

In a contested memory landscape, one actor's respectful commemoration is another's crass Disneyland.

doi:10.1093/gerhis/ghy082

Advance Access publication 11 September 2018

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***Virtual Walls? Political Unification and Cultural Difference in Contemporary Germany.* Edited by Franziska Lys and Michael Dreyer. Rochester and New York: Camden House. 2017. 201 pp. £75.00 (hardback).**

This volume poses two central questions: first, it inquires into what remains of the GDR; second, it asks whether these remnants constitute a 'virtual wall' that continues to impose 'real and imagined cultural differences between East and West [Germany]' (p. 3). In their introduction, editors Franziska Lys and Michael Dreyer identify the field of culture as the main site in which to excavate evidence of these virtual walls. Drawing on the theories of Niklas Luhmann, they describe culture as a subsystem of society that is more resistant to change than economics or politics and therefore more likely to contain remnants of these virtual walls. Unfortunately, it remains unclear if the term is solely a metaphor for cultural differences, a stylistic element to retroactively bind together the essays or if it constitutes a new analytical approach.

While most of the contributions address the cultural dimensions of reunification, the first set of essays focuses on its historical and legal aspects. Andreas Niederberger reconstructs the debate on whether to create a new constitution for the unified Germany or to modify the Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*). This interestingly provides a historical backdrop for the current rise of the so called Reich Citizens' Movement (*Reichsbürgerbewegung*), which claims that the German Reich still exists because Germany failed to hold a constitutional referendum in 1990. Although Niederberger does not refer to these groups, their actions provide strong evidence for his argument that the constitutional debates during the unification process have changed the understanding of the Basic Law and constituted a new form of 'constitutional politics' (p. 52). By comparing the sudden disappearance of the GDR to the vanishing of states such as the Weimar Republic or Prussia, Charles S. Maier identifies the mechanisms that forge collective memories during the transformation of political systems in a long historical perspective. In the case of East Germany, Maier suggests that the sudden disappearance of the East German Regime 'without an institutional aftermath' (p. 35) created a unique historical situation because it left 'only memory unsupported by history' (p. 35). As an accomplished scholar in the field of German studies Maier is able to provide an outlook on how memories can re-emerge as a history written by historians. He proposes the compelling concept of a 'moral history of late socialism' (p. 28) that conceptualizes the boundaries of private and public as a political 'trading zone' (p. 29) not only in order to integrate the many contradictions of life during socialism but also the contradicting memories of the past.

The second group of essays pursues the question of how these contradicting and often conflicting memories about the GDR are shaped and expressed artistically, using film, literature and exhibitions as examples. Referencing her earlier publications, Mary-Elizabeth O'Brian structures her text about the afterlife of the GDR in post-unification cinema by

looking not only at the script but also at the 'discursive network' (p. 90) that developed around these films. O'Brian convincingly shows why the analysis of a film script alone provides little information about the impact of movies on memory culture. She identifies two conflicting narrative trends in filmmaking and discourses that evolved around them: one focuses on the repressive and self-destructive side of East German history while the other highlights the power of fantasy as a form of resistance. Her text illustrates both the strength and weakness of the virtual wall concept proposed by the editors. On the one hand, it makes it possible to connect a broad range of topics, such as films about the GDR and constitutional debates. On the other hand, it does not produce any specific insights on if and why the cultural differences within Germany are more or less problematic than in any other country. In his contribution, Stephen Brockmann looks at the continuities and discontinuities within East German literature. Brockmann classifies authors into two categories: those who were already established before 1989 and those who made their career after the unification. Although the writing techniques, styles and topics of these two groups differ greatly from each other, Brockmann comes to the conclusion that now that the GDR no longer exists, 'East German literature serves as a focal point for people's feelings of East German identity' (p. 66) and as a way of defending a lost 'lifeworld' and the associated memories. By looking at specific East German films and literature instead of comparing them with their West German counterparts, both Brockmann and O'Brian show that it is maybe more fruitful to look for cultural differences within a certain cultural field than between East and West.

