‘Victors of History’:
Museums and Memorials as Venues of Propaganda in East Germany

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Abbreviations

DDR – Deutsche Demokratische Republik (East Germany)

GDR – German Democratic Republic (East Germany)

MfDG – Museum für Deutsche Geschichte (Museum for German History)

SED – Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (Socialist Unity Party of Germany)

VVN – Vereinigung der Verfolgten des Naziregimes (Association of Nazi Persecutees)

Introduction

On an autumn day in 1948 in East Berlin, a slip of paper was shoved through the opening of an anonymous feedback box. The box was placed at the exit of a new museum exhibit entitled "The Other Germany." The nearby exhibit panels and photographs explained how "false" beliefs in "bourgeois" power relations had led to catastrophes in the Weimar Republic, in Nazi Germany, and across Europe.[1] The exhibit triumphantly proclaimed that Germans who had always resisted fascism had brought about East Germany's "liberation," and that Germany was now rebuilding for a better future.[2]

But the slip of paper told a different story:

> Where are the millions who have been murdered since 1917 in Russia? Where are those who are now imprisoned in the concentration camps run by the Russians and the SED? Has anything changed? My boys report that many anti-fascists, who spent time in concentration camps under Hitler, are there once again. Your "exhibit" is communist rubbish![3]

This comment card offers a fascinating glimpse into the politics of memory – and their reception – that operated within the Soviet sphere of influence in Germany after the Second World War. In 1949, the state was established as the German Democratic Republic (DDR), more commonly known as East Germany. The control over these politics of memory became crucial for the new government to prove its cultural legitimacy and ensure the country's stability. The artificiality of East Germany's borders and its haphazardly established new institutions meant that the creation of a strong historical consciousness through myth-building was essential for

[1] Jon Berndt Olsen, *Tailoring Truth: Politicizing the Past and Negotiating Memory in East Germany, 1945-1990* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015), 40. https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/lib/uvic/detail.action?docID=1707813#
[2] Ibid., 42.
[3] SAPMO Bundesarchiv, DY 55/V 278/2/9. As cited in Olsen, *Tailoring Truth*, 43.

solidifying an otherwise ambiguous national identity.[4] While historical narratives usually link events chronologically, myths describe events as the origins of communities.[5] Although the stories told at East German sites of memory were based upon historical events, their collective purpose was to create national myths to establish "narrative identities."[6] Museums and memorials, which were the primary sites of public memory, served as some of the most crucial conduits for these myths. Museums contained objects charged with visitors' reflected emotions and personal connections, while memorials stabilized community identities. Narratives were constructed by the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) for the presentation of history at these two types of public memory sites to mitigate the party's permanent crisis of legitimacy.[7] The SED initially emerged in East Germany as an ideological compromise, being a new political entity created from the remains of the former Communist Party of Germany and the Social Democratic Party. [8] It became the main force behind all East German politics, and by 1948, it had reoriented itself to adhere to the Bolshevik party model and align with the Stalinist policies of the Soviet Union.[9]

This thesis explains how two narratives, one describing East Germany as the anti-fascist "true" Germany, and the other describing it as the inevitable result of centuries of workers' resistance, were used to negotiate memory and construct identity. The thesis investigates the memory politics of East Germany between 1949 and the mid 1970s, although it grounds this

[4] Alan Nothnagle, "From Buchenwald to Bismarck: Historical Myth-Building in the German Democratic Republic, 1945–1989," *Central European History* 26, no. 1 (1993): 94. doi:10.1017/S000893890001997X.
[5] Jan Ifversen, "Myth and History in European Post-War History Writing," in *European Identity and the Second World War,* ed. Menno Spiering and Michael Wintle (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 76. https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1057/9780230306943.
[6] Ibid., 75.
[7] Nothnagle, "From Buchenwald to Bismarck," 94.
[8] Monika Kaiser, "Change and Continuity in the Development of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany," *Journal of Contemporary History* 30, no. 4 (1995): 688. http://www.jstor.org/stable/261088.
[9] Ibid., 693.

examination by briefly discussing the manipulation of historical narratives prior to East Germany's official formation, and ends by examining how memory politics worked during the dissolution of the East German socialist government. It is important to note that this thesis examines the *messages* that were crafted by the SED rather than the institutions that promoted them. This work is thus structured around those two narratives, drawing in case studies from both museums and memorials, rather than being rigidly divided by a typological approach that would separate these sites of memory. The historical literature in English on this subject of East German museal narratives tends to suggest that these narratives stayed largely consistent throughout the country's lifespan.[10] However, I argue that they were instead dynamic, waxing and waning with the politics of the SED over roughly 50 years.

Chapter 1 describes how the anti-fascist narrative was particularly important in the early years of East Germany in order to create distance from the Nazi past and to prove the new state's legitimacy over West Germany. Using examples such as "The Other Germany" exhibit, the construction of the Buchenwald memorial, and the renovation of the Museum for German History (MfDG), the chapter discusses how the anti-fascist narrative changed to accommodate shifting policies regarding the remembrance of anti-Nazi resistance. Chapter 2 maps the fluctuations of the socialist narrative by comparing its presentation at *Heimat* museums to its curation at larger, centralized institutions. The chapter argues that the socialist narrative gradually changed from describing East Germany as an independent socialist republic to describing how the country had always been one element of the international labour movement.

[10] See, for example, Arthur W. McCardle and A. Bruce Boenau, eds., *East Germany: A New German Nation Under Socialism?* (Lanham: University of America Press, 1984); Henry Krisch, *The German Democratic Republic: The Search for Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1985).

A definition of "anti-fascism" is necessary here to inform further discussion of these topics. Understanding the term is complicated because of the many different interpretations, individuals, and institutions that shaped anti-fascist discourse in East Germany.[11] It is therefore easiest to work backwards, and understand how *fascism* was defined to learn how its opposite was interpreted. East German historians defined fascism as an ideology that found expression in dictatorship.[12] Composed of imperialist elements, fascism was understood as a negative force directed against the whole nation.[13] This implied that most civilians in the East, aided by the Soviet Red Army during the "liberation" of 1945, had been against the Nazi dictatorship. Therefore, East Germany was "anti-fascist" and absolved from responsibility in the Second World War.[14] Meanwhile, West Germany, closely allied with the capitalist Allies, was portrayed as a vehicle for the survival of the Nazi Party. By linking fascism to capitalism, anti-fascism was naturally linked to the opposite of capitalism: socialism. Before the Second World War, the Social Democratic Party and the Communist Party had been the main opponents of capitalism in Germany. In 1946, the East German branches of these two parties merged to create the SED, which thus became the inheritor of these socialist identities. Although the SED was a union of these two formerly rival parties, it soon became dominated by Communist politicians while

[11] Joanne Sayner, "Communicating History: The Archived Letters of Greta Kuckhoff and Memories of the 'Red Orchestra,'" in *Becoming East German: Socialist Structures and Sensibilities After Hitler,* ed. by Mary Fulbrook and Andrew I. Port (New York: Berghan Books, 2013): 81.
[12] The definition of fascism as understood by East German historians was inspired by Georgi Dimitrov, head of the Comintern, an organization co-ordinated by the Soviet Union for the purpose of advocating international communism. For more information about the Comintern's impact on socialist countries, refer to Jeremy Agnew and Kevin McDermott, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (London: MacMillan Publishers, 1996).
[13] Josie McLellan, *Anti-Fascism and Memory in East Germany: Remembering the International Brigades 1945-1989* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 73.
[14] Ibid., 73.

Social Democrats were expelled.[15] Through its lineage, the SED was tied to the historic resistance to capitalist policies and was therefore inherently anti-fascist.

Another necessary term to define is *Heimat. Heimat* is the German word for the concept of home or homeland, and expresses a "feeling of belonging together".[16] For over two centuries, *Heimat* has been used to celebrate German nationhood through the identification with the local cultures of towns, villages, and even neighbourhoods.[17] The term therefore has a long history before its use in East Germany as a way to create a moral basis for politics and serving the homeland. Within both East and West Germany, local museums in towns and even small villages were established or updated to focus on concerns directly relating to *Heimat.* For the directors of these *Heimat* museums, preserving heritage that related to *Heimat* was a method to "turn people back to the best and truest of Germanness."[18] Because of their local nature, these museums sometimes were not as strongly controlled by the SED as larger, more central institutions regularly were. SED officials therefore needed to negotiate with these *Heimat* museum curators to implement the specific desired historical narratives that would help to construct a common East German identity.

