom and the basic principles of Germany's democratic system.²⁷ However, a close reading of the debates that have taken place among historians and museum professionals since German unification reveals the extent to which the search for appropriate methods of presentation has been closely bound up with the imperative to maintain autonomy for those charged with the creation of memorial museums. This imperative relates not only to the memorial sites being set up to commemorate repression in the GDR, but is rather rooted in the history of memorial museums for the victims of National Socialist in West Germany before unification.

In the years immediately following the Second World War, it was common for sites relating to National Socialist persecution to be used for other purposes or to be abandoned altogether. It was frequently the activism of victims themselves that led to the setting up of memorials in the face of this indifference. While these memorials contained exhibitions in some cases, such as at Dachau or Bergen-Belsen, they were strongly focused on portraying the suffering of victims and the barbarity of Nazi perpetrators, providing relatively little historical context, which was arguably unnecessary so close to the events themselves.²⁸ In the 1970s and 1980s, a broadly left-wing culture of civil society engagement emerged in West Germany and West Berlin, which led to an increased involvement of non-victims in commemoration of the Holocaust and the concentration camp system, including but not limited to the rediscovery of previously ignored sites of persecution. Despite the presence of non-victims as activists, exhibitions were nevertheless developed in close cooperation with victims and foregrounded their testimonies. However, since the late 1980s, many of these new memorial museum practitioners, some of whom became increasingly professionalized through the completion of postgraduate qualifications, began to debate existing practices in terms of the presentation of sites of persecution through exhibitions.²⁹ Following unification, historians and museum professionals who either work at memorial museums sites benefiting from new forms of state funding, or who take a strong interest in the politics of memory, have increasingly stressed the need for a new approach to sites of National Socialist persecution and to sites of political oppression in the GDR; an approach that moves away from an emphasis on victim suffering at the expense of historical context.

A key theme of this new discourse on memorial museums among this group of museum professionals and historians is the alleged shift in perspective brought about by the deaths of many witnesses to the Holocaust. One of the most prominent representatives of this argument has been Volker Knigge, the historian in charge of the overhaul of a series of memorials located at Buchenwald, including the concentration camp memorial. Knigge has been particularly active in promoting an approach that underlines the disappearance of the victims of National Socialism and their "power of veto" over presentations of concentration camp sites which place their suffering in a broader historical context.³⁰ Knigge presents this generational change as an opportunity to overcome "the self-satisfaction of memory, [...] its lack of connection with historical research and methodologically sound reasoning, its transformation into unquestioned historical revelation".³¹ The renowned historian of the National Socialist period, Norbert Frei, supports Knigge's assertions in a contribution to a book they co-edited, emphasizing that the historiography of Nazi Germany can become a "normal" object of investigation for researchers now that the victims' "veto" is becoming less and less pronounced.³² Equally, Harald Welzer, who has researched extensively on National Socialism and memory, suggests that the "disappearance of the witnesses is [...] an opportunity to find new ways of using history and memory".³³

This discussion of the limitations that the living presence of witnesses places on the historian is also taken up by historian Martin Sabrow. While not directly involved in the management of memorial sites, Sabrow has been a significant voice in debates around memory of the GDR, and was appointed, for example, to lead a commission that discussed the revised

version of the Federal Memorial Concept in 2006.³⁴ In this context and elsewhere, Sabrow has pleaded strongly for a historicization of the state socialist past, in the name of offering a multi-perspectival account of history, including experiences of normality and everyday life alongside the experiences of victims of state oppression. In a contribution to a volume on the role of the historical witness published in 2012, which he edited with Frei, Sabrow emphasizes the dangers for critical interpretation of the past represented by the influence of historical witnesses, who have allegedly contributed to the historian's loss of authority.³⁵