The relatively short third section is dedicated to the changing reception of East German artists and musicians. April A. Eisman's informative article, which is based on her extensive research on East German artists, examines the changing reception of East German paintings using the so-called 'State Artist' Bernhard Heisig as an example. By deconstructing the negative connotations of the term 'State Artist', Eisman argues that this label undermines 'a deeper understanding of the artists and the work they created' (p. 118). Only by reflecting on the 'tendentious nature' (p. 125) of the conflicts surrounding the perception of East German artists is it possible to determine which role these actors played within post-unification society. By widening the scope and looking at the harsh reactions of West German artists towards the supposed 'State Artist', Eisman is able to illustrate how the shadow of these conflicts still reflects on how the history of East German art is written today.

In the fourth and final part of the volume, Andreas Eis and Michael Dreyer look for traces of a virtual wall in the fields of education and society. Eis analyses both the data and the methodologies of two empirical studies published in 2006 and 2008 that tried to measure German students' historical knowledge. Both studies indicated that most students possess little knowledge about historical facts; however, in Andreas Eis's point of view, this does not necessarily give a 'reliable picture of their deeper understanding of history' (p. 155). He claims that it is almost impossible to gain insights into the historical understanding of students with the standardized testing methods used by both studies. He especially criticizes the 2008 study conducted by the Research Centre SED State at the Free University of Berlin for not clearly distinguishing between knowledge-based questions and statements of opinion that were often formulated in a suggestive manner. Instead of simply imparting factual knowledge, Eis pleads for an approach to teaching history that focuses on the pre- and misconceptions of students and uses 'their everyday experiences as the cognitive basis for developing interpretative knowledge and historical understanding' (p. 159). Michael Dreyer turns his attention to the efforts to come up with a united 'Wende' narrative within public discourse about East Germany. He identifies four different intellectual discourses surrounding German unity. Firstly, he describes the so-called 'evil empire' discourse, which

is closely related to the perception of East Germany as an 'Unrechtsstaat', a state without the rule of law permeating all aspects of everyday life. Secondly, Dreyer identifies the 'Ampelmännchen' (a special East German pedestrian signal) discourse that he classifies as a form of 'low level resistance' (p. 172) against West German cultural hegemony and an attempt to manifest symbolically an eastern identity. The third, 'who cares' discourse is not really a discourse because it simply indicates West Germans' lack of interest in topics concerning the East. The fourth and last discourse does not yet exist. Dreyer names it the 'Rodney King' discourse: an 'earnest debate on how to get along with each other' (p. 174). This last argument in particular reveals a normative side to the virtual wall concept which also appears in Mary-Elizabeth O'Brian's text. It suggests that cultural differences are somehow problematic and should be overcome in order to create a more homogenous culture or, in Dreyer's case, a new all-encompassing discourse.

In his epilogue, Peter Hayes asks how and why the 'Wende' ended the German problem in European politics. Hayes proposes three answers: centrality, disproportionality and scarcity. The same factors that were once the reasons for the German problem became the means to contain it because the changes after World War II set Germany on a different path than after 1871. Germany's new geographical position within Europe, its more balanced demographic development relative to its neighbouring countries since 1945 and its development of an export-based economy led to the neutralization of the German problem after 1989. By taking a broader historical perspective, Hayes provides a useful outlook on how to apply the idea of a virtual wall within a larger geographical and chronological frame.

Overall, this volume of essays delivers nothing more and nothing less than what it promises. Within the broad range of topics, a few essays appeal to experts while others address scholars outside German studies, but the majority of contributions offer little new information or surprising insights because almost all authors reference their own earlier publications. For beginners and students who want to get a first impression of the work these accomplished scholars in German studies have produced so far, the volume offers a first point of access. It seems that the concept of virtual walls serves as a tool to search for cultural differences rather than providing an explanation for their historical emergence. The fact that none of the contributors uses the term indicates that it would require further elaboration if it were to apply to the currently emerging research about the history of unified Germany. In the end, the question remains as to whether this combination of approaches gives an answer to the two central questions of what is left of the GDR, and if these remnants constitute a virtual wall between east and west. Ultimately it seems that this twofold approach serves best as a starting point for further discussion.

doi:10.1093/gerhis/ghy072

Advance Access publication 2 August 2018

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