Literature on East Germany has frequently identified how the goals of the SED often did not align with what it was able to achieve in reality.[19] This thesis seeks to use a similar approach by applying it to the control of museums and memorials in East Germany. It argues that the SED

[15] Kaiser, "Change and Continuity in the Development of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany," 693.
[16] Celia Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials: The German Idea of Heimat* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 4.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid., 234.
[19] See, for example, Jeffrey Kopstein, *The Politics of Economic Decline in East Germany, 1945-1989* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Alan Nothnagle, *Building the East German Myth: Historical Mythology and Youth Propaganda in the German Democratic Republic, 1945-1999* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1999); Esther von Richthofen, *Bringing Culture to the Masses: Control, Compromise and Participation in the GDR* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008).

attempted to impose its own politics of memory, but soon learned that it instead needed to negotiate the presentation of museal narratives. In addition to the narratives described above, this thesis will therefore also explore how the SED (along with separate institutional bodies) balanced their versions of an ideal German history with what the public would accept. Existing literature is mainly concerned with the changing historiography of East Germany in its twilight years, whereas most of this work focuses on the country's emergence through to the mid 1970s, and how the SED worked to manipulate the memory landscape.

This thesis examines museums and memorials because it seeks to explain what histories were being framed, edited, and mythologized for the East German public, not for academic professionals. But understanding the public reception of museal narratives is notoriously difficult. For example, the comment card quoted at the beginning of this introduction could have been written by someone from a variety of backgrounds. It is possible the author was not from East Berlin at all, and was an outsider from the West. They may have had a negative opinion of the SED and the narratives it was trying to promote before they had even set foot in the exhibit. Although these comment cards offer candid views into receptions of these historical narratives, they may only represent the most extreme reactions to the exhibits. There was also not always an available forum for public feedback at museum exhibits or memorial sites. "The Other Germany" exhibit traveled to other cities after its initial showing in Berlin, and was modified by its curators to decrease the number of critical reviews. One of the most drastic changes was the removal of the anonymous feedback box and its replacement with an open book watched over by a staff member.[20] Therefore, this thesis uses materials produced by the memory institutions themselves (such as postcards, museum guides, and souvenir booklets) or materials produced by the SED

[20] Olsen, *Tailoring Truth,* 44.

and its affiliates (such as commission reports, commemoration speeches, museum journal articles, and teacher worksheets) to understand what narratives the East German governing bodies thought were the most important to tell.

Some of the earliest work written in English on East Germany's treatment of its own history comes from Andreas Dorpalen.[21] Writing between the 1950s and 1970s, Dorpalen discusses the Marxist lens used by East German historians when analyzing their country's history. This Marxist approach to history claims to be scientifically correct because it stems from the "objective" socioeconomic reality.[22] Yet early researchers of East German historiography have sometimes been accused of ignoring the "actual historical propaganda and historical culture" of the country, and criticized for lacking focus on the manipulation of a socialist historical consciousness.[23] East German historiography produced within the lifespan of the country claimed that historians sought to ground the past in objective historical scholarship, despite the fact that the SED deliberately exploited historical narratives to establish the new nation's identity.

In more recent works by scholars such as Alan Nothnagle, Catherine Plum, and Jan Palmowski, East German historiography is treated as a series of works that served to create overarching myths using concrete historical events as foundations of historical understanding.[24] In addition, articles by historians such as H. Glenn Penny have built upon this by illuminating narratives other than the anti-fascist one long put forward as the main story told by East German

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[21] Andreas Dorpalen, "History and Politics: An East German Assessment," *Central European History* 12, no. 1 (1979.). doi:10.1017/S0008938900022603.
[22] Ibid., 85.
[23] Nothnagle, "From Buchenwald to Bismarck," 92.
[24] Alan Nothnagle, "From Buchenwald to Bismarck: Historical Myth-Building in the German Democratic Republic, 1945–1989," *Central European History* 26, no. 1 (1993). doi:10.1017/S000893890001997X; Catherine Plum, "The Children of Antifascism: Exploring Young Historians Clubs in the GDR," *German Politics and Society* 26, no. 1 (2008); Jan Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation: Heimat and the Politics of Everyday Life in the GDR, 1945-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

historians.[25] Instead, there were *multiple* narratives that East Germany used to legitimize itself, and the country's versions of history changed through time to accommodate shifting political considerations.[26] Jon Berndt Olsen's book, *Tailoring Truth: Politicizing the Past and Negotiating Memory in East Germany, 1945-1990* is an especially helpful source of information on this topic of narrativization. One of Olsen's main arguments is that the SED shaped East German identity and collective memory by taking control of the historical narratives at museums and memorials and imposing its own ideological interpretation.[27] Olsen builds upon Penny's work by expanding upon the multiple historical narratives that East Germany used to legitimize itself, while also exploring how some local sites of memory remained removed from the party's centralizing narratives.

In East Germany, the anti-fascist and socialist narratives needed to be disseminated through propaganda. Historians such as Bill Niven have discussed how German sites of memory, such as memorials, were especially charged venues for manipulating the past because of their ability to be anchor points for collective memory.[28] One key component of addressing collective memory in East Germany involved remembrance and understandings of the Holocaust. Part of Chapter 1 of this thesis examines how Nazi camps were used within the anti-fascist narrative to emphasize communist resistance while silencing stories about the Holocaust. Nazism, through this Marxist-Leninist historiographical lens used at these East German memorial sites, became a representation for class conflict and greed instead of racism.[29] Jewish suffering was rarely

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[25] H. Glenn Penny, "The Museum Für Deutsche Geschichte and German National Identity," *Central European History* 28, no. 3 (1995). doi:10.1017/S0008938900011869.
[26] Ibid., 344.
[27] Olsen, *Tailoring Truth*, 8.
[28] Helmut Peitsch and Joanne Sayner, "Tendentiousness and Topicality: Buchenwald and Antifascism as Sites of GDR Memory," *German Politics & Society* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 101. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43917502.
[29] Bill Niven, "Remembering Nazi Anti-Semitism in the GDR," in *Memorialization in Germany since 1945,* ed. Bill Niven and Chloe Paver (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 205. https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1057/9780230248502_19.

mentioned at many museums and memorials. This exclusion instead created space for the proliferation of propagandistic messages of capitalist greed, and drew attention to stories of communists as anti-fascist resisters.

Museums are negotiators of memory and constructors of identity.[30] This is important to note because museums and memorials in East Germany were not monolithic. Officials could not necessarily dictate whatever historical "truths" they wanted to the public through books, films, memorial plaques, and museum exhibits. At some level, these narratives were required to already fit in some way with the preconceived notions of visitors *before* they entered the sites of memory.[31] Narratives of memory therefore *negotiated* with the knowledge that people had before they engaged with the knowledge of the institution.

This negotiation of memory had the purpose of providing a stabilizing function to the new regime.[32] In 1949, as East Germany was formally created, one of the key ways to legitimize the SED was to prove that the party and the state were not new creations. Instead, the SED portrayed the country as the inevitable conclusion to a long history of German socialist struggles, and that the state's realization was a revolutionary achievement representing the "true" Germany. This narrative was in opposition to one about West Germany, which was portrayed as a state continuing fascist policies. East Germany thus promoted two narratives through its memory institutions: one of anti-fascist resistance, and one of socialist struggle. These narratives worked together to construct the identity by manipulating the past in order to legitimate the present.[33]

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[30] Michaela Dixon, "The Unreliable Perpetrator: Negotiating Narrative Perspective at Museums of the Third Reich and the GDR," *German Life and Letters* 70, no. 2 (2017): 242. https://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/doi/epdf/10.1111/glal.12149

[31] Susan A. Crane, "Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum," *History and Theory* 36, no. 4 (1997): 63.

[32] Olsen, *Tailoring Truth,* 3.

[33] Penny, "The Museum Für Deutsche Geschichte," 344.

The dissolution of East Germany has been thoroughly studied. [34] Since its demise, historians have sought threads leading deep inside the country's past that would explain East Germany's eventual unraveling. However, there has not been nearly as much historical study of how the nation managed to *stay together* for 50 years, and how historical propaganda played a pivotal role in maintaining unity. This thesis strives to explore how the extensive efforts made by the SED to control the politics of memory constituted a crucial component of creating a cohesive and unifying identity for the new country, even if that meant that some of its public history projects were accused of being "communist rubbish."