This discussion has taken place not only in academic publications, but also in articles published in the *Gedenkstättenrundbrief* (Memorial Museums Newsletter) produced by the Topography of Terror memorial museum in Berlin on behalf of the Forum of Memorial Museums (*Gedenkstättenforum*), a professional organisation set up to exchange ideas among practitioners engaged at memorial museum sites in Germany, with a strong emphasis on memorials to National Socialist persecution. A number of Knigge's texts have appeared there, and several authors have used its pages to emphasize a shift away from the design of memorial museums around the emotionally overpowering depiction of the horrors perpetrated on victims, and towards a presentation of history that has much in common with that in other historical museums. As early as 1992, Wulff E. Brebeck, a historian working in a local museum in Paderborn, was advocating a "conscious musealization" of such sites, in which the element of "accusation" against the perpetrators, which emphasized the suffering of the victims, would be replaced with the use of objects and documents that communicate the historical facts.³⁶

Such professional discourse reflects a perception that, as Detlef Hoffmann observes, the dividing line between museums, with their classical functions of collecting, researching and displaying objects, and that of memorial museums with their primarily commemorative function, is becoming eroded as the reality of National Socialist persecution becomes both more widely accepted and more historically distant as the last living victims pass away.³⁷ This development is further stressed in a doctoral dissertation written by Thomas Lutz, director of the Topography of Terror memorial site and editor of the *Gedenkstättenrundbrief*. Based on interviews with his colleagues at other memorial museums, Lutz notes that, while there is a tension between the need to honour the suffering of victims and the need to "convey historical knowledge, the interpretation of which is not dictated to the visitor",³⁸ there is a strong tendency among professionals responsible for memorial museums to avoid direct representations of crimes committed against victims (e.g. through photographic evidence). This preference, Lutz argues, avoids overwhelming the visitor in a way that would not enlighten, but would only provoke emotion.³⁹

Since unification, and especially since the turn of the century, we can therefore observe among historians directly or indirectly involved with the creation and management of memorial museums a discourse on professionalization in which emphasis is placed on appropriate methodologies for the presentation of traumatic pasts. Such methodologies focus on the explanation of historical context, the presentation of material and documentary evidence underpinned by academically respectable research, and the indirect presentation of human suffering. At the centre of this emerging model of the memorial museum in Germany is a conception of the autonomous visitor who is allowed to confront the historical evidence provided by professionals and reach their own conclusions. The historians and museum professionals involved in these debates no longer conceive of the memorial museum as a place where the visitor will be primarily shocked by the experiences of the victims of persecution.

In constructing such a new approach to these sites, and to the role of the witness in public understandings of history more widely, historians and museum professionals position themselves as having access to a set of methodological approaches that the victims themselves, who only have their own experience to draw on and who are, in general, not historically trained, are unfamiliar with. This discursive demarcation between appropriate and inappropriate

approaches to presenting traumatic pasts in memorial museums is therefore also an attempt to establish a demarcation between who is and who is not allowed to influence that presentation. This discourse explicitly resists the politicization of such methodologies noted by Carola Rudnik, who is herself a historian previously employed at the Sachsenhausen concentration camp memorial and who is now a member of staff at the memorial for victims of National Socialist “euthansia” programmes in Lüneburg. In other words, the influence of the political system on the presentation of the past in memorial museums is rejected in favour of a set of allegedly apolitical methodologies.⁴⁰ Equally, as noted in the arguments these historians present about the end of the victims’ “veto”, the discourse of professionalization implicitly excludes victims from direct influence over the presentation of memorial museums, or at least gives museum professionals the final right to decide which presentation of victims’ experience is methodologically appropriate. As Tiffany Jenkins has observed in another context, such debates over appropriate methodologies among those responsible for museums of all kinds are simultaneously processes of establishing professional authority. By drawing on discourse that presents itself as informed by an objective, professional methodology, historians and museum professionals seek to draw a line between those qualified to make decisions about the presentation of history and those who are not.⁴¹

The Conflict between Museum Professionals and Victims over the Leistikowstraße Memorial Museum

Such attempts at demarcation were at the heart of the conflict between victim groups and museum professionals and historians over the memorial at the former Soviet remand prison at Leistikowstraße in Potsdam. Built in 1916 by a Christian charitable organisation the *Evangelisch-Kirchliche Hilfsverein* (EKH), the building in which the memorial museum is housed today was part of a wealthy suburb near the centre of Potsdam that was requisitioned and walled off by the Soviet occupying forces in 1945. The Red Army continued to occupy the area until 1994, when its troops withdrew and the buildings, for which the Soviets had paid rent, were returned to the original owners or their heirs. The building at Leistikowstraße 1 was returned to the EKH in 1994. Subsequently, the site was visited by some of those who had been held there in the immediate post-war period by Soviet counter-intelligence and who were then sentenced to long prison terms in the Soviet Zone of occupation or who had been deported to labour camps in the Soviet Union.⁴² In cooperation with the German chapter of the Russian human rights organisation MEMORIAL, the EKH allowed the building to be used from 1997 for an exhibition detailing the fates of those who had been imprisoned there, which was revised in 2000 and then ran until 2005. In 2003, an association was founded which included former inmates and others interested in the preservation of the building and its use as a memorial museum, the *Verein Gedenk- und Begegnungsstätte Ehemaliges KGB-Gefängnis Potsdam e. V.* Nevertheless, the site remained the property of the EKH, which ran a competition for the renovation of the buildings and the construction of a visitor centre in 2006. The EKH received funds from the Ministry for Culture in Brandenburg and also from the federal government. This state funding extended to the creation of a new foundation in December, with the task of creating a permanent exhibition at Leistikowstraße and managing the site. During the creation of a new exhibition from 2009, the main building was closed, although tours were made available at weekends. It was not until April 2012 that the completed exhibition opened.⁴³

In the years during which the memorial was closed for the preparation of the new permanent exhibition, conflict developed between, on the one hand, the representatives of the *Verein*, whose members were frequently also former victims, and other victim groups, on the one hand, and, on the other, the historian in charge of the new memorial museum, Ines Reich, and her team. The foundation set up in 2008 was not independent, but rather a subsidiary of the

Brandenburg Foundation of Memorial Museums, which manages other sites co-funded by the regional and federal government. Reich had been a colleague of the head of the Brandenburg Foundation, Günter Morsch, working at the concentration camp memorial at Sachsenhausen since 1997.⁴⁴ As Peter Jochen Winters has observed, Morsch “represents a modern concept of memory politics, which understands [...] memorial museums as open sites of historical learning”, placing him within that discourse of professionalization and historicization already discussed in relation to contemporary historians and museum professionals involved with memorial sites.⁴⁵ As will become clear from an analysis of the new permanent exhibition at Leistikowstraße, Reich’s team’s presentation of this memorial museum was in line with such an approach, with Reich herself defining the site primarily as “a modern historical museum” as opposed to “a memorial”.⁴⁶

The original exhibition created by MEMORIAL, on the other hand, relied very heavily on witness testimony and foregrounded the experience of victims. This was possibly due to practical constraints. Unlike sites associated with the GDR, the documentary evidence on the use of Leistikowstraße 1 by the Soviet occupying forces was held in archives in the Russian Federation, not locally, and access was difficult not only in terms of resources to travel to these archives, but also in terms of the willingness of the Russian authorities to cooperate in the mid-1990s. Also, the volunteers involved in the MEMORIAL exhibition did not necessarily have training as historians or museum professionals.⁴⁷ The better-funded new exhibition, however, was able to work in cooperation with the State Archive of the Russian Federation using staff who were trained historians.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, the decision of MEMORIAL to base their exhibition primarily on oral history interviews (28 German prisoners and 6 Soviet prisoners), was arguably more than a practical necessity.

Beginning with an overview of the structures of the various Soviet agencies connected with the site and the practices in terms of arrest, interrogation and conviction of victims, the exhibition concentrated strongly on the experiences of physical and mental discomfort of those imprisoned. So, for example, direct quotations from interviews with witnesses on display boards emphasized the appalling nature of the conditions under which prisoners were held.⁴⁹

Without any possibility of cleaning ourselves or receiving necessary medical help, we vegetated like outcasts, [...] almost eaten alive by ticks and lice that left behind terrible wounds, we were literally rotting alive. (Heinz Schwollius)

Similarly, former prisoner Edith Wierschin describes the sight of another inmate who was being held in solitary confinement, in a text that was used twice in the exhibition:

They opened the door, she was lying curled up like a snail on the floor. She’d maybe been in there about four weeks, or who knows how long, in her own faeces, just in a pair of boots and a pair of trousers or maybe a slip.