[34] See, for example, Mike Dennis, *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic 1945-1990* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2000); Charles S. Maier, *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Dietrich Orlow, *Socialist Reformers and the Collapse of the German Democratic Republic* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Steven Pfaff, *Exit-Voice Dynamics and the Collapse of East Germany: The Crisis of Leninism and the Revolution of 1989* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Steven Saxonberg, *The Fall: A Comparative Study of the End of Communism in Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, and Poland* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic, 2001).

Chapter 1: The Anti-Fascist Narrative

Adjusting portrayals of the past, both recent and ancient, was a priority for the Socialist Unity Party (SED) in the years following the Second World War. With the division of Germany into East and West in 1949, the SED continued a national program of cultural rehabilitation, restoration, and redefinition that its main predecessor party, the Communist Party of Germany, had begun in the immediate aftermath of the war. Although the SED at first focused on restoring and updating museums and memorials, the party increasingly sought to curate collections for new institutions that were being built across East Germany (the DDR). During this early period, the core message promoted by the Communist Party and later the SED was the "moral superiority" of their policies compared to the West.[35]

The party could not just invent a new history for East Germany since it had to maintain some form of continuity in order to be recognized as legitimate by its own citizens. History thus needed to serve the identity politics of the new socialist state. The updated collections and the new memorials shaped visitor experiences in the first decade of East Germany by presenting history through an anti-fascist lens. Promoting anti-fascism helped to distance the DDR from its recent Nazi past. The narrative also equated capitalists, members of the bourgeoisie, and other "non-socialists" with fascists. To be a socialist state was to be an anti-fascist state; this linked the ruling party symbolically to a past of anti-fascist resistance. Marxist-Leninist historians praised the SED for the overthrow of fascism because it broke the supposed historical pattern of reactionary imperialists and capitalists constantly vying for power.[36]

[35] Olsen, *Tailoring Truth,* 24.
[36] Nothnagle, "From Buchenwald to Bismarck," 98.

However, this triumphant narrative failed utterly to describe the devastating toll of Nazism on the Jewish people. At new memorials dedicated to those who had died under Nazi rule, Jewish identities were largely subsumed under the larger category of anti-fascist resisters. This homogenization was an attempt to forge a unified socialist identity while marginalizing Jewish survivors. This marginalization was closely tied to the entirely false belief (later popularized by historian Raul Hilberg in the 1960s) that Jews did not resist the Holocaust, and were instead led "like sheep to the slaughter."[37] Jewish prisoners were thus wrongly associated by the SED with passive persecution, while political prisoners of the Nazis were equated with active resistance. The anti-fascist narrative insisted that Nazism had been eradicated through strong political resistance, implying that the progressive proletariat had now become a "victor of history" by inheriting this struggle from the political – not Jewish – resisters.[38]

East Germany faced a tremendous challenge following 1945. Cities had been devastated by the war, and well-known museums such as the Dresden Museum of Hygiene had been largely destroyed.[39] Some memorials, such as one built during the Nazi era that was dedicated to a martyred *Freikorps* member, were purposefully dismantled to reflect East Germany's commitment to anti-fascism.[40] Other markers of public memory, such as the statues of Prussian royalty from the Victory Alley in the Tiergarten Park, were also removed and put into storage.[41] Although not connected to Nazism, these statues were deemed to be inappropriate for display because of their original purpose to develop nationalist sentiments during Kaiser Wilhelm II's

[37] Michael R. Morrus, "Jewish Resistance to the Holocaust," *Journal of Contemporary History* 30, no. 1 (January 1995): 86. https://doi.org/10.1177/002200949503000104.
[38] Feiwel Kupferberg, *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic* (London: Routledge, 2002), 47. https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.4324/9781351324724.
[39] Richard Wolfel, "What is Old is New Again: The Reintegration of Dresden's Landscape into the Modern German State," *The Geographical Bulletin* 53 no. 2 (2012): 106.
[40] Olsen, *Tailoring Truth,* 23.
[41] Ibid.

reign. In Berlin, some public memory sites were exempted from extensive modification; their total removal was unnecessary because of their supposed "place in the hearts of the Berliners, for whom [they are pieces] of old-Berlin life."[42] Each decision about destroying, renovating, or preserving a memorial or museum had to be made on a case-by-case basis by municipal committees run by first the Communist Party and later the SED.

The party could not make all these changes on its own, and so relied on external organizations such as the Association of Nazi Persecutees, or its successor, the Committee of Antifascist Resistance Fighters, to help stimulate public interest, fund new memorial projects, and dismantle Nazi monuments.[43] Regional leaders and historians were employed to educate the public on this historical narrative of anti-fascism. For example, new administrators at various historical sites were selected for their commitment to the ruling political party rather than for their academic and professional qualifications.[44] Their anti-fascist and Marxist interpretations of history were publicized with the opening of temporary exhibits such as "The Other Germany," the building of memorials such as Buchenwald, and the creation of the Museum for German History (MfDG).[45]

Visitors to these historical sites were confronted with the material culture of memory: photographs, flags, plaques, statues, postcards, and more. Prime Minister Otto Grotewohl tasked historians with the "great national responsibility" of retrieving the people's past from the annals of "bourgeois history."[46] The material culture of East Germany's history was thus constructed by professional individuals assigned to do history "correctly" in order to fulfill their patriotic duties.

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[42] Ibid.
[43] Peter Monteath,"Organizing Anti-Fascism: The Obscure History of the VVN," *European History Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (April 1999): 298. https://doi.org/10.1177/026569149902900204.
[44] Catherine Plum, *Antifascism After Hitler: East German Youth and Socialist Memory, 1949-1989* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 174.
[45] Olsen, *Tailoring Truth,* 94.
[46] Penny, "The Museum Für Deutsche Geschichte," 360.

For example, by reaching out through daily newspapers to the "many workers who must still have letters, leaflets… and objects of historical value", historians working for the Museum for German History asked civilians to donate their items so they could "be made accessible to the general public in the museum."[47] The authority with which museum and memorial staff told the country's stories made these narratives believable, while the artifacts, gathered from the general public and used to illustrate historical events, made the past tangible.

One of the earliest attempts to tailor the past in East Germany was in the exhibit "The Other Germany." The exhibit was curated by the Association of Nazi Persecutees, which was an SED-oriented outgrowth of the usually non-partisan Victims of Fascism organization.[48] The members of this organization, who had mostly belonged to the Communist Party of Germany before the creation of the SED, valued the remembrance of active resistance rather than narratives of passive persecution and suffering.[49] The exhibit curated by the organization's members consisted of objects donated by former camp political prisoners and newspaper articles, who used these items to heroize the politically persecuted communists.[50]

[47] Ibid., 353. Translation by author.
[48] Olsen, *Tailoring Truth,* 39.
[49] Monteath, "Organizing Anti-Fascism," 291.
[50] Olsen, *Tailoring Truth,* 40.

Figure 1: A view inside "The Other Germany," 1948. The exhibit relied heavily on photographs, diagrams, and text, rather than standard physical objects to guide visitors through the narrative. Museum exhibits in East Germany were not just spaces for the public to confront artifacts: they were spaces in which stories were crafted and told.[51]

"The Other Germany" propagated the idea that anti-fascists who had "always resisted Nazi aggression were the same Germans now ready to lead Germany into a better future."[52] The struggle against fascism was framed as part of a larger historical narrative that stretched back through centuries of working-class oppression. Prior to entering the room on recent German history, visitors first walked through rooms that contained paintings and texts detailing how working class revolts, such as the Peasants' War of 1525, the March Revolts of 1848, and the November Revolution of 1918, had failed in the past.[53] The failures of these previous revolts were linked with the failure of Germans to overthrow fascism themselves. In "The Other

[51] SAPMO Bundesarchiv Bild Y1-22361. As cited in Olsen, *Tailoring Truth,* 41.
[52] Olsen, *Tailoring Truth,* 42.
[53] Ibid., 41.

Germany," the need for foreign help in defeating Hitler was depicted as a failure of the German people to fully commit to resistance.[54] But in later memorializations of Nazi resistance, such as at Buchenwald, the Soviet Red Army would be incorporated into the anti-fascist narrative through descriptions of it helping Germany topple Nazism.

The final rooms positioned German anti-fascists as the leaders who would rebuild the country. Only by following these leaders would East Germany be able to avoid future failed revolts and control its own affairs independently from the West. The SED and the Association of Nazi Persecutees were able to use history to mirror the state's contemporary struggle against the West for demonstrating the moral correctness of socialism.[55] However, the Association was dissolved after suspicions arose about "hostility to the party."[56] Some of the duties undertaken by Association of Nazi Persecutees duties would be shouldered by a new organization, called the Committee of Anti-Fascist Resistance Fighters.[57] The Committee later went on to collaborate with the SED for other exhibits and memorials.[58]

A newspaper article describing "The Other Germany" expressed how the exhibit provided "an authentic answer" to the question of how to deal with the effects of the Second World War, those "found in the artist works of anti-fascist artists, who suffered and at times even lost their lives."[59] The party understood that exaggerating the role of the anti-fascist resistance movement during the Nazi period, and that movement's subsequent significance in establishing East Germany, would liberate the country of some of the guilt of defeated Germany.[60] Some visitors wrote on anonymous comment cards that all people "must be forced to see this exhibit,

[54] Ibid., 42.
[55] Ibid., 43.
[56] Monteath, "Organizing Anti-Fascism," 297.
[57] Ibid., 298.
[58] Niven, "Remembering Nazi Anti-Semitism," 206.
[59] Olsen, *Tailoring Truth,* 42.
[60] Ibid., 21.

in order to understand and be reminded!"[61] The exhibit emphasized the role communists had played in liberating Germany during the Second World. German anti-fascists led by the Soviet Red Army were depicted as responsible for expunging Nazism in the country. The Red Army had indeed been critical to the overthrow of Nazism, and so this was not an unfounded argument. The SED aimed to use this strong connection with the Soviet Union to link German anti-fascists with Soviet communists to establish a socialist identity forged through resistance. East Germany, headed by the SED, needed to be shown to be the heir of the *resisters* of the Nazis, the heir of the working-class that had constantly been put down throughout history by greedy capitalists.

However, visitors also gave negative feedback on these comment cards. Some visitors left notes on how it might be better to forget the past, or on the exhibit's silence on the similarity between the Nazis and the Soviet occupation forces, such as on this comment card:

Where is the room for how things are now?

NSDAP SS

SED NKVD

The same[62]

The SED quickly learned that "The Other Germany" exhibit was too obviously linked to the party's political agenda, and that the anti-fascist narrative could not contradict the lived experiences of visitors who knew friends or family currently imprisoned in camps run by the Soviet secret police, the NKVD, in the Soviet occupation zone. Once East Germany was officially founded in 1949, a year after "The Other Germany" first opened, the focus of the historical anti-fascist narrative shifted to contrast West Germany with East Germany. Over time, the narrative increasingly implied that the West German government was the heir of Hitler and

[61] Ibid., 43.
[62] Ibid.

the Nazi past. This allowed for the development of a memory culture that emphasized East Germany's commitment to anti-fascism while downplaying the historical similarities between the brutal repression policies of the Nazis and Soviet forces.

The maturation of the SED's anti-fascist narrative is perhaps best explored by studying the memorialization of the former concentration camp, Buchenwald, near the town of Weimar. The SED's memorialization of the camp omitted Buchenwald's specifically Jewish history in order to focus on the narrative of anti-fascist resistance. Built in 1937, the camp had originally been used to inter mostly political opponents of the Nazi Party, such as communists and social democrats.[63] A notable prisoner of Buchenwald was Ernst Thälmann, the leader of the Communist Party of Germany from 1925 to 1933, who, after being imprisoned for eleven years, was executed at Buchenwald in 1944. Most importantly, prisoners within the camp had revolted against its guards in March, 1945, as SS guards began to flee the camp before American Allied forces could arrive.[64] Members of the underground organization swore the "Oath of Buchenwald," which outlined their goal to "build a new world of peace and freedom" through the "destruction of Nazism from its roots."[65] Buchenwald's history was thus rich with potential for narrating communist resistance against fascism across East Germany.[66] However, if the SED did not act quickly, it risked losing the power to tell the story of Buchenwald in a manner that fit with its legitimizing narrative of anti-fascist resistance and self-liberation. Soon after Germany's defeat in the Second World War, local leaders had attempted to construct their own memorial at the former concentration camp. In response, the SED formed its own commission in 1954, with

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[63] Maoz Azaryahu, "RePlacing Memory: The Reorientation of Buchenwald," *Cultural Geographies* 10, no. 1 (2003): 5.
[64] Nothnagle, "From Buchenwald to Bismarck," 98.
[65] Buchenwaldarchiv, Sign. NZ 488, "Buchenwald Oath." Accessed through "Wir bekräftigen den Schwur von Buchenwald!" Vereinigung der Verfolgten des Naziregimes, https://nrw-archiv.vvn-bda.de/texte/1837_schwur_von_buchenwald.htm.
[66] Azaryahu, "RePlacing Memory," 4.

Prime Minister Otto Grotewohl at its head, to make Buchenwald a *national* memorial site. In the same year, the Museum for German History (MfDG), East Germany's central history museum, was ordered to curate a permanent exhibit at the former concentration camp that would juxtapose Nazi brutality with anti-fascist martyrdom.[67] The Buchenwald exhibit created by the MfDG underwent several revisions over the lifespan of East Germany, but throughout its iterations, it remained almost entirely focused on the resistance movement that had grown within the Buchenwald camp and culminated in the Buchenwald oath. On the exhibit's plaques, placards, and photograph captions, there were few references to the Jewish population who had also been imprisoned in the camp.[68]

On September 14, 1958, East Germany's National Memorial Day for the Victims of Fascism, Grotewohl spoke at a service dedicating the completed memorial at Buchenwald.[69] According to an article published in the *New York Times*, the prime minister said "the fascism and militarism responsible for the extermination of 11,000,000 persons… had been eradicated only in East Germany."[70] The memorial dedication thus became an anti-Western rally that situated West Germany as a "dangerous centre of reaction" continuing to foster a fascist ideology.[71] Museums and memorials were able to depict West Germany as a continuation of Nazi dictatorship "by other means" by juxtaposing it with the "anti-fascist" history of East Germany. At these sites of public history, East Germany was portrayed as the result of the long-sought revolution of anti-fascist resisters and German peasants. Myths tied to this narrative explained East Germany's origins as a state liberated and created by anti-fascist resisters and

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[67] Niven, "Remembering Nazi Anti-Semitism," 208.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Azaryahu, "RePlacing Memory," 5.
[70] "Nazi Victims Honored: East Germany Attacks West at Buchenwald Service," *New York Times,* September 15, 1958, 3. http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/historical-newspapers/nazi-victims-honored/docview/114535718/se-2?accountid=14846.
[71] Ibid.

working-class heroes who had worked throughout history to overthrow their oppressors. This promoted an aura of continuity rather than portraying East Germany as an uncertain (and untested) new state.[72] The memory of anti-fascist resisters was also commemorated at Buchenwald with the creation of a shrine dedicated to Thälmann; youth were encouraged to lay wreaths at the communist leader's shrine in ceremonies that bordered on the religious.[73]

These examples illustrate how the SED sought to highlight the role that communists had played in anti-fascist resistance.[74] It must be noted that these were not outright lies: Communist Party and Social Democratic Party members constituted the largest mass resistance to Nazism.[75] At Buchenwald, it was therefore the lack of *other* narratives told in conjunction with this story that was responsible for creating the public impression that only anti-fascist communists had engaged in resistance.

[72] Plum, *Antifascism After Hitler,* 4.
[73] Ibid., 85.
[74] Olsen, *Tailoring Truth,* 21.
[75] William Sheridan Allen, "Social Democratic Resistance Against Hitler and the European Tradition of Underground Movement," in *Germans Against Nazism: Nonconformity, Opposition and Resistance in the Third Reich,* ed. Francis R. Nicosia and Lawrence D. Stokes (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015), 191.