The remainder of the exhibition focused on the experiences of the former prisoners after their incarceration at Leistikowstraße, whether they served out prison terms in the Soviet Zone of Occupation and the GDR, or whether they were deported to work camps in the Soviet Union. Their lives after release, including the traumatic after-effects of their treatment, were also key features of the narrative.

The exhibition contained panels giving full biographies of all of the witnesses, some of whom had died before the setting-up of the exhibition, but who had left behind autobiographical accounts. These biographies were displayed not only with a curriculum vita, but also with selected quotations detailing their experiences and their feelings about those experiences. For example, the biography of Gerhard Penzel, who spent five years in a work

camp in Workuta in the Soviet Union, is accompanied by a quotation in which he talks about the lack of sympathy he encountered after his release to the Federal Republic in 1955:

What are you going to do? The people here can't understand it, they can't imagine what it was like, to get 25 years for nothing. They just say to themselves, "there's no smoke without fire, is there?"

The original MEMORIAL exhibition, while providing some historical background in terms of the working methods of the Soviet authorities, did so very much in the context of retelling the life experiences of those interviewed for the project, and the narrative of the exhibition followed those life stories from the point of arrest, to detention and questioning, sentencing, punishment and life after release. Its clear purpose was to preserve these memories, and the use of direct quotation, often about traumatizing and degrading experiences, assumes the historical validity of such accounts without recourse to corroborating documentary evidence. This is not to claim that the reminiscences of the victims are not accurate (although they may not be in some respects), but rather to point out that the approach taken in the MEMORIAL exhibition assumes that such testimonies speak for themselves as evidence of a typical experience. As the introductory text to the exhibition put it, in fact, "[t]hese are the fates of individuals. Yet they are exemplary representatives of the fates of hundreds or even thousands of prisoners."

From 2009, however, Ines Reich and her team followed a very clear policy of re-orienting the planned exhibition away from this victim-centred approach and towards a historicizing methodology of the kind already discussed above. First of all, the closure of the building restricted access of the victims to the site and there were complaints that the tours that were offered at weekends were conducted not by contemporary witnesses or others associated with the *Verein* or MEMORIAL, but by local students.⁵⁰ As the new exhibition was developed, the memorial museum's advisory committee, which did include victim representatives and members of the original *Verein*, pointed to what they regarded as insufficiencies in the proposed presentation of the site, criticisms that fell under three broad headings.

Firstly, victims questioned the way in which the physical substance of the building would be presented in the new memorial museum. For example, because of regulations for buildings to be made accessible to the public, it was necessary to install lighting pointing to emergency escape routes. Particularly in the context of the display of former cells, remembered by former inmates as dark and oppressive, there were complaints that this failed to communicate the sense of fear and the physical suffering experienced by victims.⁵¹

Secondly, it was reported that both victims and non-victim members of the advisory committee were concerned that the texts being written for the new exhibition adopted a language that was too neutral in the sense of failing to make clear the injustice of the situation experienced by victims. According to the leader of the *Verein*, for example, a former inmate was referred to as having been shot for "spying", without making clear that this charge was one frequently made by Soviet counter-intelligence on flimsy or even non-existent evidence.⁵² A spokesman for the victims who was a member of the advisory committee stated that they had demanded four re-writes of texts for the exhibition, although one blogger reported that, during a public discussion of the new exhibition, Reich had denied that texts had been revised.⁵³

Thirdly, by far the most significant complaint levelled against the new exhibition was that, in contradistinction to the MEMORIAL exhibition, it no longer focused solely on those unjustly imprisoned at Leistikowstraße. The new exhibition devotes significantly more attention to the workings of Soviet counter-intelligence operations than was previously the case. Instead of focusing exclusively on individuals against whom barely credible charges had been brought, the new exhibition shows a more rounded picture of the work of Soviet security personnel. This can be seen, for example, in the documentation around the case of Rafail

Goldfarb, an interpreter who had worked for Soviet authorities at Leistikowstraße before defecting to the West, where he provided information on Soviet practices to the CIC, forerunner of the CIA.⁵⁴ Although the accompanying text stresses that it is impossible to say whether any of the cases detailed by Goldfarb involved individuals guilty of the charges against them, given the use of interrogation techniques to force confessions, the documentation of these individuals' fates certainly leaves open the possibility that at least some of the punishments were not without justification. For example, in the case of the policeman Max Porth, accused of war crimes in present-day Belarus, the exhibition text reports the following:

Max Porth was a military policeman in local command 653, which was part of Army Group Central in White Russia. The involvement of these commands in anti-Semitic mass murders is historically documented. For the Soviets, it was enough that Max Porth had been a military policeman to prove that he was personally responsible.⁵⁵

Equally, in the case of Jakow and Jagwida Litwinenko, two Soviet citizens who had tried to leave the Soviet Zone in 1948 for the West and who were sentenced to terms in labour camps for allegedly offering US security services information, the question of whether the pair actually intended to offer their services as spies to get a better start in the West, or whether they were simply the victims of "Soviet security paranoia" is presented as undecided on the basis of the historical evidence.⁵⁶

Elsewhere in the exhibition, details of individual prisoners are included for cases in which an involvement with the crimes of National Socialism is not a far-fetched claim, contrasting sharply with the fates of young inmates who were accused of belonging to pro-Nazi "Werwolf" groups on largely invented evidence. For instance, in the case of Heinrich Heindt, a recidivist criminal imprisoned in the National Socialist concentration camps at Buchenwald and Ravensbrück, the exhibition cites Konrad Finkelmeier's book *Die braune Apokalypse* (The Brown Apocalypse, 1947) as evidence of Heindt's implication in National Socialist crimes:

Former concentration camp inmates such as Konrad Finkelmeier remember Heinrich Heindt as a corrupt and dangerous camp functionary, who spied on other prisoners for the "Political Department" and the Camp Commandant. His reports on others led to the most serious punishments and in some cases meant death.⁵⁷

Similarly, the case of engineer Franz Thiel, who was executed for National Socialist crimes, is accompanied by evidence that the factory he was responsible for increased its number of forced labourers from around 1,000 to over 3,000 during his tenure from 1941 to 1942. By presenting these cases alongside those more easily classifiable as innocent victims of Soviet paranoia, the exhibition tends to imply that, while their methods are to be condemned, there were some cases in which the Soviets might have had reasonable grounds to pursue individuals, particularly those linked to the National Socialist regime.

Although testimony by former prisoners, including some who featured in the MEMORIAL exhibition, is incorporated into the various sections of the exhibition alongside other evidence, the relative space given over specifically to the experience of imprisonment is comparatively limited. In the official catalogue, it is only in relation to the conditions of imprisonment ("Haftbedingungen") that the victims are foregrounded as the primary source of historical evidence.⁵⁸ In the memorial museum itself, the cells in the basement contain video installations of a number of former prisoners whose testimony on various subjects can be listened to at the touch of a button by visitors. Here twelve former prisoners comment on specific aspects of their imprisonment, divided into 30 individual videos.⁵⁹ This separation of victim testimonies from the wider historical exhibition, however, strongly implies that it is only

the experience of imprisonment and interrogation itself (or the memory of it) to which the victims can testify. In the case of the victim biographies shown in vitrines on the other floors, these do occasionally include excerpts from memoirs by the subjects in question, but generally rely on a range of documents and do not systematically privilege such testimony as was the case for the MEMORIAL exhibition.

In general, in the new memorial museum exhibit, victim testimony is set in the wider context of the historical information about the work of the Soviet security services. This is underscored by the fact that the exhibition is no longer organized chronologically according to the life-course of the victims. For example, the sections on the places where victims served out their sentences is much reduced compared to the MEMORIAL exhibit, and there is no discussion of life after imprisonment apart from the rehabilitation process following the end of Soviet occupation in the 1990s.⁶⁰