Figure 2: Postcard of Buchenwald, 1958. This picture depicts one section of the Buchenwald memorial and was printed in celebration of "the construction of national memorial sites" in 1958, the year of the Buchenwald Memorial's official opening. The building seen here was called the "Tower of Freedom," and represented the "self-liberation" of anti-fascist resisters within the Buchenwald concentration camp. [76]

Over the years, the National Buchenwald Memorial was expanded, eventually becoming East Germany's largest concentration camp memorial. However, nowhere was it mentioned that 12,250 Jews had been imprisoned in Buchenwald following the Nazi-instigated pogroms of *Kristallnacht* in 1938, and over 3300 had been killed.[77] When Jews *were* specifically mentioned on plaques at the memorial, they were placed within a narrative that embellished stories of communist solidarity and friendship toward Jewish prisoners.[78] They were remembered as

[76] "Maximumkarte 'Für den Aufbau Nationaler Gedenkstätten' mit Glockenturm von Buchenwald – 1958," *Volkskinstverlag*, DDR: Postkarten-Museum. https://www.ddr-postkarten-museum.de/picture.php?/30015/search/9406. Accessed March 4, 2022.
[77] Niven, "Nazi Anti-Semitism in the GDR," 209. Although specific numbers are unknown, there were likely many more Jewish deaths at Buchenwald because of the death marches that occurred there in the last months of the war.
[78] Peitsch and Sayner, "Tendentiousness and Topicality," 108.

people befriended by the political prisoners, and who had then died together "as fighters against fascism and war".[79] Because of Nazi racial targeting, the individual identities of Jewish people were erased. Memorial curators did not correct these Nazi erasures at Buchenwald, and so Jewish suffering at the camp was not highlighted or explained.

The Holocaust was not central to East Germany's reckoning with the recent Nazi past.[80] Buchenwald and other memorials erected soon after the Second World War focused on communist anti-fascist resistance rather than Jewish suffering.[81] On memorial statues, Jewish people were swept under nationalities such as Polish, Russian, and Hungarian, obscuring how they had been targeted only because they were Jewish.[82] All of this worked to complement the SED's promotion of the anti-fascist narrative. By classifying people as belonging to one particular identity ("anti-fascist") rather than acknowledging the wide range of people targeted for persecution (Jewish, communist, social-democrat, homosexual, Sinti and Roma, disabled, so-called "asocial", Black), East German curators created a false sense of common identity that had allowed them to "defeat" the Nazis and gain their liberty. This did not go unnoticed by visitors. One visitor wrote a letter to Prime Minister Grotewohl to complain how Israel was excluded from the list of nations whose dead were commemorated at Buchenwald.[83] Visitors to these public history sites did not always accept the narratives told at these memorials, and were sometimes critical of the way history was portrayed by institutions supported by the SED.

This narrative of anti-fascist resistance that devalued specifically Jewish suffering was an attempt at myth-building, at creating a nation by emphasizing "one" community rather than

[79] Niven, 210.
[80] Ibid., 205.
[81] Ibid., 206.
[82] Ibid., 208.
[83] Ibid.

emphasizing a nation of many identities. According to the historical remembrance policies of the SED, the murder of millions of Jewish people was secondary to the murder of anti-fascists by the Nazis.[84] Even the Museum of the Resistance Struggle and the Suffering of Jewish People, opened in 1961 at the former Nazi concentration camp of Sachsenhausen, told the story of a Jewish rebellion as one that was instigated by communists.[85] This museum had only opened after Israel pressured East Germany to dedicate more public projects to the remembrance of the Holocaust.[86] This confrontation between the SED and international governments over Jewish memorialization in East Germany demonstrates how the anti-fascist narrative was inherently an anti-western one. Post-war displays, exhibits, and memorials in East Germany all portrayed generalized suffering as a result of capitalist greed, without acknowledging the role of racism in the Holocaust.[87] Disseminating this anti-western propaganda was an important goal because it glorified an identity centered around socialist resistance.[88]

The anti-fascist narrative also became entrenched in education policies directed at young students to instill a particular brand of historical consciousness. In 1962, teacher training workshops were launched by the Buchenwald memorial in conjunction with the Museum for German History to "broaden" teachers' knowledge about fascism.[89] The workshops emphasized acts of resistance by communist prisoners and linked the Communist Party to anti-fascism and the current politics of East Germany.[90] These courses were also aimed at history educators and party members. Memorial and museum staff wanted to root the East German identity within the

[84] Kupferberg, *The Rise and Fall of the German Democratic Republic,* 47.
[85] Niven, "Remembering Nazi Anti-Semitism," 206.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid., 210.
[89] Olsen, *Tailoring Truth,* 122.
[90] Ibid.

narrative of anti-fascism.[91] By the late 1970s, one of the exercises used in the worksheets created for student-use at Buchenwald asked children to "compare the actions of German soldiers in the Soviet Union to the conduct of the Soviet soldiers who liberated Eastern Germans" and to then voice their opinions to the class.[92] There was a sort of irony to the exercise, considering how Buchenwald continued to be used by the NKVD as a camp until 1950. It is estimated that more than 7,000 of about 28,000 people imprisoned by the Soviet occupation forces died at Buchenwald.[93] Focusing on the atrocities of the Nazis and the heroic actions of the anti-fascist resisters was one method employed by the SED to draw attention away from the fact that the country's violent history had not ceased with the end of the Second World War.

It is important to keep in mind that Jewish people were not fully excluded or marginalized at all spaces of historical commemoration, or from all anti-fascist narratives in East Germany, even in its earliest years. A memorial at the cemetery in the small town of Tröbitz was dedicated to the "Jewish men and women who fell victim… to murderous fascism," and another memorial at a destroyed synagogue in Halle was also erected in memory of those who had died in the Holocaust.[94] The SED was therefore not all-powerful, and there were many separate bodies (such as the MfDG, the Ministry of Culture, and the Committee of Anti-fascist Resistance Fighters) that had to work together to create new or update old exhibits and memorials.[95] This meant that differing opinions on how to represent the consequences of Nazi anti-Semitism changed how remembrance was carried out at East German sites of memory.

[91] Ibid.
[92] Plum, *Antifascism After Hitler,* 175.
[93] Andrew Szanaida, "The Prosecution of Informers in Eastern Germany, 1945–51," *The International History Review* 34, no. 1 (2012): 153. DOI: 10.1080/07075332.2012.668340.
[94] Niven, "Remembering Nazi Anti-Semitism," 211.
[95] Ibid., 206.

One of the major institutions in which these differing opinions were forced to come together was the MfDG. Its staff, exhibits, and museal publications were heavily modified as it slowly became the SED's centralized historical propaganda mouthpiece. Having learnt from the mixed reception to "The Other Germany," key officials such as State Secretary for Higher Education Gerhard Harig, Prime Minister Grotewohl, and museum director Alfred Meusel worked to frame the MfDG as a *Volksmuseum* (People's Museum) rather than an institution built by (and for) the state.[96] The MfDG had a long history prior to the formation of East Germany. The original museum, situated in Berlin in a building called the Zeughaus, originally contained an impressive collection of weapons and Prussian war trophies. When the SED took control, the museum became the most significant historical institution to come under the party's influence. For almost the entire lifespan of East Germany, the MfDG was central to the organizing of public memory, and increasingly became a source of power for Marxist-Leninist historians as they helped to curate exhibits and write articles in the East Germany's own museum journal.[97]

Because the MfDG was East Germany's leading national museum and was located at the nexus of the web of public memory institutions, other smaller local history museums were tied to it and looked to it for guidance about regional issues.[98] Curators at the MfDG's main building in Berlin frequently traveled to other sites of memory to help research exhibits, organize events, speak at memorials, or run workshops for educators to teach them the "proper" ways of instructing young students on German history. However, brand new exhibits were expensive in both time and money, so it took several years for the museum to create exhibits that fit the historical narrative that the SED wanted to project. The permanent exhibits of the MfDG

[96] Olsen, *Tailoring Truth,* 73.
[97] Penny, "The Museum Für Deutsche Geschichte," 347.
[98] Wolfgang Herbst and Ingo Materna, "20 Jahre Museum für Deutsche Geschichte," *Neue Museumskunde* 15, no. 1 (1972): 10. As cited in Penny, "The Museum Für Deutsche Geschichte," 351.

remained largely the same for many decades, with little revision to the overarching story they told.

Curators in Berlin worked not only to "rehabilitate" German history after the catastrophe of the Second World War, but rather to *reconstruct* and *build* a new socialist identity and ideology through a shared common history.[99] Importantly, the permanent exhibit at the MfDG, which portrayed the years of 1789-1949, was about situating German history as a continuing struggle of workers against capitalists, imperialists, and fascists. The final triumph of these resisters in 1949 was the founding of East Germany, the workers' state.[100] This "scientific" depiction of history can be seen in a postcard showing a photograph of the permanent exhibit.[101] The illustrations on the exhibit's walls depict chimps, Neanderthals, and humans crafting, hunting, and socializing, with the scenes becoming more complex as the timeline progresses. Depicting history as a controlled progression of linear evolution, from making crude stone tools to engaging in complex agricultural systems, made it seem as if all German (and even human) history led to the "co-operative" creation of East Germany. The country was thus portrayed as the pinnacle of thousands of years of evolutionary socialism.

[99] Ibid., 346.
[100] Ibid., 347.
[101] See Figure 3.

Figure 3: Inside the permanent exhibit of the Museum for German History, 1954.[102]

Prime minister Otto Grotewohl made a speech at the founding of the MfDG, at which he said it was the responsibility of the new museum to "re-inform Germans about their past and their inheritance."[103] It is important to note that this was a historical project about *re*-educating civilians about their history. It was a process of augmentation and correction, not creating a fresh new version of the past.

While the anti-fascist narrative was important for the country to situate itself in juxtaposition to West Germany, and to reckon with its recent Nazi past, it was not the only narrative used to shape public memory. In the 1950s, the SED increasingly focused on using *Heimat* museums as a venue to amplify the past contributions of the German labour movement.

[102] "Museum für Deutsche Geschichte, Abteilung Ur- und Frühgeschichte – 1954," Hermann Schaaf, DDR – Postkarten-Museum. https://www.ddr-postkarten-museum.de/picture.php?/20111/category/1110. Accessed March 4, 2022.
[103] Penny, "The Museum Für Deutsche Geschichte," 348.

The MfDG was also further transformed into a bearer of overt socialist messaging. The SED hoped that shifting the dominant strain of historical representation from the anti-fascist narrative to the socialist narrative would give the maturing state not only political legitimacy, but also cultural legitimacy.

Chapter 2: The Socialist Narrative

In 1968, an article appeared in the *GDR Review*, an East German propaganda magazine to commemorate "International Museum Year".[104] Intended for Western consumption, the *GDR Review* was published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to influence audiences to establish political and cultural connections with East Germany.[105] The author of this particular article wrote that East German museums "are able to help people… be stimulated by the good traditions of the past to build for the future"; it also elaborated on the direct contacts that museums maintained "with men and women in the factories and with socialist work teams."[106] East German museums clearly constituted an important part of a socialist identity that was rooted in the promotion of heritage culture.

The article's key points – that museums contained heritage knowledge that could be used to improve the future and that the institutions were for the direct benefit of members of the working class – represented the core of the socialist narrative used to manipulate history in East Germany. The socialist narrative emphasized revolutionary traditions throughout German history to demonstrate the triumph of a workers' state inspired by Marxist-Leninist principles.[107] The SED hoped that by embracing *Heimat* traditions, workers who were neither strongly anti-fascist nor inspired by "great German culture" would instead be exposed to the socialist values of exhibits that glorified the workers' struggle.[108] The past also needed to be portrayed in a way that

[104] Lorn Hillaker, "Representing a 'Better Germany': Competing Images of State and Society in the Early Cultural Diplomacy of the FRG and GDR," *Central European History* 53, no. 2 (2020): 375.
[105] Ibid., 376.
[106] "The Museums of the GDR Today: A Contribution to International Museum Year – 1968," *GDR Review*, 13 no. 10 (October 1968): 18; Ibid., 19.
[107] Brian Ladd, "East Berlin Political Monuments in the Late German Democratic Republic: Finding a Place for Marx and Engels," *Journal of Contemporary History* 37, no. 1 (2002): 93.
[108] Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation*, 24.

would make the socialist governance of the country acceptable. Museums would play crucial roles in doing both.

This chapter examines how the socialist narrative was presented in museums throughout several decades of SED rule. Many small museums were quickly reopened after the end of the Second World War. Therefore, at first, the socialist narrative was tightly intertwined with anti-fascism. Prior to the formation of East Germany and the SED's consolidation of power, these regional institutions were not initially subject to centralized oversight. However, even at this early point, regional museums were instructed by organizations such as the Cultural League for the Democratic Renewal of Germany to focus on renewing progressive, humanist, national, and "truly German" traditions to erase the remaining traces of Nazism in the country.[109] Gradually, the concept of *Heimat*, or "homeland", became increasingly important in the local museums of counties, towns, villages, and neighbourhoods. By the 1950s, the idea of *Heimat* was central to understandings of East German socialist identity.

During the 1950s and 1960s, the Museum for German History (MfDG) in Berlin emerged as the main institution for coordinating presentations of public history, working with *Heimat* museums to negotiate narratives of the past that were informed by Marxist-Leninist principles. While East Germany's first constitution in 1949 described a singular people living in the two Germanys, the new 1968 version distinguished its own population as the "people of the GDR."[110] Rather than distributing historical and museal narratives that looked forward to an eventual German reunification, the socialist narrative began emphasizing a distinctly East German identity in opposition to the West. The 1970s signalled another massive change in identity politics, as

[109] Ibid., 23.
[110] Ronald Asmus, "The GDR and the German Nation: Sole Heir or Socialist Sibling?" *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 60, no. 3 (1984): 407. https://doi.org/10.2307/2617570.

East German museums began promoting historical solidarity with other socialist nations to support an international labour-based identity. There was an increasingly wider range of historically-defined ways to be recognized as an East German citizen.[111] Ultimately, the socialist narrative was used to justify past events leading to the achievement of a workers' state, where history would be used to "build the future".[112]

Heimat museums were different from history museums that used exhibits to tell national stories. Instead, the exhibits within *Heimat* museums pertained directly to the localities in which the museums were situated.[113] The scope of these locally run institutions was therefore limited to events that had directly affected the communities around them. The appeal of *Heimat* museums was their representations of their respective communities as "peaceful and immortal".[114] In addition, since they were dedicated to telling the history of their locality – whether town, village, or even neighbourhood – these museums were seen to serve the workers of the community. The history presented within these museums thus needed to be relevant and meaningful to workers, and not be displays of bourgeois decadence that had little bearing on the present-day community.

In the first decade after the war, bombed and plundered *Heimat* museums were quickly restored. [115] One municipal official wrote about the importance of heritage for telling the story of the working people: "the workers are the inheritors of the great German culture…. We take on this treasure! But not to lock it up in museums and libraries – accessible perhaps only on workdays from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. We want to take these cultural goods to the masses."[116] *Heimat* museums "allowed workers to reclaim the history and culture that for so long had been defined

[111] Ladd, "East Berlin Political Monuments," 94.
[112] Krisch, *The German Democratic Republic*, 86.
[113] Olsen, *Tailoring Truth*, 110.
[114] Applegate, *A Nation of Provincials,* 240.
[115] Ibid., 232.
[116] Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation,* 24.

by the self-interested perspectives of the bourgeoisie."[117] Curators at these institutions were encouraged therefore to focus exhibits on local, working-class traditions in order to educate bourgeois collectors and heritage enthusiasts.[118] In 1946, the Schwerin Folklore Museum was reopened to fulfill this new purpose. Instead of collecting the "treasures of deceased cultures," the directors aimed to "link the past to the present, specifically to the working people." [119]

Heimat museums were thus ideal venues for the public to engage with history in tangible settings. However, because *Heimat* museums were concerned with heritage of their own villages and municipalities rather than East German history, the country's national Marxist narrative was not uniformly told.[120] The quality of these museums also varied across the country because some were run by volunteer organizations while others lacked public participation in their management.[121] One of the methods to address these inconsistencies in the 1950s was to streamline the intended audience for the *Heimat* museums. This new focus on catering to the needs and desires of workers as visitors represented a new push to educate the public in the *Heimat* traditions of the working class. A director from one *Heimat* museum, the Schwerin Folklore Museum, wrote that "The visitor… appreciates the eternal values that work could create, and he should learn to understand the context which allowed developments to merge."[122] Local heritage was interpreted in these museums as a guide for being better workers. *Heimat* museums that focused on "folk" traditions were also popular venues for disseminating this socialist message because folk art was considered to be the art of the working class, and was "a

[117] Ibid., 38.
[118] Ibid.
[119] Ibid., 39.
[120] Olsen, *Tailoring Truth,* 103.
[121] Ibid., 110.
[122] Landesarchiv Schwerin, Ministerium für Volksbildung 2903: "An die Landesregierung Mecklenburg," January 18, 1948. As cited in Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation,* 39.

source of power for our people in its fight against the old, for the victory of socialism."[123] Historical and contemporary pieces of art were collected by *Heimat* museums, such as the Dresden Museum of Folk Art, to demonstrate workers' cultural competency.[124] In East Germany, then, the *Heimat* museum's duty was to educate and serve the working class.[125]

The SED promoted *Heimat* traditions because they linked the new party to German worker traditions. By the late 1950s, *Heimat* had become one of the core tenets of East German socialism.[126] Importantly, rural civilians could also access the historical narratives of *Heimat* museums.[127] In 1961, *Heimat* was further defined in a report on "*Heimat* and Regional History" as a dynamic, class-based concept that was demonstrated through participation in socialist activities of East Germany.[128] The idea of *Heimat* less commonly referred to the beautiful but static countryside as it had previously in earlier epochs of German history, and instead could encompass the historically emotional bonds developed while working in factories.[129] *Heimat* also represented a historic Germany that was "unspoiled" by the West.[130] Because of the new emphasis on the connection between class and *Heimat,* East German *Heimat* museums were seen to practice authentic heritage traditions that differed from the supposed "bourgeois" conception of *Heimat* in West Germany.