As Sara Jones has argued, victim testimonies in memorial museums are necessarily subject to mediation, and it is the context in which they are placed that tends to organize the potential diversity of individual experiences into coherent narratives about the past.⁶¹ Whereas the original MEMORIAL exhibition at Leistikowstraße arguably fitted individual life stories to a single schema of unjust incarceration and individual yet representative suffering, not just during imprisonment but also in the present day, the new exhibition focuses on what Martin Sabrow, for example, would describe as a multi-perspectival presentation of the history of this site,⁶² which offers a range of historical evidence to the visitor that cannot be easily reduced to an unequivocal condemnation of the Soviet authorities. As such, the victims who criticized the new exhibition were particularly angered by what they regarded as the creation of a “spying museum”, as the head of the *Verein* put it, which seemed to place more emphasis on documenting the work of the Soviet security services than on honouring those unjustly imprisoned.⁶³ As complaints from victim organisations about the more “harmless” presentation of the cells and the allegedly too neutral tone of the exhibitions texts also makes clear, some former prisoners and others supporting their cause also felt that the presentation of oppression at the site was less likely to inspire empathy for their fate than had been the case with the victim-centred MEMORIAL exhibit.

In response to these claims, Ines Reich herself, but also well-known historians concerned with the management of memorial museums, sought to intervene in order to defend what they saw as the necessary independence of their role as researchers and museum professionals. The sense of threat experienced by historians and museum-makers in this case was doubtless heightened by a physical attack that took place against Reich at the memorial museum in Leistikowstraße in March of 2012, not long before the official opening, when a former prisoner believed he was being denied access to the site.⁶⁴ However, the rhetorical counter-offensive by historians, although apparently motivated by this incident, had a more fundamental purpose. Wolfgang Benz, for example, who is a prominent academic authority on anti-Semitism, was persuaded to edit a volume of essays condemning the behaviour of victim organisations in their criticism of Reich and the new exhibition, including a contribution by historian and journalist Martin Jander, in which the author seeks to establish links between the protest against the new exhibition and alleged far-right elements in victim groups, while at the same time stressing that he is not attempting to portray such groups as right-wing extremists *per se*.⁶⁵ In the same volume, Peter Jochen Winter points to links between one prominent protester and the right-wing newspaper *Junge Freiheit* (Young Freedom).⁶⁶

Despite these attempts to morally discredit those who objected to the new exhibition, the central thrust of the argument put forward by Benz and a number of his contributors returns us to the discourse of professionalization already discussed in relation to the role of German historians in memorial museum projects and closely associated with a historicizing methodology for the presentation of such projects. Benz argued that with “the insistence on the

exclusive power of individual experience to create knowledge, any possibility of a scientific approach to history [*historische Wissenschaft*] is condemned to failure before it gets started.”⁶⁷ In a similar vein, Martin Sabrow pointed to the case of the Leistikowstraße as an example of two related dangers. Firstly, where victims insisted on an emotionally charged representation of suffering, they were failing to acknowledge the scientific insight that such empathy does not necessarily lead to historical understanding. Secondly, by insisting on their right to influence the work of historians at memorial museums so as to achieve their preferred presentation of the past, victims were endangering the “autonomy” of historians and museum professionals like Reich, whose exhibition had been “well received by others in the profession”.⁶⁸

The emphasis placed by Reich and her colleagues within the profession on the application of professional standards of “memorial museum pedagogy”⁶⁹ was therefore explicitly framed both as an attempt to preserve the autonomy of their profession from the impositions of victims and, in more practical terms, to retain a cultural authority over the process of musealization. While historians and museum professionals insisted here upon their autonomy at the expense of victims’ demand to have their suffering foregrounded in the presentation of the memorial museum, victim groups regarded this subordination of victim experience to historiographical and museological method as morally unacceptable. As one victim and critic of the Leistikowstraße memorial put it, “the biographies of human beings are not just material that young academics can exploit to raise their own profile or that should be the basis for intellectual speculation”.⁷⁰

The Intervention of Politicians in the Case of the Leistikowstraße

In the case of the Leistikowstraße memorial museum, the existing politicization of memory in relation to the Soviet Occupation and the GDR at both national and regional level created the conditions for politicians to intervene in the debate. For example, Bernd Neumann (CDU), the Federal Government’s cultural representative, called on the makers of the new exhibition to take more account of victims’ views before the exhibition was opened to the public, and was instrumental in the employment of two external assessors, who were brought in to make changes to the texts to be used in the exhibition. At the opening of the exhibition in April 2012, Neumann stressed that the views of the victims had therefore had an impact on the presentation of the site, while also underlining that any future suggestions from them would have to be taken into account as the memorial museum continued to develop.⁷¹

This intervention on Neumann’s part was commensurate with his general stance and that of the CDU at the federal level in terms of the emphasis it placed on commemorating the victims of the Soviet occupation and the GDR. The Christian Democrats in the 2000s pushed strongly for a revision of federal memorial policy that would emphasize the parity of the National Socialist and state socialist dictatorships in the commemorative landscape, claiming that the victims of the latter were being too quickly forgotten.⁷² As already noted in the context of Brandenburg, this stance was driven by concerns at the continued popularity of the post-communist PDS/Die Linke in certain regions of the country and the gradual softening of other parties’ positions on coalition with them. In 1997, in response to just such a shift in position on the part of the Green Party, a number of former GDR opposition activists, who had been elected to the federal parliament as Greens, left to join the Christian Democrats. Their actions contributed to the party’s renewed focus on the situation of the victims of state socialism. Neumann himself had been the Federal Government’s cultural representative, the equivalent of its minister for culture, during the debates leading up to the revision of the Federal Memorial Concept in 2007 and had rejected a number of key aspects of the findings of the Sabrow Commission, which had made the case for a more distinctly historicized and multi-perspectival presentation of the GDR past, including aspects of “normal” everyday life under socialism.

Instead, as Andrew Beattie observes, while the CDU continued to lead on memorial policy at the federal level, there was a marked tendency to see such policy “primarily as a tool for demonstrating the pervasiveness of dictatorship and thus tackling nostalgia for the GDR.”⁷³

In this light, Neumann’s support for a stronger victim perspective at the Leistikowstraße memorial was of a piece with his established position and that of his party. However, a policy of discouraging positive associations with state socialism clearly also resonated with the CDU’s approach to the SPD-Die Linke coalition within Brandenburg itself, holding that coalition to account for its alleged failures in coming to terms with the GDR past. Neumann’s intervention can therefore be regarded as chiming his party’s priorities at the regional level. However, Minister President Matthias Platzeck of the SPD was equally keen to stress the importance of the victims’ perspective, emphasizing in his speech that it had been their activism that had led to the preservation of the site. He went on to observe that the apparent exclusion of some of those victims from influence over the form of the exhibition could “not be satisfactory for any of us in the long term”.⁷⁴ Speaking to the press, Platzeck went as far as to suggest that the exhibition as it stood would need to be revised if it was found wanting in any way.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, Platzeck’s support for the protesters can be seen in a different light to that of Neumann’s comments, in that the opening of the memorial museum provided an opportunity for the Minister President to emphasize Brandenburg’s commitment to coming to terms with the Soviet occupation and GDR past as an expression of its commitment to basic democratic values,⁷⁶ which implicitly places his intervention in the context of controversies over his party’s alleged failure to address that past adequately at the regional level. The controversy provided Platzeck with an opportunity to show that he and his party were serious on the issue of coming to terms with the state socialist past and protecting the interests of the victims, despite their coalition with Die Linke and perceived weaknesses in their record on historical memory in Brandenburg.

However, despite these interventions by Platzeck and Neumann, it is questionable whether the politically symbolic act of criticizing the treatment of the victims at the opening of the new exhibition is likely to lead to significant changes to the presentation of history at Leistikowstraße. Such criticism has not yet translated into a willingness to fund a potentially expensive overhaul of the exhibition, and the fact that the memorial museum has been integrated into the Foundation of Brandenburg Memorial Museums also limits politicians’ ability to directly influence the representation of victims. The Foundation has a dual structure, in which representatives of the Brandenburg government have responsibility for overseeing its administration, whereas a committee of experts (*Sachverständigenrat*, i.e. a committee of historians) is responsible for making judgements on the exhibitions it conceives and implements.⁷⁷ The Foundation strongly defended itself during the debates over the Leistikowstraße, insisting that a “serious” exhibition could only be based on proper research and accusing the victims of rejecting any “nuance” in the presentation of the site.⁷⁸