The Schwerin Folklore Museum was an East German *Heimat* museum that came under increased control by the SED as a venue for portraying local events as reflections of trends of the socialist state. For example, effects of local land reform policies implemented in 1945 were

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[123] Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation,* 40.
[124] Museum für Sächsische Volkskunst, "Über uns," https://volkskunst.skd.museum/ueber-uns/. Accessed March 4, 2022.
[125] Penny, "The Museum Für Deutsche Geschichte," 347.
[126] Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation,* 26.
[127] Plum, *Antifascism After Hitler,* 53.
[128] Olsen, *Tailoring Truth,* 111.
[129] Ibid.
[130] Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation,* 25.

discussed in the Schwerin Folklore Museum and were entwined with the history of workers and peasants in the surrounding county. During this time, *Heimat* museums defined "homeland" traditions as stemming from workers' labour empowerment.[131] The Schwerin Folklore Museum was a model for other *Heimat* museums in the region and thus received the vast majority of its county's heritage funding.[132] However, this funding disparity meant that other local museums in the same region were barely able to keep staff, and could not update or change displays to echo the socialist narrative told at the Schwerin Folklore Museum.

East German historians in the 1950s frequently divided human history into five phases: slavery, feudalism, capitalism, imperialism, and socialism. This Marxist, historical narrative was constructed around changing systems based upon the ownership of the means of production, not necessarily around political events.[133] Drawn from Karl Marx's *The German Ideology,* the narrative emphasized how material conditions influenced history, and that the mode of production guided the alignment of societies.[134] However, because of the unequal funding of *Heimat* museums and the lack of clear government direction in the curation of these institutions, *Heimat* museums were not committed to this narrative. According to the authorities, therefore, they were not reaching their full potential for influencing the establishment of a united East German historical consciousness. The SED therefore began to strengthen this historical materialism narrative within one centralized heritage institution: the Museum for German History (MfDG) in Berlin. By focusing on one large, influential museum, the SED imagined that the MfDG would eventually be able to extend the socialist narrative to encompass isolated *Heimat* museums. This way, the SED did not have to curate individual *Heimat* museums one by

[131] Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation,* 39.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Penny, "The Museum Für Deutsche Geschichte," 355.
[134] Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997), 165.

one: instead, they would all look to the MfDG as a model for the "correct" presentation of history. It was in this context that the MfDG became a centralizing force for *Heimat* museums by supporting temporary exhibits in rural areas and giving advice for how East German museums should be updated after the SED's rise to power.

History in the MfDG was portrayed as "a chain of historical elements which were given impetus and motion by a series of critical moments: revolts, revolutions, war and repression."[135] The museum aimed to show how workers influenced and changed the course of East German history. For example, exhibits in the MfDG described how the First World War occurred because of the greedy interests of imperialists. The museum described how the common workers had not wanted to wage war, but it was they who ended up paying the price. Imperial Germany's policies – now intensely unpopular in the socialist regime – were narrated through the placement of artifacts, such as sandbags, unexploded shells, and rifles mounted next to newspaper clippings and photographs.[136] Meanwhile, pamphlets and brochures, and excerpts from communist newspapers showed Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg (founders of the revolutionary Spartacus League and the Communist Party of Germany), along with the communist activist and politician Clara Zetkin, as heroic alternatives to imperialist policies.[137] Raising public awareness around these revolutionary figures was meant (according to the curators) to "contribute to an increase in the class-consciousness of the working class."[138]

Children and youth groups represented a large portion of museum visitors: in 1974, about 60% of the visitors to one of the largest *Heimat* museums in East Germany were children and

[135] Penny, "The Museum Für Deutsche Geschichte," 354.
[136] Ibid., 355.
[137] Ibid.
[138] DHM, Hausarchiv: MfDG/1174. As cited in Olsen, *Tailoring Truth,* 108.

youth groups.[139] Recognizing these high numbers of students that visited museums on school field trips, staff at the MfDG sought different ways to engage their young visitors. Some teachers who escorted children through the MfDG were given booklets, guiding them to use the museum's diorama displays to get the children to "discuss workers conditions versus leisure conditions" and explain, for example, how the disparity had "led to the First Class Battle of the Proletariat," (more commonly known as the Silesian Weavers Uprising of 1844).[140] The booklets told instructors to "emphasize pride in the heroic tradition of the workers' movement" and the "necessity of freeing the working class."[141] It was crucial to indoctrinate the young with a sense of a common socialist past, and so field trips and activities were used to immerse them in the heritage that had supposedly created the workers' state. Many of these schoolteachers were young individuals who were part of the *Neulehrer* – literally, "new teachers" – who did not have Nazi connections but had received some pedagogical education during the 1940s. The *Neulehrer* had been politically reliable enough to keep their jobs during the Soviet occupation. The SED and its supported historical institutions provided these teachers with resources for structuring "historically acceptable" lessons.[142] Children were encouraged to work closely with their history teachers and with museum staff, both at the MfDG and regional museums. Volunteer organizations such as "Young Historian Clubs" presented opportunities for students to undertake projects carrying out approved research into socialist, communist, and anti-fascist resistance in East German history.[143]

[139] Olsen, *Tailoring Truth,* 115.
[140] Penny, "The Museum Für Deutsche Geschichte," 356. Translation by author.
[141] Ibid.
[142] Plum, "The Children of Antifascism," 10.
[143] Ibid.

Figure 4: Youth at the Museum for German History, 1968. Here, the school group examines a Spinning Jenny replica. Teachers were given exhibit guides published by the SED in order to educate students on the "necessity of freeing the working class."[144]

Yet, as the Cold War evolved, so did the socialist history politics of East Germany. By the late 1960s, museums, memorials, and historians were encouraged by the SED to focus their attentions on the shared history between East Germany, Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union.[145] Wolfgang Herbst, director of the MfDG, asked both MfDG historians and *Heimat* museum directors to create new displays and update exhibits to reflect East Germany's evolving place in international history.[146] In the first iteration of the MfDG's historical displays in the 1950s, the 1871 unification of Germany had been portrayed as a critical event. To reflect the evolving

[144] Bundesarchiv Bild 183-G0320-0028-001 / Rainer Mittelstadt. As cited in Olsen, *Tailoring Truth,* 124.
[145] Penny, "The Museum Für Deutsche Geschichte," 362.
[146] Ibid.

narrative espoused by Herbst, however, a new temporary exhibit at the MfDG chose to emphasize the role of Karl Marx in the founding of the International Workingmen's Association in 1864. This event, more than "imperial unification", was claimed to have brought about the liberation of workers of all nationalities. Moreover, at this temporary exhibit, a full third of the displays focused on Russian events, not German ones, including the 1905 revolution and the toppling of the tsar in the Russian Revolution of 1917.[147] The exhibit's Russian focus and heightened emphasis on Marx show how in the middle years of East Germany's myth-making, the socialist history narrative prioritized an identity based upon an international labour force sympathetic to the Soviet Union over a single East German national identity.

By the late 1960s, the SED was searching once again to align the message of socialist solidarity put forth by the MfDG with *Heimat* museums.[148] These museums increasingly used local events "to retell Germany's past through a Marxist perspective."[149] *Heimat* museums inspired patriotism by using familiar, emotional, objects to tell stories. One organization, called *Natur-und Heimatfreunde* (Nature and *Heimat*-Friends), had helped to open new *Heimat* museums across East Germany during the 1950s, thereby making these historical experiences more widely available.[150] The MfDG had refined the historical materialism narrative through curation of its permanent and temporary exhibits to depict how East German society had developed. The socialist narrative could now be applied to the *Heimat* museums so they could also, in the words of one local museum's director, "illustrate the development of human society in our county and the interrelation between man and environment in its dialectical unity."[151]

[147] Penny, "The Museum Für Deutsche Geschichte," 366.
[148] Olsen, *Tailoring Truth,* 104.
[149] Ibid.
[150] Palmowski, *Inventing a Socialist Nation,* 30.
[151] Olsen, *Tailoring Truth,* 113.