Conclusion

The case of the Leistikowstraße memorial museum clearly demonstrates that the form that debates over such sites take is the outcome of a “*liaison dangereuse* between structurally distinct partners”, as Martin Sabrow puts it.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, the ability of politicians, historians and museum professionals, or victims to translate their discourse into the concrete form of a particular kind of memorial museum is not simply the outcome of a discursive struggle, but is also conditioned by factors such as property ownership, an element which is frequently underestimated in discussions of memorial culture.⁸⁰ The fact that the EHK owned the building at Leistikowstraße and then passed that property on to a foundation that was integrated into the

Brandenburg Foundation of Memorial Museums meant that neither victims nor politicians could exert extensive influence on the form of the exhibition. The autonomy for historians and museum professionals inscribed into this institutional structure essentially allowed those charged with making the new memorial museum to pursue their historicizing approach, even in the face of public controversy and attempts to intervene by politicians and victim representatives.

However, politicians did seek to respond to the protests of victims where they could make political capital from such interventions in the broader context of coalition politics at the regional level and the attempts by the CDU to delegitimize cooperation between the SPD and Die Linke. Nevertheless, any attempt by politicians to rescind the autonomy of the Brandenburg Foundation would arguably have been viewed as a scandalous and undemocratic attack on independent institutions, negating any potential political capital to be gained from fighting for the cause of the victims. From the perspective of victim groups, there was clearly a danger that such political interventions would seem like “cheap talk”, thus alienating them further from the politicians and museum professionals charged with addressing their traumatic past.

In the case of the Leistikowstraße, conflicts between politicians and victims, on the one hand, and museum professionals and historians, on the other, emerged from a competing set of interests that were rooted in the particular context of post-unification German politics at the regional and national level, the development of a discourse of professionalism and appropriate museological method around the presentation of historical sites among historians and museum workers, and the demands of victim activists for public recognition of their suffering. An acknowledgement of these competing interests allows us to trace the dynamics of this conflict, while at the same time recognizing that the strength of the position of historians and museum professionals in this dispute, despite the heavy criticism they faced, was contingent upon existing institutional structures, particularly the autonomy of state-funded culture institutions such as the Brandenburg Foundation for Memorial Museums that can be found in the German system. Paying attention to the reasons for the politicization of memory, the development of discourses of professional authority among historians and museum professionals, and the demands of victim groups should provide a framework for studying similar conflicts over the presentation of the past in memorial museums in other contexts, both in Germany and elsewhere. However, the particular outcomes of such struggles will be highly context-dependent.

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⁴ Marcel Thomas “Coming to Terms with the Stasi: History and Memory in the Bautzen Memorial,” *European Review of History: Revue européenne d’histoire*, no. 20.4 (2014): 697–716.

⁵ Carola S. Rudnik, *Die andere Hälfte der Erinnerung: Die DDR in der deutschen Geschichtspolitik nach 1989* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2011), 201.

⁶ Ibid., 731–741. Cf. Rudnik, “Wenn Häftlinge und Historiker streiten. Konflikte um sächsische Gedenkstätten,” in Wolfgang Benz, ed., *Ein Kampf um die Deutungshoheit: Politik, Opferinteressen und historische Forschung. Die Auseinandersetzung um die Gedenk- und Begegnungsstätte Leistikowstraße Potsdam* (Berlin: Metropol, 2013), 197–218.

⁷ Ibid., 197. Translations from the German are my own.

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- ¹⁴ Jörg Schönbohm, “Glanz und Elend einer Blockpartei im SED-Staat. Jörg Schönbohm tritt für eine offene und kritische Auseinandersetzung mit den Fehlern der Ost-CDU ein und empört sich über die Geschichtsverlogenheit der SED-Nachfolger,” *Welt am Sonntag*, January 4, 2009, 9.
- ¹⁵ Karl Doemens, “‘Ich würde nie ein SED-Mitglied mit SS-Leuten vergleichen.’ Ministerpräsident Platzek über Abweichler in der SPD, die Zusammenarbeit mit der Linkspartei und die Zukunft der Sozialdemokratie,” *Berliner Zeitung*, 5 November, 2009, 29.
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