Indeed, the *Heimat* museum's primary goal was to "demonstrate the economic and socioeconomic conditions that led to important political, cultural, and scientific events in the region with special emphasis given to the relationships between people, the role of the classes, and class warfare."[152] By harnessing the emotional power of *Heimat* museums and using personal nostalgia embodied by exhibits' familiar photographs, artifacts, or folk art, *Heimat* museums were used to make socialism meaningful at a local level.[153]

The Merseburg Castle Museum is an example of a new *Heimat* museum that was opened in the wake of the consolidation of the MfDG's socialist narrative. As a *Heimat* museum, the Merseburg Castle Museum promoted the history of the surrounding county over national, East German history. However, its narrative was crucially shaped by the Marxist conceptions of history used at the MfDG, and represented events in relation to the struggles of the working class. Bureaucrats from the District Ministry of Culture took over the previously independent museum in the late 1960s, and played a more direct role in the type of narrative promoted at the museum. For example, in the "prehistoric" area of the museum, curators placed "a special emphasis on early man as pure and uncorrupted – stressing the absence of private property, the products of communal labor, and the equal distribution of wealth."[154] The Merseburg Castle Museum also had exhibits about how Germanic and Slavic settlements existed in the same region, which was intended to prove the peaceful cohabitation of two different peoples, united by their "worker" status.[155] This was part of the growing attempt to link German identity to a larger, socialist Eastern European identity. A later section of the museum detailed the "era of

[152] Ibid.
[153] Ibid., 119.
[154] Olsen, *Tailoring Truth,* 113.
[155] Landesarchiv Sachsen-Anhalt-Merseburg, Bezirksleitung der SED Halle, IV/A2/902-40, 135, "Inhaltliche Konzeption für die Einrichtung des Kreismuseums Merseburg," April 1967. As cited in Olsen, *Tailoring Truth,* 113.

capitalism" which began with the French Revolution and ended with the demise of the Nazi regime. Special attention was placed on local Worker and Soldiers' Councils, and the local history of the regional wing of the Communist Party, and workers' uprisings in 1920 and 1921.[156] The museum ended with the "socialist era" in which depictions of the transitions to socialist agriculture and education reform were supposed to highlight the region's historical and socialist development. The socialist present was interpreted as the logical conclusion to over a millennium of historic development in the region. The Merseburg Castle Museum also attempted to make connections between visitors' daily lives and what they saw in the exhibits. For example, exhibits drew attention to new housing strategies (which was a current major political goal) and cultural festivals held at factories.[157] By 1974, the Merseburg Castle Museum was one of the most visited *Heimat* museums in East Germany.[158]

In an essay from 1950, Walter Ulbricht, leader of the SED (and thus effectively leader of East Germany), wrote that "For the first time in the history of mankind the oppressed class, the working class, has won the victory over the capitalist class" and that from this victory, the youth "must learn… how to build socialism."[159] Within both *Heimat* museums and the MfDG, the SED indeed tried to educate the young and the working class on a socialist version of East German history. Yet by the late 1970s and early 1980s, the myth of a long and esteemed history of working-class struggle was already beginning to deflate. Even with the attempt to make the MfDG the centralized institution for East German history, the chronic lack of funding for *Heimat* museums to update exhibits that matched the SED's goal for a unified narrative was never fully

[156] Ibid., 115.
[157] Ibid., 119.
[158] Ibid., 115.
[159] Walter Ulbricht, *On Questions of Socialist Construction in East Germany,* trans. Intertext Berlin (Dresden: Verlag Zeit im Bild, 1968), 200.

realized. In addition, the Marxist-Leninist approach to historical narratives restricted other identities held by people.[160] There was tension between the creation of a national, East German identity and the promotion of socialism within the ranks of workers in non-urban centers. *Heimat* museums had emphasized the special nature of the communities within which they were located, and even after the SED had established committees to bring them under greater control, they still did not fully portray East German workers as a unified class.

This chapter has illustrated how the SED wished to build an East German identity that was rooted in a history of revolutionary socialism. Institutions such as the Schwerin Folklore Museum sought to ground the idea of *Heimat* in the social empowerment of the workers, thereby linking heritage to working-class struggle. However, the SED's lack of direct control over the many *Heimat* museums that reopened or were established in East Germany after the Second World meant that there was no defining narrative that unified workers. The Museum for German History updated its permanent and temporary exhibits to incorporate Marxist principles and present a new socialist narrative that was defined by the shifting conditions of the working class. Once this narrative had been established at this museum in Berlin, the heart of East Germany, SED officials believed it would be able to successfully coordinate *Heimat* museums across the country. Although this revamped socialist narrative was implemented at sites such as the newly SED-appropriated Merseburg Castle Museum, *Heimat* museums still failed to establish strongly national narratives that promoted East German identities over regional identities. As the country's socialist identity became increasingly unstable with the decline of East Germany's close ally, the Soviet Union, the SED's socialist historical narrative that had been haphazardly spun over decades of Marxist-inspired curation finally began to unravel.

[160] Ladd, "East Berlin Political Monuments," 94.

Conclusion

Museums and memorials in East Germany were important venues for disseminating the historical narratives coordinated by the Socialist Unity Party (SED). Public sites of memory were charged venues in which stories of the past could be manipulated and used to create the foundation of a national East German identity. Although memorials, *Heimat* museums, and national history museums were originally decentralized, the SED attempted to bring these sites of memory under party control to unify narratives of anti-fascist resistance and socialist struggle. By analyzing the speeches, articles, and pamphlets written by Marxist historians sanctioned by the SED, it becomes clear that the manipulation of historical narratives was an important propaganda tool for legitimizing the regime. Based upon these Marxist and anti-fascist conceptions of history, museum exhibits and memorial displays were useful conduits for the SED to communicate these narratives to the public.

With the split of Germany into East and West in 1949, the East German SED needed to prove the country's legitimacy as a new state and assert its superiority over the West German government. Promoting anti-fascist resistance as the founding narrative for the new East German state helped to distance the country from its recent Nazi past. Anti-fascism was equated with socialism, and those who had died during the Nazi regime were remembered in memorials and museums as martyrs who had contributed to the founding of a workers' state. The anti-fascist narrative was intended as a unifying force, but its frequent absorption of the Jewish people under the label of "anti-fascist resisters" marginalized the experiences of those who had survived the Holocaust and erased those who had died in it.

East Germany needed to establish its commitment to anti-fascism, but it also needed to define itself as a socialist nation. *Heimat* museums, which detailed the narrow history of their

local communities, were recognized by the SED as potential venues for promoting this narrative. However, despite the party's effort to gain control over the many *Heimat* museums that were established and reopened in the wake of the war, insufficient funding for the institutions and divided management over the historical narratives meant that the SED temporarily turned its focus away from curating *Heimat* exhibits. Instead, it turned increasing focus to framing history in Marxist terms at its centralized historical propaganda mouthpiece, the Museum for German History (MfDG). Although *Heimat* museums were influenced by the socialist narrative that informed the MfDG's exhibits, they still tended to promote regional identities grounded in socialism rather than national East German identities.

During the final years of the East German state, funding was funneled increasingly towards "private space" projects such as housing, rather than towards public projects such as museums and grand memorials.[161] Manipulating public memory was still important for the SED, but the party's grip on the narratives of anti-fascism and socialist struggle had begun to falter. In the 1980s, historic statues were returned to Berlin that had been removed more than 30 years before because of their imperialist, anti-socialist nature.[162] Socialist memorial projects failed to gain traction with East German architects, and the SED relied on help from Soviet designers to prop up public memory initiatives.[163] Narratives have the power to endow events with culturally sanctioned meanings.[164] Yet, when the sanctioned understandings of those meanings begin to evolve, and a disconnect forms between the narrative and the event, those stories lose their

[161] Ladd, "East Berlin Political Monuments," 93.
[162] Olsen, *Tailoring Truth,* 185.
[163] Ibid.
[164] Hayden White, "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), 88.

power. Museums and memorials were used as propagandistic pillars in the construction of identity in East Germany, but by 1989, they could no longer support the weight of the regime.

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